

**WE'VE BEEN THROUGH HELL; NOW WHAT?**  
**CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT, RENEWAL AND HOPE**

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of  
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TO MY WIFE AND CHILDREN, MY COLLEAGUES AND FELLOW  
PROFESSORS, AND TO THE EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE OF ST PAUL'S  
LUTHERAN CHURCH WITH WHOM I HAVE SHARED THIS JOURNEY  
1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-3

## ABSTRACT

WE'VE BEEN THROUGH HELL, NOW WHAT?

CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT, RENEWAL AND HOPE

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I am an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and have served the people of St. Paul's since December of 2002. St. Paul's was once the "power church" in Karnes City, but as it has aged and as the Church has been pushed closer to society's margins, it has seen its membership and influence wane. This has been the cause of much anxiety and has embroiled the congregation in round after round of conflict, causing a loss of missional vision and further erosion of membership and influence.

The title of the project and subsequent thesis draws its name from a comment made at a gathering of St. Paul's members following the conclusion of the latest round of conflict that drew to a close with the adoption of the recommendations from the Synod Consultation Committee. It was realized that some clear direction needed to be established or St. Paul's would soon find itself back in conflict.

It was the intent of the project to help move St. Paul's through healing toward focusing on a renewed sense of its mission and purpose. Using a model of inward, upward, and outward, the project began with a Lenten book study in Lutheran spirituality, moved to a Lenten worship service of healing, Holy Communion, blessing and sending,

and then post Easter to a process for beginning to establish a Strategic Mission plan for St. Paul's.

The thesis is a narrative recounting of the journey of the pastor and people of St. Paul's together through the hell of conflict and beyond into the hopefulness of God's future. Through Christ's descent into hell, a connection with God and God's love is established that cannot be broken and which connects us together even when the forces of conflict and chaos threaten to tear us apart. The surprising grace of this love held the pastor and people of St. Paul's together and gave them the opportunity to live into a hopeful future through participating in The Missional River Initiative, a joint venture between the Southwestern Texas Synod, ELCA, and the Missional Network.

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## CHAPTER 1

### PRELUDE

#### *The Wounded Healer*

My name is David and I am a parish pastor. Is this the opening greeting of a Pastors Anonymous meeting? Are you half-expecting a responsorial chorus of, “Hi, David,” to ring out into the smoky, coffee scented silence? No, it is simply a statement of fact and a confession of self. My name is David and I am a parish pastor.

I am a very unlikely candidate for such a lofty calling.<sup>1</sup> I am a smart ass (who has developed a strong internal censor due to lack of physical size and love of life and limb) who is much more at home with the biting satirical remark, rather than the inspiring, uplifting aphorism. I am quiet, reflective, and creative much more at home in study and meditation rather than committee meetings and public affairs (I work a Sudoku puzzle much better than I work a room). There was a time when I could very easily have become an agnostic. Today, I still shake my head at what passes in the popular imagination as being representative of the way of Christ and find myself resonating as much with those who identify themselves as “Nones”<sup>2</sup> as I do those who identify

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<sup>1</sup> I titled my blog, from which I have taken a hiatus while working on this degree, “The Unlikely Pastor.”

<sup>2</sup> “Nones” is a term used for those who identify themselves as being spiritual people but having no religious affiliation, spiritual but not religious, a quickly growing segment of the North American population. The phenomenon and its implication for the life of the Church are studied in Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper One, 2012).



themselves as “Christian”. (What was it that the great prophet Billy Joel sang? “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun...”)

Yet the call remains and, heaven help me, I have answered it. My name is David and I am a parish pastor. Much like Jacob at the river Jabbok<sup>3</sup>, I wrestle mightily with this call. I question it. It questions me. There was a time when I shrank from the challenge; yet, I have grown to appreciate the process, the questioning back and forth, the inner “Word-play” in my soul.<sup>4</sup> In addition, much like Jacob, I often come away from the interaction wounded and limping, blessed with a title rather than a name, and therein I find my strength for ministry.

My name is David and I am a parish pastor. This calling, this wrestling trophy, has been the source of deepest blessing as well as the source of grievous wounds. We serve a crucified Christ, one who was “wounded for our transgressions, crushed for iniquities... and by his [sic] bruises we are healed.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, we who witness to the truth of this crucified Christ bear in our selves Christ’s woundedness. Henri Nouwen wrote, “[M]inistry can indeed be a witness to the living truth that the wound, which causes us to suffer now, will be revealed to us later as the place where God intimated his [sic] new creation.”<sup>6</sup> The surprise of the gospel comes in finding that as we live together in community, in our mutual woundedness we find healing and strength. My struggles to

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 32:22-32.

<sup>4</sup> For a homiletical treatment of how this questioning process has played out in my life and how I have invited the people of St Paul’s into this process see the Sermon entitled, *The Big One*, in the Postlude. It is the ongoing liturgical conversation of questioning and being questioned by that is the “work of the people” into which we are called as followers of Christ.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 53:5

<sup>6</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1979), 96.

live out this truth, to be a wounded healer among the people I have been called to serve, are in part documented in this thesis.

*Prelude, Not Prolegomena*

The Doctor of Ministry degree, which I pursue, is a contextual degree. This has been a hard truth to communicate to the people of my parish. Many of them picture higher education as pushing me higher into the foggy academic ether, further removing myself from their level. They have had a hard time grappling with the reality that they are as integral a part of this process as any of the classes that I have taken or papers that I have written. Without them and the relationship that we share as pastor and people there would be no context, no degree, only idle ungrounded musings.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, I chose to title this chapter “Prelude” rather than “Prolegomena.”<sup>8</sup> This chosen title suggests an approach more grounded in liturgics, liturgy being loosely translated as “the work of the people,”<sup>9</sup> rather than one more grounded in Systematic or Apologetic Theology. My seminary training suggested that there are three basic movements to the liturgy of the Western Rite: Entrance/Gathering; Liturgy of the Word; Liturgy of the Table. The main body of this thesis will follow such a threefold, triune format.

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<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of an episode of the television show *Star Trek the Next Generation* where Chief Engineer Laforge meets up with the design engineer who conceptualized and built the ships engines. They clash over real world variations he found necessary to make in her original conceptual designs. It is a classic clash of theory and practice, which comes to its resolution as they work together to save the starship Enterprise and her crew from a disastrous end. So a working relationship is established between context and theology in the life of a parish. A balance needs to be struck between intellectual and theological integrity and real world relateability.

<sup>8</sup> Those who have known me over a long period know that this would not always have been the case. One of my struggles has been to get out of my head and to find that point of rapprochement between theological integrity and real world relateability spoken of in footnote 7 above.

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 4 above.

In doing so, this thesis is an exercise in narrative pastoral theology. It follows the lead of Savage and Presnell who write,

Since it is our conviction that the meaning of human life as lived and shared is captured and given communicable structure in story form, we define pastoral theology as, critical conversation which takes place at the intersection of the multiple narratives surrounding a particular contemporary situation nestled in a particular ministry context.<sup>10</sup>

As such, this thesis is an exercise in creative tension between two different theological reflective methods: Constructive Narrative Theology and Canonical Narrative Theology.

Constructive Narrative Theology can be described as,

[T]he creative potential people have to construct meaningful stories out of the varied circumstances of their lives. Such stories may have coherent form, understandable plots, establish the identity of the author and make clear the meaning of apparently puzzling events. And yet the meaning of a story always exceeds these functions, and so narratives also serve to emphasize the mysterious and indefinable aspects of human experience.... The stories recounted in Scripture are important within this method of theological reflection but these do not determine the pattern of the believer's own narratives. It is rather that threads from these foundational traditions are woven with many other strands into new stories which are vivid and original. They testify through diversity, and particularity to a God who is known through the stories we tell, as individuals or communities, about experiences that have become revelatory for us.<sup>11</sup>

The beginning point in Constructive Narrative Theology is human experience (in seminary we spoke of theology from below). This approach is most clearly reflected in the ritual components of the Doctor of Ministry project (especially the body prayer and blessing components)<sup>12</sup>. As Anderson and Foley write

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<sup>10</sup> Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 51-52.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2005), 47.

<sup>12</sup> See discussion in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

[R]itual and narrative are analogous to our own experience, which is mediated by body and mind, flesh and spirit, touch and imagination. In our patterned behavior we explore and express our hopes and dreams. Rituals shape our stories, and our instinct to perceive life as a narrative urges us to rehearse that narrative through our bodies.<sup>13</sup>

These rituals evolved out of our common story as pastor and people so that we could move forward together from a history of conflict out into our community in mission.

By contrast, Canonical Narrative Theology can be described as theology from above. It takes as its starting point,

[G]od's self-narrated story told through the life and death of Jesus Christ. The Gospel narratives of Jesus' words and actions are taken as the key to not only interpreting the rest of Scripture but also the unfolding events of human history. As the incarnation, passion, and resurrection constitute the central reality of existence, the challenge facing Christians is to pattern their own life in conformity with this great drama. The theological task is to discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story that the church tells about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative. This method... invites the Christian to develop a habitus, or way of life through which the story of Jesus continues to be told in the life of the story-shaped community of the Church.<sup>14</sup>

This approach is reflected in the movement toward a missional orientation of congregational life that the project sought to foster, the triune shaping of the project itself, and in an included series of sermons preached during my tenure in my present call.<sup>15</sup> These sermons, along with other elements of the project mentioned above, represent attempts to engage the people in the ongoing conversation, the ongoing wrestling match with the crucified one in whose image we are made and remade, the one who accompanies us in the struggle.

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<sup>13</sup> Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Graham et al., 78.

<sup>15</sup> See Postlude.

The Constructive and Canonical Theology models exist in dialogical tension with one another. As the ongoing narrative of God's people in conversation with the world around them seeks embodiment in ritual action, so too the ritual liturgical actions drawn from within the Christian tradition, shape God's people into the cruciform shape of Christ.

The biblical story is present ... in the very language of the liturgy, which, through penitence and acclamation, comes to focus on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The participant's absorption into the story is made possible through their absorption of the story in and through ritual enactment. They are not simply witnesses of the story but characters within it. They do not simply recall the forgiveness of sins but ask and receive forgiveness; they do not repeat the praise of others but give praise themselves; they do not merely remember the night on which Jesus was betrayed, but mindful of their own daily betrayal, gather with the apostle's at that night's table, themselves called by the one who in that darkness called his disciples to eat with him. Above all, they do not merely remember the giving of the bread and the passing of the cup, but, receiving the bread and passing the cup amongst themselves, they too share in that night's food.<sup>16</sup>

It is an ongoing dialog between the two poles, a paradox of faith. Such paradoxes are a particular strength of the Lutheran tradition in which I stand.<sup>17</sup>

With this paradoxical methodology in mind, in Chapter 2, the reader will enter into the context and get a feel for the lay of the land. This is the Entrance/Gathering portion of the liturgical movement, or in more triune terms the God the Father [sic] chapter. It is the first person of the Trinity who speaks and brings context and community into being, patiently weaving our disparate stories together with the threads of divine steadfast love.

In Chapter 3, the reader will explore "our descent into hell" as we struggled to find meaning, community, and hope in the midst of chaos, conflict, and despair. This is

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<sup>16</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 223-224.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Luther's teaching that human beings are *simul justus et peccator*, at the same time justified and sinners.

the Liturgy of the Word portion of the liturgical movement, or in more triune terms the God the Son [sic] chapter. It is the second person of the Trinity who is spoken into our midst and abides with us, even descending into hell with us so that no human experience lies outside the experience of God, not even death and hell. God reigns over the living and the dead.

In Chapter 4, the reader will explore the interaction of the Doctor of Ministry project and the context. This is the Liturgy of the Table portion of the liturgical movement, or in more triune terms, the God the Holy Spirit chapter. It is the third person of the Trinity who calls us together in community and sends us out in witness to the world.

A Prelude (Chapter 1) and a Sending (Chapter 5) bracket the main body of the thesis as introductory and summary elements of the overall liturgical movement. A Postlude will follow which presents a collection of sermons preached over the course of my tenure at St Paul's.

The prelude now draws to a close. As its final chords fade into the silence of memory we ask God's blessings on the journey upon which we are about to embark. My name is David and I am a parish pastor. Hang on; it is going to be a bumpy ride! *Sola dei gloria. Amen.*

CHAPTER 2  
THE PLOT THICKENS

*Of Stories, Narratives, and Context*

I have always loved stories. Ever since I was little and my parents would regale me with stories of a boy named Throckmorton whose daily adventures amazingly paralleled my own, stories became a foundational pillar of my existence. Of course, in the more no-nonsense adult world of academia we speak more in terms of narratives. Narrative language brings to mind more formal and objective images rather than the folksy and fanciful images conjured by the language of story. (It makes us sound more grown up.). I do tend to think of story on a more individual level, and narrative as having a more universal overarching function; however, on the whole, I am not possessed of quite such a discerning ear and tend to use the words more interchangeably.<sup>1</sup>

Given that word of introductory caution, as a parish pastor, it is part of my call to assist the people I serve in locating their stories in the overarching narrative of God's story, to put the two sides in conversation with one another.

[W]e understand our purpose in the world in terms of story—what our life is all about and how we fit into our understanding of the world's story. We have a sense of where the world is going (or ought to be going)—whether it be in terms of the story of prosperity, or the story of peace and justice, or toward a developing care for creation. This is where our story connects with God's story. What is God's story for the world? What is God doing in the world? And in what ways does our story cohere with God's narrative....

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<sup>1</sup> What follows is a brief discussion of narrative as it relates to sermons. For a general discussion on the narrative underpinnings of this thesis see the discussion in Chapter 1.

Orienting our story to God's story is often a fundamental reorientation that enables us to give ourselves to something much larger than ourselves, to a 'universe story' being woven by our creator and redeemer.<sup>2</sup>

The sermon is a vital tool in this reorientation process. Lathrop notes that even its position in the liturgy speaks of its reorienting role.

The location of the sermon is not simply arbitrary. An assembly gathers, reads the Scriptures, and then hears preaching. Following this sermon, the assembly prays in intercession for the needy others and for all the world and then proceeds with the celebration of the holy meal and the dismissal to mission in the world. Such a location of Christian preaching... must interpret the *texts* read in *assembly* so that the community may come again to *faith*, a faith then further exercised (and further fed) in prayer for the needy, in the simple thanksgiving supper and in mission.<sup>3</sup>

To engender this reorientation process, one approach I have found helpful is preaching sermons that retell the biblical stories from a particular perspective.<sup>4</sup> The perspective taken could be that of one of the characters in the story. It could be that of a character inserted as a narrative element.<sup>5</sup> I have even retold the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man from the perspective of the dog who licks Lazarus' sores. The thought is that entering the story from a different angle shakes loose whatever preconceptions may have rusted shut the imaginations of the hearer and opens them to the possibility of engaging in fresh conversation with the text itself.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Rhodes, foreword to *When God Speaks through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By*, by Craig A. Saterlee, Kindle ed. (Hernden, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), Kindle Locations 71-82

<sup>3</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 45.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis on the effectiveness of narrative in preaching see Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-Literate Age* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1993). On preaching narratives in a postmodern context see Brian C. Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). For a representative collection of such sermons I have written and preached during my tenure at St Paul's see the Postlude.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the sermon entitled, *The Prodigal Wife/Mother Speaks*, in the Postlude.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed treatment of the idea of entering into conversation with the biblical narrative see Karl Allen Kuhn, *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).



The parable of the Prodigal Son (better titled the parable of The Father who Had Two Sons) is itself an example of how individual stories come together and interact with one another, merging and diverging and becoming interwoven into a larger narrative unit.<sup>7</sup> The story of the younger son and his relationship to his father is interwoven with the story of the older brother and his relationship both with his father and his younger brother (who he refuses to acknowledge as his brother, but only as his father's son). Both of these stories are interwoven with the story of the father and of his patient, forgiving, and inviting presence.

This thesis and the Doctor of Ministry project on which it expounds are attempts to weave together in a meaningful way the varying contexts and narratives of my own life experience with those of the people of St Paul's and the steadfast love of God and God's inviting presence. Our mutual narrative is an extended real life parable testifying to that steadfast love of God. As in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, some among us have turned our backs on one another and squandering God's love, have foraged in the foreign land of selfish indulgence, conflict and discord. Others have stayed home and taken God's love for granted, cultivating a harvest of entitlement and resentment. Through it all God has been patiently inviting all to come home, be reconciled to God and to one another and move on together in mission and ministry. This is the story to which we now turn our attention.

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<sup>7</sup> For a sermonic treatment of this parable see, *The Prodigal Wife/Mother Speaks*, in the Postlude.

*In This Corner: The Community*

The story begins in Karnes City, Texas, the county seat of Karnes County. Originally, Karnes City was a backwater town in the central part of the county. The town of Helena located about 6 miles to the north of Karnes City was the original county seat town. There are competing stories as to the relocation of the county seat. Both stories concern the eventual route through Karnes County laid by the SAAP (San Antonio-Aransas Pass) Railroad, which initially wanted to bypass Karnes County all together because it had a bad reputation as being a haven for gunrunners.

Both stories involve a wealthy local landowner named Col. WG Butler. The more romantic, tells a tale of vengeance for the shooting death of Col. Butler's son at the hands of a sheriff's posse, after the son allegedly shot the sheriff in an escalation of a personal feud. After the shooting, Col. Butler is alleged to have ridden through the town seeking to learn the identity of the individual who shot his son. When no one would turn over the responsible party, it is alleged that Col Butler exclaimed, "Well, then, I'll just kill the whole town." Which he essentially did by donating his own land for the railroad to use, thus by passing the town of Helena entirely.

The other version of the story has the overconfident residents of Helena convinced that they were too much a town of consequence to be bypassed by the railroad, and being unwilling to raise a \$35,000 fee which the railroad was seeking to offset construction costs. It is noted that some local residents scrambled to raise \$32,000, which was rejected by the railroad, and efforts to raise the additional monies failed. It was then at this point that Col. Butler offered the railroad his property on which to build, and even ponied up some of the construction costs himself. The railroad gladly accepted,

thus sealing the fate of Helena. Without railroad access, business dried up, or moved to Karnes City, with the location of the county seat eventually moving as well. Whether through vengeance or through prideful shortsightedness Helena is now nothing more than a ghost town and Karnes City lives on.

But the ghosts of Helena have taken a toll on Karnes City too. Karnes City's inner politics are mired in shortsightedness, conflict, and a dogged nostalgic clinging to a vision of a past golden age that in reality wasn't all that golden. Karnes City has never been much more than a small backwater town (even if there were periods when it "bustled" more than in others). There remains a small, powerful wealthy cadre who are determined to keep it that way, blocking every effort to bring in new business, or improve the quality life with a new city park, or restore and renovate the historic county court house. Businesses moving into the area to serve the burgeoning oil industry are locating elsewhere in the county, particularly in rival town, Kenedy (located six miles to the south). If the trend continues, perhaps Karnes City will suffer a similar fate to that of Helena

As for today, Karnes City remains a small rural community, populated by 3000-3500 souls, out of which 35-40% are estimated to be Anglo (mostly of German or Polish heritage), 55-60 % Latino/a, and 5% or less African American or of other ethnicity. Karnes County with a total population of about 14,000 has until recently been one of the poorest and least educated counties in the state, sporting one of Texas's highest teen pregnancy rates

Primarily farming and ranching land, Karnes County has seen both cycles of prosperity and poverty. Cotton once was king, with three cotton gins being located in

Karnes City alone. Cheaper imports and climate change have all but taken cotton out of the mix as a viable crop alternative. A large population of feral hogs and climate change issues make the farming of traditional row crops an extremely risky venture. Most farmland is now devoted to grazing land or the raising of hay and oats to feed cattle herds. Climate change and tight water supplies also threaten the local cattle industry.

The Eagle Ford Shale Zone has begun a major, though much debated how enduring, shift in the fortunes of Karnes County and its citizens. The process of hydraulic fracturing, “fracking,” has been able to tap a reserve of high-grade crude oil that up until this point has been inaccessible. The resulting economic boom has proven to be a mixed blessing to date. It has increased and even totally reversed the economic fortunes of some. However, it has had very little trickle-down effect to those at the bottom of the pyramid (the parking lot at the local office of the Texas Department of Health and Human Services is more crowded now than it ever has been). The oil boom has even driven a wedge deep into some families as long worthless family holdings have all of a sudden become worth a small fortune.

The oil boom has placed a strain on an already shaky, overburdened, and underfunded infrastructure and consumed much more than its share of valuable natural resources (especially water). All of this while leaving open questions of geophysical stability and long term human and environmental health concerns. Local memory harkens back to the 1980’s when uranium strip mining scarred the landscape and then blew out of town leaving in its wake an alarmingly high incidence of cancer. Roadways not constructed for the volume or type of traffic they have to carry are in need of constant repair, and the citizens, the county government, and the oil companies are all at

loggerheads about who is to pay. The demand for people with a CDL license (who can also pass the mandatory drug screening) has shot through the roof and the resulting volume of truck traffic has led to a tremendous jump in highway accidents and fatalities.

Ironically, the oil boom has also placed a cap on local economic growth. A maximum-security correctional facility located just south of Kenedy (the area's previously touted economic savior) has had to transfer half of its inmate population to other facilities throughout the state, because they are unable to match the hourly wage of those offered in the oil fields. Similar stories are told in the food service and other related sectors. National chain restaurants (of both the fast food and family variety) have been reluctant to locate in Karnes County for fear of being unable to secure a qualified work staff.

The shortage of affordable single family and multiple family dwellings amplify this problem. Workers coming into the area to work in the oil fields are leaving their families behind because of the housing shortage. These family members are people who could fill some of those service sector jobs. Landowners rather than selling now valuable land to be developed are holding onto it, erecting makeshift RV parks, or are buying up unoccupied housing and charging outrageous rents.

Overall, the current climate in Karnes County is a bit of a Wild West free for all atmosphere, reminiscent of the distant past. It is in this atmosphere that St Paul's Lutheran Church struggles for breath.

#### *And in This Corner: The Congregation*

St. Paul's is a 110 year old ELCA Lutheran congregation, composed primarily of farmers and ranchers whose families immigrated from Germany or who are of Polish

Catholic background and have married into the congregation (the St Paul's version of a bi-racial couple!). The congregation was founded as a mission outreach from a neighboring community. There were five founding families, to which a number of St. Paul's current membership can trace their lineage.

Over the years, St. Paul's has envisioned itself as a beacon to the community at large. Its steeple can be seen from many vantage points around the area. It was at one time the power church in town, very much at the center of community life. It is no longer so. As the wheel has turned and society has changed pushing much of religious life to the outer fringes of the community's sphere of activity, St Paul's has slowly declined in influence and membership.

St. Paul's current structure, one of the largest church facilities in Karnes County, was dedicated in 1961. It is built of sandy colored brick and features stained glass windows that are reported to be some of the finest in all of the Southwest Texas Synod. The current facilities occupy approximately 1.25 acres of church owned land and replace a more typically designed white clapboard country church. Stories are told of the pastor at the time (the "sainted" Pastor William Ihrig) having to wheedle and cajole for every brick and panel of stained glass that adorn the facility; thus making the facility a lasting memorial to his tenure at St. Paul's. Pastor Ihrig died of a heart attack while still serving as St. Paul's pastor some nine years following the dedication of the newly rebuilt facility.

Like many Lutheran churches in America, until recently, St Paul's has never given much scrutiny to its legacy as an immigrant church. Most Lutherans when immigrating to America brought with them some variation of a "state church" mentality. Their religious heritage became very much tied to their ethnic and cultural identity.

Ethnic enclaves were formed that were very caring and tight-knit, but suspicious and closed to those outside their cultural boundaries, with pastors most often falling into the outsider category. In the case of St Paul's, even people from within their own community who walk to the beat of a different drum are perceived as outsiders and viewed with suspicion if not outright shunned. Numerous stories exist of people who were outright told that their "kind" was not wanted at St Paul's. During the most recent outbreak of open conflict, St Paul's leadership was able to uncover and begin the process of reconciliation with a family who was shunned by the church for over 50 years for lack of proper socio/economic status.

The same shortsightedness and combative attitude that infects the common life of the community at large seeps into the life together of the people of St. Paul's. Stories are told that the congregation at one time held quarterly meetings, but they became so contentious and violent that they were discontinued and replaced with an annual meeting. An effort to remove the possessive "'s" from St Paul's (after all, doesn't the church belong to Christ?), resulted in an angry tirade and threats from more than one member, ranting on about how their confirmation certificates said "St Paul's," and would no longer be valid, and other such awe inspiring feats of logic. It was decided the battle wasn't one worth fighting, and so the name remains St Paul's.

In such a climate, anxiety and desperation have tended to be the driving forces behind congregational life warping the congregation's sense of mission and ministry in the world. Over the years, keeping the doors open has become a primary focus of mission. Challenging this focus had led to reactions of even deeper fear and anxiety,

engendering in me serious fantasies of running off screaming into the night, resurfacing at an undisclosed location in northern Canada as a logger named Sven.

*Pastor and People Together: The Descent into Hell*

When I began the journey together with St Paul's in 12/2002 as their pastor, St Paul's had been yoked to a congregation in Poth (a community about 17 miles to the northwest). It was a new pairing. St Paul's had not shared pastoral services since the days of the sainted Pastor Ihrig in the late 1960's. I entered the call serving Karnes City at 60% and Poth at 40% of my time. This arrangement satisfied neither congregation. The unwritten expectations were that I serve each with 100% of my time.

The people in Poth seemed to feel particularly slighted because I lived in Karnes City, and my children attended Karnes City schools. Consequently, I and my family tended to be more oriented toward the goings on in Karnes City, even though I made every effort to be involved in local ministerial activities in Poth. It was not enough, and following a failed attempt to remove me from office through the constitutionally stipulated process in 2005, in 7/2006 amid continual conflict egged on by the anxiety in both worshipping communities, the partnership was dissolved.

What some folks in Karnes City did not understand was that I held two separate letters of call. This meant that the dissolution of the parish agreement between the Poth and Karnes City congregations ended my term as the pastor in Poth; however, I continued at 60% time as the pastor in Karnes City. This led to a particularly contentious vote to end the call to serve Karnes City, which not only failed but resulted in my time being increased to 75% time for several years. That level of service proved financially



unsustainable and was reduced to 50 % time until as of 4/2013 when it was dramatically increased to 100% time.

Since the split from Poth, I have survived wave upon wave of angry uprisings and coup attempts (kind of felt like a Central American dictator for a while). The son of the sainted Pastor Ihrig, who moved back into the area from Houston, led one attempt. A retired army Lt. Col led another charge. With each new attempt, the list of the desperate, wacky, outrageous and over the top behavior intensified.

In 2009 when the ELCA made its fateful decision to certify for ordination people who are living in fully committed, lifelong, same sex partnerships (That's a lot of words to say "marriage" isn't it?) many of the small rural churches in this area voted to leave the ELCA. The Southwestern Texas Synod, of which St Paul's is a part, has had more congregations leave than any other synod in the ELCA. This region of the Synod has led the way. For the majority of people at St Paul's leaving the ELCA was not even an issue. Not because folks at St Paul's agreed with the ELCA's decision; rather, because the anger and anxiety felt by a sizeable minority of folks coalesced around ousting the pastor, clearing the way for the triumphant return to the glories of the past.

In order to impose their will on the congregation and maintain the illusion of control, those members who wanted the pastor gone began withholding their offerings. While an effective tactic in the short term, long term it failed as oil money from the Eagle Ford boom began to flow into the congregation from the tithes and offerings of a number of generous St. Paul's members. Congregational bank accounts that struggled to stay in the triple digits by month's end now were well within five and six digit territory, and climbing.

As time passed, the frustration and desperation of those who wanted the pastor gone grew. “We need a new leader,” became their mantra. “In the past, when the congregation wanted a change of pastor, a certain percentage would leave and the pastor would get the message and move on.”<sup>8</sup> In this way congregational control had been maintained in the hands of the few and an illusory barrier against change had been erected which also effectively blocked the free movement of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> The longer the pastor stayed the more difficult it became to maintain that barrier’s integrity. Cracks began to appear. The illusion of control was being lost. For them, this was hell.

Without digging too deeply into the legitimacy of the practice of leadership change by congregational shrinkage referenced above, it does raise an interesting question with which I still grapple: Why am I still at St Paul’s? Why would I remain in what was hell for me as well?

An answer to that question begins with the observation that I have often characterized my years in ordained ministry as being akin to a long relief pitcher in baseball. The starters and the closers get all of the notoriety and the glory, but it is the long reliever who is willing to go out there and take one for the team on a bad night, or to keep a team in a game and give them a chance to rally, that are baseball’s most underappreciated commodity. My ministry in most of the congregations I have served has been one of transition, in baseball parlance, a ministry of earning a “hold”, of working with a congregation until they were ready to transition to the next phase of their life in ministry, and then turning over the reins to the next pastor, who would take the

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<sup>8</sup> These are examples of the sentiments that were being expressed at the time by those desiring a change in pastoral leadership.

<sup>9</sup> John 3:8

congregation to the next level building on the foundation now in place. Perhaps I am still in there pitching, taking my lumps for the team, until my “hold” is earned. It is the love of God that refuses to let go holding the people of St Paul’s in community even in the midst of conflict and questionable behavior. It is the same hold of God’s love that will not let me go which empowers me to hold on and continue serving in faith and hope, even when circumstances have been difficult. In the words of Martin Luther’s signature hymn,

God’s Word forever shall abide,  
 No thanks to foes, who fear it;  
 For God himself [sic] fights by our side  
 With weapons of the Spirit.  
 Were they to take our house,  
 Goods, honor, child, or spouse,  
 Though life be wrenched away,  
 They cannot win the day.  
 The Kingdom’s ours forever.<sup>10</sup>

Even so, I have tried to leave. I have been actively seeking a new call for 6 years now. I keep hearing that it’s the economy, or the housing market, or it’s this or that. Four years ago, I was poised to accept a new call to serve three congregations in Northern Iowa, but when it came to a congregational vote, two of the three congregations balked at the pay package as being too expensive. Now at age 53, I suspect, but cannot prove that age discrimination is playing a factor as well.

Do I really want to leave? I wish there was a simple answer to that question. I vacillate back and forth. Having a family to whom I am responsible complicates the issue. With the amount contributed to my pension plan tied to my reduced salary, worry about the quality of my retirement or even whether retirement is an option at all, complicate the

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (No. 229) in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978).

issue. There are also issues of personal and professional integrity, for example, standing with those who have stood with me, that complicate the issue. Above all, I wish to remain faithful to God and true to my calling to serve God and the people of St Paul's. Discerning the faithful course of action has been difficult and confusing. So, do I wish to leave? The answer to that question varies with the day.

Now we circle back to the question, why am I still here? On one level, I certainly am no hero of faith, just a person struggling the best they can to keep a roof over their heads and to feed their family. On a deeper level, as I have struggled to discern a faithful course of action and discern meaning in my continued ministry at St Paul's I have become deeply convinced that my continued ministry here is a witness to the love and grace of God which tenaciously pursues us and refuses to give up on us no matter how we may reject it (like one of those blow up punching clowns that bounce back up every time you hit it).<sup>11</sup> I also have come to believe that St Paul's and I simply have unfinished business together, and that when that business is concluded, whatever it may be, we each can move on.

The Doctor of Ministry project was conceived as a step toward the conclusion of our business together, to move us together through the conflict and out into mission to the community. Whether it proves to be that concluding step remains to be seen. There are those among the St Paul's faithful who have expressed the opinion that once I receive my Doctor of Ministry degree, I will be on the first stage out of town. I do not want to be like the husband who sticks with his spouse until he gets his degree and then leaves. What kind of witness is that? God uses us for God's own purposes and then abandons us? That would make a mockery of everything we have been through together. No, I trust

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<sup>11</sup> Psalm 139:7-8; Romans 8:38-39.

that God will indeed provide a faithful conclusion to our mutual journey and we will part company in God's time.

To be clear, at this point in time, we have journeyed through hell together and have at least emerged in purgatory. The Site Visit Evaluation indicated a level of mutual trust and acceptance having been reached between myself and the people of St. Paul's. I am their Pastor, and I know that there is still work to do. We will continue working together, growing together, and navigating the waters of God's missional river together into uncharted territory.<sup>12</sup>

However, in this narration of our mutual journey we have not yet reached that point. That story still has a few twists to be navigated. We journey on.

### *Armageddon*

A significant twist in the path of that mutual journey occurred on September 12, 2011. One of St. Paul's members summoned me to the church office. I was there presented with about a 30 page document in a professional looking report cover. I was informed that the contents of the document stated the reasons why I should be relieved of my call and that copies had been personally presented to the President of the St. Paul's Church Council and the Synod Bishop and mailed to the ELCA's Presiding Bishop in Chicago. After a cursory glance at the document, I thanked its author for her concern and she left.

The document was an anxiety-driven patchwork of nostalgic remembrances and angry, fear-filled accusations against the pastor and the current congregational leadership. After consulting with the Synod Bishop it was ascertained that he had indeed met with

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<sup>12</sup> The "missional river" is a reference to a Synod pilot project done in conjunction with the people of The Missional Network that St Paul's has chosen to be a part. See the discussion beginning on page 55.

three individuals who shared the document with him. He had informed them that if they wished to start the constitutional process for the removal of a pastor from office then he would need a formal petition with the required number of signatures. What they had presented to him was not in the appropriate format. He also suggested that they meet with the council and share their grievances, before doing anything else.

They made their pitch at the September council meeting. It was nothing new. The council, the average pew sitter, even many people in the community at large had heard all of this before. The plaintiff parishioners took any disagreement with their position to mean that they were not being heard, and continued to restate their grievances with growing vehemence and venom. The council stood firmly behind the pastor and communicated their support to the petitioners.

On November 27, 2011 a formal petition was presented to the Synod Bishop seeking removal of the pastor. After some debate as to the validity of the signatures that were gathered, the council decided that it was best to not contest the petition and to let the process work its way through. At first I was anxious about these proceedings, but in time came to realize the wisdom of trusting the process. At the end of January 2012, the constitutional process for the removal of the pastor began.

The date is now Easter afternoon, 2012. The occasion is an informal gathering of some battle-weary St. Paul's veterans gathered around a shared meal. The beer and wine flowed as freely as the Texas crude pumping through the pipeline that snaked its way through our host's front pastureland, adding to the joyous spirit of the gathering. For those gathered there it's hard to believe that just one week prior St. Paul's had overwhelmingly adopted the recommendations of the Southwestern Texas Synod's

Consultation Committee.<sup>13</sup>

The final result at the congregational meeting called to vote on the recommendations had been 53-5 in favor of adopting them, when all indications were that the vote should have been much closer. The opposition leaders had been lobbying hard and a number of folks who had dropped out of the active life of the congregation but maintained their voting membership by fulfilling the bare minimum requirements were present that morning.<sup>14</sup> A preliminary glance at the crowd gathered that morning indicated a result of about 38-20 in favor of adopting the resolutions. When the results were announced they were met with a mixture of disbelief, relief, joy, and anger. Some folks stomped off and have not been heard from since. Most were glad the whole situation was at an end. It was the culmination of six long anxiety filled years. But what would the future hold?

This was the realization on that Easter afternoon. St. Paul's had come to a fork in the road with no clear discernment of the path ahead. Like those first believers staring into the empty tomb, they were uncertain what to make of it all. "We've been through hell," one person observed, "Now what?"

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<sup>13</sup> The Synod Consultation Committee's recommendations can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>14</sup> The ELCA simply requires that in order to be considered a voting member of a congregation a person must be baptized, confirmed, and have received Communion once and made a contribution of record (no amount specified) within the last year.

## CHAPTER 3

### HIDDEN HOPE

#### *A Hope in Hell*

We've been through hell; now what? The statement stuck with me. It was one statement made by one person in a moment of exuberance and relief. However, of all the activity in the months following the vote on the Synod Consultation Committee's recommendations, it was this plaintive query that kept coming into my thoughts repeatedly. What could this mean?

Then it dawned on me. It was something so obvious, yet in the conceit of my own humanity, something I had failed to give more than a passing consideration. I had not come through this experience alone. We, pastor and congregation, had been on this journey through hell together. The journey had been long, arduous, and all-consuming of our collective energy and resources. After taking a collective cleansing breath, the reality of our new situation began to take hold. Exhausted, we stood at a crossroads, aware that the path we took from here could very well lead right back into that hellish nightmare from which we had just emerged.

In the past that is exactly what had happened. When we had emerged from a period of conflict, we had failed to find a meaningful way to move on together. The relief of the conflict's absence was so great it became an end in itself. But failing to find an alternative means of being together, we lapsed back into the familiar, the tension grew



until it boiled over and the conflict erupted anew. The cycle had to be broken. We've been through hell, now what?

The Doctor of Ministry project was devised to break the cycle of conflict so that pastor and people could move on in ministry together.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it was first of all important to acknowledge the reality of what we had been through together. We had been through hell. This naming and claiming of our experience brought it out into the light of day acknowledging God's presence even in those hellish moments.<sup>2</sup>

Even in our most hellish moments, God is present with us. We have hope. The people who pushed for the pastor's removal had lost that vision of hope. Void of hope they saw only a future of decline and death, and they lashed out in fear and anxiety. Their actions became very much akin to those of the biblical figure of Judas Iscariot.

Wonder with me for a moment, what was the crime of Judas Iscariot? Why, he betrayed Jesus, of course.<sup>3</sup> Yes, but so did the other 11, they abandoned Jesus to his fate and hid behind locked doors to save their own skins. Furthermore, I betray Jesus every day when I ignore cruelty, violence, and injustice, or, heaven help me, participate in them

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<sup>1</sup> A brief aside, the original project I conceived was called Table to Table. It was intended to link the in house hospitality of our monthly potluck supper, to the hospitality of Christ at the Communion table, and to wonder together in practice if extending the frequency of the celebration of Communion could lead to increased hospitality at our other tables to include those in the surrounding neighborhood. It never really gelled, because the timing was wrong.

<sup>2</sup> This work is ongoing in personal conversation with leadership and individuals and in sermons when appropriate. For an example of the treatment in a sermon see the sermon entitled, "A Disciple's Testimony" in the Postlude.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word (*paradidomai*) translated as "betrayal" actually is a more neutral word more akin to "handed or given over." The negative connotations of betrayal have been implied through theological reading of the text. For a fuller treatment of Judas from a less traditional perspective see, William Klassen, *Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996).

(whether knowingly or unknowingly). The human predicament is that we are hopelessly enmeshed in sin and cannot free ourselves.<sup>4</sup> So, we all are consigned to hell?

The resurrected Christ brought grace and forgiveness to the 11 and does so for all who are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection.<sup>5</sup> This is God's promise to us that in Christ Jesus we are delivered from the powers of hell. From that promise springs our eternal hope. We have a hope in hell!

Why then has Judas been singled out and held up as the exemplar of those who are roasting in eternal hellfire? It was not for his act of betrayal, but because he was unable to trust in God's promise of forgiveness for him. Once he realized what he had done, he threw back the money he had received for turning Jesus over to the authorities<sup>6</sup> (an act of contrition?), but void of trusting in God's promise of forgiveness, he lost hope and ultimately gave in to the voice of despair.

The voice of despair spoke through those people who sought the pastor's removal. They no longer could trust in God's promise of a hopeful future for St. Paul's. They lashed out in anger against the body. The body of St. Paul's was deeply wounded and in need of healing.

The biblical and theological underpinnings of that healing are provided in the next section. It is a brief review of biblical and doctrinal sources of hell. This review gives the theological basis for the acknowledgment of what it means to say, "We have been

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<sup>4</sup> Lutherans who use the "Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness" in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* confess this at the opening of each service.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 6

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 27:3

through hell.” With this done the foundation is laid for the project to answer the question, “Now what?”

### *The Hell You Say*

How does one speak of hell in a postmodern context? Is hell a literal physical place strategically sequestered away in the depths of the earth’s core where those who do not adhere to a certain set of beliefs and practices are sent for eternal punishment? Is hell simply a profound existential sense of God’s absence? Further, why would Jesus go there, as is confessed in the words of the Apostle’s Creed?

The Judaism of Jesus’ day did not feature a fully developed teaching on the life to come.<sup>7</sup> All people who died went to dwell in *sheol*, the abode of the dead (in Greek, *hades*), an eternal waiting room until the time of the final judgment.<sup>8</sup> The shift from a belief in hell as a general abode for the dead to the realm of Satan and those forces opposed to God is a later development. This evolved belief leads to an eternal division of the house at the time of death, the righteous on the upward trail and the unrighteous on the downward. Exceptions were made for those designated for purgatory to be cleansed of their impurities.<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ descent into hell (to the dead) is an interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 which states that Jesus “went and preached to the spirits in prison” and 1 Peter 4:6

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<sup>7</sup> Tony Jones and Andrew Root, "Why Did Jesus Go to Hell?," in *Re:Form Leader Guide*(Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2010). 73

<sup>8</sup> Carl E. Braaten, "The Person of Jesus Christ," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). 548. This description brings to mind the INS detention facility located on the outskirts of Karnes City where undocumented persons are held pending their deportation hearings. Judaism was not monolithic in this belief. The Sadducees believed in the ultimate finality of death (Luke 20:27). The Pharisees adhered to a belief in the general resurrection of the righteous to rule at the time of the Messiah’s triumph (John 11:24).

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 548

adds that on this trip “the gospel was preached even to the dead.”<sup>10</sup>

The phrase, “He descended to the dead (*hades*),” as it appears in the Apostle’s Creed, makes sense as being originally intended as a statement of belief that (paraphrasing the Munchkin doctor from the Wizard of Oz) “he was most sincerely dead”. That is, Jesus didn’t fake his death and go off to lead an obscure existence in some remote corner of the world, nor did his disciples spirit the body away leaving the “miracle” of the empty tomb,<sup>11</sup> or the divine spirit which animated his corpse wasn’t somehow mysteriously translated into another dimension leaving behind the empty shell of a body. Jesus died, period. As Christian thought about life beyond death developed, the time between Jesus’ physical death and resurrection became linked to the previously mentioned verses from 1 Peter: Jesus descended into hell (*hades*).

The significance of the creedal statement has several dimensions. Jesus infiltrated enemy territory and overcame the power of its ruler, thereby breaking the power of hell and death over humanity. There is now no dimension of human existence, even death and the experience of abandonment and separation from God which lies outside the realm of the divine experience. In Jesus we are known and loved fully and completely.<sup>12</sup> The creedal statement has also been used as an answer to vexing questions as to the eternal fate of those who died before the time of Jesus, or of those who die without having heard the Gospel proclamation. There is hope even in those situations. Jesus is Lord of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 548

<sup>11</sup> Such alternative explanations must have been in circulation very early following the events of that first Easter morning (Matthew 28:11-15).

<sup>12</sup> The DVD that is a piece of the *re:Form* confirmation curriculum describes the act of Jesus descending into hell as an extreme act of love. It is like a parent cleaning up after a sick child (or in my experience, changing a child’s diapers, which I had to do with cotton balls stuffed in my nostrils in order to keep from being nauseated).

living and the dead.<sup>13</sup>

The experience of hell implied in the statement, “We’ve been through hell,” is more a statement of the experience of hell as an existential reality that impinges upon our contemporary experience, rather than a statement that envisions hell as a physical place. Personal experience bears witness to the truth of this statement. There are moments in life when the presence and reality of God’s love for us is nowhere to be found. To those moments the tradition proclaims that Jesus has been through hell, too. God is there, even in our hellish moments. Hell has no power over us. Jesus is Lord of all, even hell.

The constant tension and bickering created such an environment for the people of St. Paul’s. Wounds that were closed and thought healed were reopened by the constant picking and pecking at the pastor and at each another. In the midst of this environment, the tradition proclaims that Jesus has been through hell, too. God is there, even in our hellish moments. Hell has no power over us. Jesus is Lord of all, even hell.

There is no human experience outside the realm of the divine experience; not even the experience of suffering, death, and hell. On the cross of Christ the whole of human experience was raised up into the experience of God. There is nothing which can separate us from the love of God for us in Christ Jesus; nothing.<sup>14</sup>

The profound insight of God’s presence even in moments that are experienced as being those of God’s absence is reflected in the core of Lutheran theology, a theology of the cross. Sometimes referred to as a thin tradition, this theology is built upon the following foundational themes, “meeting God where God chooses to find us – in our sorrow, our pain our weakness; hearing God’s gracious word manifest in the death of

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<sup>13</sup> Braaten. 549

<sup>14</sup> Romans 8:38-39

Jesus on the cross; following Jesus in his death and resurrection.”<sup>15</sup>

Even though Luther developed the core of this approach, perhaps the most moving illustration of its profound truth comes from a Jewish source. Elie Wiesel in his powerfully haunting recollection of his Nazi death camp experience, *Night*, recounts the execution of a young boy tortured and sentenced to death because of being a suspected conspirator in an act of sabotage. Sentenced to be hung along with two other suspected conspirators, Wiesel describes the grisly scene,

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. “Long live liberty!” cried the two adults. But the child was silent. “Where is God? Where is He (sic)?” someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon the sun was setting. “Bare your heads!” yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping. “Cover your heads!” Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive.... For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him, “Where is He (sic)? Here He (sic) is—He (sic) is here hanging on this gallows....”<sup>16</sup>

Wiesel spoke more than he knew. Being Jewish, Wiesel was not thinking of Jesus on the cross, but of the very notion of God becoming a total absurdity in the face of such horrific inhumanity. For Wiesel the experience ended in death and surreal absurdity. There is no notion of being raised up, of resurrection, of hope.

However, a Christian theology of the cross takes the process one step further. True, our human notions of God do die in the face of such horrific inhumanity. However,

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Erlander, *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Chelan, Washington: Holden Village, 1981). 22

<sup>16</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), 79.

the most profound truth at the heart of Christian proclamation is that death does not have the final word about God or about us. God is present in the midst of death and hell. Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. We have a hope in hell. This is the core truth the people of St. Paul's needed to hear and experience in order for healing to begin and to move on in ministry.

The opposite of this (a theology of glory) is evident in much popular theological thought today, a theology built around prosperity and success. Such theology is much more palatable and an easier sell. Who wouldn't rather hear about God putting the divine stamp of approval on our prosperity, than us having to follow Jesus to the cross, having to die in order to live?

The absence of an understanding of a theology of the cross has led to a disconnect between congregational spiritual and worship practice and the living out in the world of congregational mission practice. While not being unique to St. Paul's it is still a very real concern. Commitment to much beyond the hour or so on Sunday mornings for worship has been difficult to obtain, and even the definition of regular worship attendance has become hazy. In this respect, St Paul's very much mirrors society at large.

However, Christian faith is a lived faith. Christian faith is not simply a set of beliefs and practices; nor is it about showing up at worship on Sunday morning in order to hedge one's bets against eternity, as a type of eternal fire insurance. As Erlander implies in the title of his work, *Baptized We **Live**: Lutheranism as a **Way of Life*** (emphasis added), Christian faith is a way of being, a way of living; a way which follows Jesus to the cross and beyond. It is dying in order to be raised to life.<sup>17</sup> It is being "perfect" (Greek teleos; whole, complete, one) as God is perfect (whole, complete,

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<sup>17</sup> Romans 6:4

one).<sup>18</sup> Christian faith is living in trust in the presence of God especially in the midst of life's most hellish moments when God seems noticeably absent, the flickering flame of an eternal hope that the darkness cannot overcome.

What might this lived faith look like? I am reminded of a story that a friend told me many years ago. God granted a vision of hell and a vision of heaven to certain holy person. In the Spirit this person was first taken to hell. There they saw a great banquet hall decked out with an elaborate meal made up of the finest and most exquisite delicacies. It was indeed a feast to die for; however, those gathered around the table were emaciated in appearance and wore grumpy and sad expressions. It was then that the person noticed the eating utensils. They were so long that those gathered around the table were unable to avail themselves of the fine meal that was set before them. They could not feed themselves and were forced to fume and glare at the situation in which they found themselves.

“How terrible,” the person thought, “to have everything right there in front of you and to be unable to partake in the feast.”

It was then that the person was taken up in the Spirit again, and this time shown a vision of heaven. Much to their surprise the setting was the same. It was the same banquet hall, the same elaborate feast, and the same oversized eating utensils. However, the people gathered around the table were joyous, festive of mood, and healthy in appearance. What was the difference?

As the holy person contemplated this, an angel appeared to them. “What troubles you, my child?” the angel asked.

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 5:48, Deuteronomy 6:4



“I don’t understand,” replied the holy person. “I was granted a vision of heaven and hell and each place appeared exactly the same. It was the same festive hall with the same elaborate banquet and the same oddly long eating utensils. Only in hell the people were emaciated and angry and in heaven the people were healthy and joyous. Please explain to me the difference.”

“Ah, my child,” came the angel’s reply, “the people in hell could only imagine to try to feed themselves, while the people in heaven learned to feed each other.”

So it is with the people of St. Paul’s. After many years of frustration and fighting and devouring themselves, after their descent into hell, they are learning how to feed one another. They are learning to be a community in Christ. They are readying themselves for the next step in the journey, the step out beyond the confines of the church facility to feed the starving ones who are at the gate.<sup>19</sup>

The need is real. Not everyone has prospered from the Eagle Ford oil play. Many people who do not own property still live in poverty. A colleague of mine who is the President of the Board of Directors of the agency who runs the local food pantry tells me that requests for their service have reached all-time highs. They have trouble keeping the pantry shelves full. My wife helps to distribute surplus commodities to the community and reports continual frustration with the selfish, hoarding behavior perpetrated by many who display no obvious need while leaving little for those who do.

The need is real. For many people in Karnes City and the surrounding county hell is seeing the prosperity around them and knowing that they remain closed out on the other side of the gate. The challenge for the people of St. Paul’s will be to step out of their own hell and be Christ’s presence in the hell of others. This is the “Now what?”

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<sup>19</sup> Luke 16:19-21

that the Doctor of Ministry project was created to answer.

*Postcards from Hell*

Toward the end of Chapter 2, the reader was given a taste of the hell that was created in the life of the people and pastor of St. Paul's. In the previous paragraph, the reader was given a taste of the hell where a number of Karnes County citizens reside. Just as one need not wait around until the moment of death to begin leading a kingdom existence, so, too, one need not die physically in order to descend into hell. Nor is it necessary to believe in the physical existence of hell somewhere in the space-time continuum in order to experience the reality of it. Even the notoriously conservative pope, Jon Paul II, in a 1999 statement for the faithful declared that, "[Hell] is a spiritual condition, a 'state of complete frustration and emptiness of life without God ... the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God.'"<sup>20</sup> Such a statement is indeed a step in the right direction, and from the perspective of eternity is spot on. However, in addition, not all experiences of hell this side of eternity are by one's own choice. Sometimes one ends up experiencing the absence of God because of overwhelming circumstance or because of the consequences of the choices of others.

Likewise, one's experience need not be as traumatic as that experienced by Wiesel (alluded to above) and other victims of the Holocaust or the innumerable other atrocities that humanity has visited upon one another and upon the created order itself. The profound evil that has conceived and carried out such actions is a very real force with which we continually strive to name, contend, and be vigilant against.

That being said, it is not the experience of hell that haunts many people. I

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<sup>20</sup> Pope Jon Paul II as quoted in Peter Hawkins, *Undiscovered Country: Imaging the World to Come*, Kindle ed. (New York: Seabury, 2009), Kindle Locations 492-493.

remember very distinctly an elderly member of the congregation where I served my internship pulling me close one Sunday on her way out of worship and imparting the following gem, “It is hell to be old.” She never elaborated further but her words of wisdom have stuck with me.

My Grandfather Collins died at the age of 89. He was a very healthy, robust individual and sharp as a tack. He was well known and well respected in his community. He walked at least three miles a day up until the day he died. An accountant before retirement, he kept a journal of every penny he spent, complete with the money he spent on the evening paper he was found reading when he died. He had no history of heart trouble, yet he died of a sudden heart attack. In reality he died of a broken heart, for my Grandmother Collins had died about nine months before. We tried to get him to move to the town where we lived, but he declined. He went out for his walks, his evening meals, and to church, but otherwise stayed at home perusing the obituary section of the local paper. He died alone on a Friday evening and was not discovered until Monday when the housekeeper reported for duty. It is hell to be old.

Fred<sup>21</sup> was a member of the first parish I served in rural southeastern Nebraska. He had been married to his wife, Loretta<sup>22</sup>, for over 50 years. Several years before I arrived, Loretta experienced a major stroke. She resided in a nursing home in a community 50 miles away. Loretta existed in a vegetative state, her heart continuing to function even though her higher brain functions had ceased. Fred no longer drove and was unable to see her often. And even though it went against every principle he had ever learned, Fred, on the advice of his children, divorced her, because the expense of

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<sup>21</sup> Real name not used to protect confidentiality.

<sup>22</sup> Real name not used to protect confidentiality.

maintaining Loretta left him not enough resources to care for himself. When I visited with him, he felt guilty, ashamed, and betrayed. He was one of the kindest, gentlest souls I have ever known. Fred died six months before Loretta never fully reconciled with having done what needed to be done for both Loretta and for himself. It is hell to be old.

Anna<sup>23</sup> was a parishioner in the parish I served in a small town in northeastern Nebraska. She lived alone in a modest house several houses down and across the street from the parsonage. At 90 she had begun to slow down a bit, but one could still sense the vitality of the active farm wife about her. For many years, she and her now deceased husband had worked side by side tending to their vocation. Every time she spoke of him a little twinkle would break through her rather stoic countenance, but it would quickly recede, as she would move on to recounting how after a series of strokes she could eventually no longer care for him at home and felt forced to move him to the nursing care facility located just several blocks away. Even though she would go tend to him daily, helping the nurses bathe him and feed him, she felt guilty and ashamed that she was not able to care for him at home. Her sadness was etched into her face.

Anna's sadness was compounded by a grandson who was jailed on drug possession and other charges and by a national tragedy that surprisingly reached its tentacles all the way to a tiny town in northeastern Nebraska. Anna's great niece died in the 9/11 attacks. The niece and her husband had been trying for years to have a baby and after several miscarriages she was finally pregnant and carrying the baby to term. The niece's remains were never identified. During the 9/11 memorial service the husband was presented with two urns of ash from the sight, one for his wife, one for his unborn child. Anna, who had lived through the Great Depression and World War II, who had

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<sup>23</sup> Real name not used to protect confidentiality.

seen drought and flooding, who had experienced just about everything a person in rural northeastern Nebraska could experience, had no frame of reference for making sense of her niece's death. Whenever she talked of her niece, were the only times I ever recall tears welling up in the corners of her far away gaze. It is hell to be old.

Hell is not a reserved for the elderly by any means. One of my work-study jobs while in seminary was helping with office work and co-facilitating family educational and after care groups for an alcohol/drug treatment facility. One night I was working with a group of young children. Among them was the cutest, brightest little boy named Sam. Sam's dad was a patient in the treatment facility. The instructions that night were for the children to draw a picture and then to describe what they had drawn. Children drew pictures of their pets, of their homes, of their families, but not Sam<sup>24</sup>. It really was hard to distinguish what he had drawn. It looked like perhaps a vehicle of some kind, and a figure carrying a gun. Sam was asked to describe his picture. With as calm and non-emotional a demeanor as I have ever seen, he related a tale of how his dad was drunk and fighting with his mom, and how the picture showed him running out to his dad's truck and grabbing his dad's rifle and running to hide it, so his dad would not shoot his mom. I am still haunted by the fact that Sam told this story as matter of factly as I would describe what I had for breakfast this morning. Hell is for children, too.

My own experience of hell is shaped by a time in my life when I felt as if I were encased in a bubble. No matter how hard I tried to reach out to other people, no connection ever seemed to be made. No matter how much other people tried to reach out to me, no connection ever seemed to be made. Now, having gained some perspective, that experience is how I envision hell to be, suffocating, unending isolation and

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<sup>24</sup> Real name not used to protect confidentiality.

loneliness devoid of the divine presence, of any presence, for eternity.

Into each of these and the countless other untold private hells Christ descends to preach the good news of hope in the midst of despair, to lift all human experience into the joy and peace of the Eternal One. In my own case, Christ came in the form of individuals who loved me and believed in me until I could love and believe in myself. My primary sense of ministry is to be the presence of Christ for the other, to come to them in the midst of their hell and suffering, and through the power of Christ's Spirit at work in me and through me to lift them up into the presence of the Eternal One.

This too is the challenge set before the people of St. Paul's: how to enter into the hell of those in their community and be the presence of Christ for them. The inward, upward, and outward motions of the Doctor of Ministry project were used to redirect the ministry focus of St Paul's and move them toward embracing their mission as Christ's beloved children.

To embrace this mission and enter into it together is the challenge set before the pastor and people of St. Paul's. To do so will mean letting go of past notions of who we have been and who we hope to be. It will mean dealing with our own sense of grief and loss<sup>25</sup> even as we take on the grief and loss of the other. However, as followers of Christ, we grieve differently than the world around us: we grieve as those who have hope, the living hope of the resurrected Christ.<sup>26</sup>

In the power of this promise, we are freed to deal with our grief and enter into the grief of others confident that no matter how deep we descend, Christ is our traveling

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<sup>25</sup> The "hell of aging" is actually a grieving process as we grieve the loss of our physical capabilities, our voice, our power, our control, our independence, and our companions.

<sup>26</sup> I Thessalonians 4:13

companion and will never abandon us. The power of the living hope of Christ's resurrection life shines even in the deepest darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.<sup>27</sup> Trusting in the illumination of this vision of living hope, St Paul's began its ascent out of the hell of the last six years toward embracing the call of Christ in the voices of those in the community around them.

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<sup>27</sup> John 1:5

CHAPTER 4  
LIVING HOPE

*Competing Visions and the Project*

The conflict at St Paul's centered on two competing visions for the very soul of the congregation. The first was an inwardly focused vision seldom venturing beyond the boundaries of the church property and personal salvation. It had held sway and guided the life of the people of St. Paul's for many years. The second was a vision flowing outwardly from its center in relationship with God to the local community and beyond.

The D Min project sought to move the people of St Paul's toward the embracing of the second vision. The concept was deceptively simple: instead of forcing the congregation's focus outward, given the congregation's naturally inwardly focused inclination, why not lean into this inclination and further concentrate the congregation's gaze inward.

The Chinese finger puzzle served as a tangible metaphor for the project, and indeed for my pastoral care for the people of St. Paul's. To solve this puzzle a person places one finger in the end of a woven tube and then places a finger from the opposite hand in the opposite end of the tube and then tries to free their fingers from the tube. The more a person pulls, the tighter the puzzle becomes on their fingers. It is when a person pushes their fingers in toward the center that the puzzle releases its grip. Along the same lines the project and my pastoral ministry at St. Paul's for the last ten years is a witness to



the love of God from which nothing can separate us, not even our fear and anxiety driven behavior.<sup>1</sup> This love of God is relentlessly resilient as it leans into us despite our rejection and in so leaning frees us from all that would ensnare us and hold us in captivity even the forces of sin, death, and hell.

Following a model suggested by Richard Foster, the project followed a Trinitarian design.<sup>2</sup> The project moved inward as the congregation engaged in a Lenten study of, *A Graceful Life: A Lutheran Spirituality for Today*.<sup>3</sup> The project then moved upward, focusing the congregation's attention on a midweek Lenten service of healing. Finally, the project moved outward focusing the congregation's post Easter attention on a process designed to move it toward the formation of a Strategic Mission Plan<sup>4</sup> and closer to embracing a vision for congregational life more open toward the world outside its doors.

### *Competing Visions: Reflections and Implications*

A movement toward embracing the second vision would not come easily.

However, such movement was necessary in order to move forward in hope. The first

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:38-39

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, 1992). XII. Foster suggests that the inward movement represents God the Son, the upward movement God the Father and the outward God the Holy Spirit. Foster further suggests that the starting point is fixed on the movement inward, the Christ movement, because this is where God has revealed God's self most clearly and fully. I liken this process to that of a laser printer which first pulls the paper inward, then upward and over the drum as the image is imprinted upon it, and then outward to serve its created purpose, bearing that imprinted image to the world.

<sup>3</sup> Bradley Hanson, *A Graceful Life: Lutheran Spirituality for Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> As part of its LIFT (Living into the Future Together) emphasis the ELCA is strongly encouraging its member congregations to develop a Strategic Mission Plan as a focal point for congregational life. See Appendix B for a copy of the tool used.

vision surrendered a hopeful projection of the future for a longing for the past, in essence trading in its promised inheritance for a bowl of stew.<sup>5</sup> This vision glanced nostalgically over its shoulder at days gone by when pews were full and the Sunday School was thriving.<sup>6</sup> It was a different time. The church in many small towns was the hub around which community life turned and was ordered and prioritized, and Karnes City was no exception. This is no longer the case.

The hub around which community life turns in Karnes City is, as it has been in all of the smaller communities in which I have served, the school system, and more specifically school athletic events<sup>7</sup>. As well as providing prime opportunities for socialization, community pride and identity are on the line each time these young people take the field/floor/court. In essence, these student athletes become the projections of the community's self-image, which rises or wanes after any given contest.<sup>8</sup>

The Christian story no longer serves as a community metanarrative. It dangles on the fringes like a loose thread on a worn out garment, given public lip service but mostly relegated to the realm of personal choice.<sup>9</sup> Wednesday nights, which in days gone by in many small communities was considered "church night," has now become the night that teachers pile on the homework assignments due to the heavily scheduled athletic calendar

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 25:12

<sup>6</sup> Luke 9:62

<sup>7</sup> In Texas, the sport of choice is easily football. There are other academic and extracurricular competitions over the course of the school year (band and one act play competitions, for instance) as well as athletic endeavors, but in Texas football is king (and, yes, the male word "king" was used intentionally).

<sup>8</sup> I cannot begin to imagine the pressure these young people are under and so ill equipped to handle

<sup>9</sup> Generic prayers are said before football contests and some teams even gather to pray together afterward. Activities such as See You at the Pole and Fellowship of Christian Athletes still exist but by my observation seem to exhibit little influence in the overall development of the participants. They are just another activity to slap on the college application.

that even on occasion invades the weekends. Families seeking relief from overscheduled work and school lives now feel free to take Sunday as a day for family getaways (which ironically are often filled with the same frenetic pace of activity), rather than a day for worship and rest. If a pastor wants to create over the top melodrama, they do not need to hire a Hollywood screenwriter. All she/he need do is float the idea that confirmation class will be held during the week and attendance for anyone wishing to be confirmed is mandatory, then sit back and watch the fur fly (hopefully not her/his own).

The nostalgic longing for the “Golden Age of St. Paul’s” is understandable and not without precedent.<sup>10</sup> When a person worships in a building built to host 250 per service and now only hosts 40-50, the emptiness is palpable. And all the talk of the “great cloud of witnesses which surrounds us”<sup>11</sup> cannot erase that sense of emptiness and loss. Couple that sense of loss and grief with the sense of loss created by the church being pushed to the margins of community life, and it is a wilderness experience, which for some can become the perfect breeding grounds for anxiety, fear, and anger erupting into conflict.

However, the wilderness experience need not be one ruled by fear, but one where Jesus is found<sup>12</sup>, one where trust in God is discovered in the midst of the journey and a relationship of trusting faith is developed and deepened. The wilderness experience can become the petri dish within which a congregation’s missional identity is cultivated.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The story of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness and longing for the “good old days” in Egypt (Exodus 16:3) comes to mind

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>12</sup> See the sermon entitled, “Where is Jesus? Living Out from the Center,” found in the Postlude.

<sup>13</sup> The term “missional,” defies definition. Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books,

This is the core of the second vision that competed for the soul of St. Paul's. It is the vision at the heart of the Doctor of Ministry project. By moving beyond the inward looking inclination of the congregation, to the upward, and then completing the cycle with the outward movement, a vision was projected of a hopeful future grounded in the promises of God's gracious abundance. An invitation was put forward to embrace a living hope rather than a dying devotion, to eschew a hospice care existence for an aggressive regimen of life affirmation. Through study, sermon and ritual action, a vision was cast that God provides everything that St. Paul's needs to move forward confidently into God's future and for the people of St. Paul's to live forward into that future as God's witnesses in this time and in this place.

According to this vision, a living hope arises from trusting that God is in charge and calls the people of St. Paul's forward into the future.<sup>14</sup> Such living hope so distinguishes itself from the false hopes proclaimed by the world that people will want to know the fountainhead from which it erupts.<sup>15</sup> This living hope becomes the core of the community's witness to the world.<sup>16</sup>

Part of what is at stake between these two competing visions is the role of tradition in the ongoing life and witness of the church. For the first vision, tradition

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2009), 45. There they describe "missional" not simply as a replacement word for evangelism, but "an alternative imagination for being the church." For them, missional is about [the] transformation toward a church that is shaped by mystery, memory, and mission." Jesus own transformation and formation of his missional identity happened in the wilderness, see Matthew 4:1-17. Following his baptism, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness where he succeeded in facing temptation where the people of Israel had failed. He then began his ministry of proclaiming the coming Kingdom.

<sup>14</sup> In the opposing vision hope is placed on the community/individual's ability to reproduce and fall in line with the familiar practices of the past

<sup>15</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

<sup>16</sup> Acts 2:43-47

dictates the form and shape of the present. Tradition provides stability and security. However, in that first vision, one views the received tradition through the filter of nostalgic memory,<sup>17</sup> which romanticizes the stability and strength of the past and looks past the insecurities and blemishes, to a supposed “golden age” that never truly existed.<sup>18</sup>

Tradition in the view of the second vision is also a source of stability; however, more so in the sense of providing a sense of grounding or rootedness. Tradition becomes the foundation on which the present life and witness is built, and the launching point for future hope.<sup>19</sup> Which one of us would lay a home’s foundation and then simply set up housekeeping on it? Wouldn’t one instead build upon that foundation, adding walls, and flooring and a roof overhead? Wouldn’t one pay attention to the climate and environment in which one was building in order to determine the amount and type of insulation, and other materials used in the house’s basic design and construction?

At St. Paul’s celebration of the liturgy using the historic Western rite, solid biblical preaching, and a focus upon the grace of God for living form the core of the tradition that nurtures faith. These gifts of tradition become the good soil into which faith can sink its roots and branch out deep and wide in order to hold faith fast while the storms of chaos swirl around it.

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<sup>17</sup> ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson is reported to have called nostalgia “the abdication of memory.”

<sup>18</sup> For instance, while St. Paul’s at one time boasted a larger membership and more prestigious place in the life of the Karnes City community, it was decided to alter the practice of quarterly congregational meetings in favor of annual ones because too many fights and arguments ensued.

<sup>19</sup> Through the study of the book on a specifically Lutheran approach to spirituality and worship involving both Word and Sacrament a link was established to the tradition upon which a hopeful future would be established.

However, tradition was never meant to be an end in itself. Jesus, while rooting himself firmly in the tradition of his forebears,<sup>20</sup> criticized and broke with that tradition when necessary.<sup>21</sup> Tradition was meant for humanity, not humanity for tradition. When tradition becomes an end itself it provides a false sense of security and can lead to an inward focused sense of smugness and self-righteousness,<sup>22</sup> as opposed to leading to an outwardly focused life of true and just relationship.<sup>23</sup>

Another matter at stake in the battle between the competing visions was ecclesiology, the nature and role of the church. An unfortunate and unintentional carryover from its immigrant state church roots is the life and ministry of St Paul's remained closed off to the influence of the surrounding multicultural milieu. It remained very white, Northern European in its approach to life and ministry. A key component of the mission of St Paul's as with many Lutheran churches had become preserving a way of life, as opposed to being a place for experiencing a transformation of life in the Spirit. The primary of the focus mission of the church was about making members rather than creating disciples.

With a focus on a Strategic Mission Plan, the project sought to shift the vision of St Paul's toward envisioning the church as a place of discipleship and stewardship, a

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<sup>20</sup> See Matthew 5:17, for instance. Throughout Matthew 5 & 6 Jesus roots his teaching deeply in the tradition of the Mosaic Law and the Hebrew prophets while at the same time broadening and deepening the tradition's boundaries.

<sup>21</sup> See Mark 2:23-27, for example.

<sup>22</sup> In Lutheran tradition, the heart curved in upon itself is the essence of sin.

<sup>23</sup> This seems to me to be the heart of Jesus's prophetic critique of the Pharisees (see Mathew 23:23). The tradition's true intent is spelled out in Micah 6:8, and I paraphrase here, "Here is what the law requires of you, to love justly, to live compassionately, and to walk in humility with God."

house of prayer for all nations.<sup>24</sup> Following the lead of the apostle Paul, I envision the church to be about the formation of the “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.”<sup>25</sup> From the call of Abraham onward, God has called out a people who God blessed to be a blessing,<sup>26</sup> a light to the nations.<sup>27</sup> God called a people to witness to a life lived in faithful relationship with God. The project’s outward movement toward mission was an attempt to further cast this vision and help alter the inward focused culture of St Paul’s congregation.

As a member of Christ’s body in the world, the church, St. Paul’s is a community of those so called by God’s Word, shaped and nourished around font, pulpit, and table, and sent out in mission to share the good news of the in-breaking of the reign of God, using words when necessary. Like tradition, the church is not an end in itself. The church is the body of Christ in the world, existing to make visible the invisible presence of Christ in the world. In the words of Theresa of Avila,

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
 No hands but yours, no feet but yours.  
 Yours are the eyes through which to look out  
 Christ’s compassion to the world;  
 Yours are the feet with which [Christ] is to about doing good;  
 Yours are the hands with which [Christ] is to bless all [people] now.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Mark 11:17

<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:1, NRSV

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 12:2

<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 42:6; Matthew 5:14-16

<sup>28</sup> Theresa of Avila as quoted in Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 109. I often use this poem as part of the Sunday morning sending ritual.

Deep ties exist between ecclesiology (who the church is) and missiology (what the church is up to in the world). The church may be the only human organization that exists not for the primary benefit of its membership but for those who are outside of its embrace.<sup>29</sup> Not being open to this reality fueled the anxiety that led to the conflict at St. Paul's.

The recommendations of the Synod Consultation Committee<sup>30</sup> were offered to resolve the conflict and to begin the dissipation of the cloud of anxiety that had hung over St. Paul's for so long. By adopting those resolutions, the people of St. Paul's chose to take the first steps toward following the second vision to guide and direct their life and mission. The fact remained that historically they were an inward looking congregation and the transition to a more missional focus would be a long and winding journey. However, in faith they had agreed to take those first tentative steps and to see where the path would lead.

*Baby Steps Upward and Outward: Harbingers of Hope*

The Doctor of Ministry project was designed to help guide those halting first steps along the path. With the ultimate goal of developing a Strategic Mission Plan in mind, several key points in the liturgical design are worthy of note. Each service featured the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion. This was a break from the congregation's usual practice, and emphasized not only the tie between God's healing love offered in the Sacrament and the healing of the rifts that exist

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<sup>29</sup> For a full treatment of this aspect see Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix A.



between individuals and groups within the congregation, but also the extension of God's gracious healing and hospitality out to the other tables in congregational and personal life.

To deepen the experience further, instead of coming forward to receive the Sacrament from the Pastor and communion assistants, a smaller table was placed at the front of the seating area and the participants were invited to gather in a semi-circle around it. Distribution of the Sacrament began at one end of the semi-circle with first the wafer and then the cup. Participants served the person to their right and communed by intinction. The person on the far end of the line served the pastor. If the people of St. Paul's were to serve and feed others, then the place to begin was learning to feed and serve each other.

As the weeks progressed, similar procedures were done with the anointing for healing and the blessing before sending. Hands once clenched in anger now opened in healing; voices once raised in cursing now joined in blessing.<sup>31</sup> It was wondrous to behold: husbands communing their wives; children pronouncing words of blessing on their parents; people who had been on opposite sides of the conflict "oil-painting" the sign of the cross in a gesture of healing on the forehead of their one time opponent. It was a beginning, a step toward healing, wholeness, and hope.

One further note: a body prayer created specifically for this experience served as a transition and focusing piece.<sup>32</sup> Designed to mirror and reinforce the Trinitarian

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<sup>31</sup> The logistics of this service would have been difficult to accomplish during a normal Sunday worship service. However, the intimacy of a Lenten Mid-Week worship setting made for the perfect setting.

<sup>32</sup> Compare the experience of praying while kneeling to that of praying while standing with arms upraised to that of praying while sitting with hands folded, eyes closed. Each has a different feel and changes the dynamic of the prayer itself. A prayer of thanksgiving has a different feel when prayed on

character of the experience and of that particular point in the cycle of the liturgical year: inward (Lent); upward (Easter); outward (Ascension/Pentecost), the body prayer attempted to move the participants beyond a mere intellectual exercise toward a deeper more holistic integration of the experience.

The people of St. Paul's received the body prayer well and of all the experiences of that Lenten journey together, it may prove to have the longest life in the collective memory of the people.<sup>33</sup> Further reflection revealed another dimension to the body prayer (which merits its mention here and adds to its ongoing relevance in the life of the congregation). The body prayer as a whole reflects the movement of the community's life of faith. The inward movement reflects acts of devotion and confession. The upward movement reflects acts of grace and praise—being fed and nourished font and pulpit and table. The outflowing movement acts of sending out into the world in self-emptying service and proclamation.

The body prayer is a summary written in movement of the fullness of faith that God intends for the people of St. Paul's (and that I long to see develop). Joints have become calcified and arthritic over the years and have lost the ability to complete the cycle of movement, leaving the people frozen somewhere between the inward and upward movements. The body prayer serves as a physical therapy tool for the body of Christ dwelling at St. Paul's, providing opportunity for increased flexibility, movement, and the development of deep muscle memory as they work together to live out the cycle the prayer makes incarnate.

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one's knees than when prayed standing upright with upraised arms. See Carla DeSola, *The Spirit Moves: Handbook of Dance and Prayer* (Austin, Texas: The Sharing Company, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> The body prayer continues to be utilized from time to time at the beginning of council meetings and other appropriate moments.

What might the movement look like? Does St. Paul's have the resources and the will to embark upon the journey outward from its center? The final phase of the project was an event designed to begin the conversation and work toward the formation of a Strategic Mission Plan.

While the event suffered from poor attendance,<sup>34</sup> the honest discussion that ensued and the actions that have since come about are signs of the restless stirrings of hope awakening. Following a light meal provided by members of the LAC, and a brief devotional service revealing the logic behind the body prayer, the Congregational Assessment Questions<sup>35</sup> were distributed. The group discussed each question, recording a consensus answer from the group as a whole.<sup>36</sup>

The Congregational Assessment Questions divide into two categories, "Ministry Resources" and "Missional Attitude." After discussion, the participants answered with a "+," a "-," or an "=", and a summary score for each category obtained.<sup>37</sup> The Congregational Assessment Matrix was then distributed. The twin categories of "Ministry Resources" and "Missional Attitude" form the axes of the Congregational Assessment Matrix with the summary scores placing the congregation into one of four quadrants each with a brief description and recommendations for subsequent action.<sup>38</sup>

Interpreting the results obtained that night was not such a straightforward process.

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<sup>34</sup> Ideally, I had anticipated an attendance of 15-20 people. More realistically, I had anticipated 10-12 people. In reality, there was an attendance of six people. Poor attendance and lack of participation beyond Sunday morning are ongoing problems that plague St. Paul's.

<sup>35</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>36</sup> Had attendance been greater, there would have been more than one group with each group reaching a consensus answer to each question.

<sup>37</sup> See the instructions for the Congregational Assessment in Appendix B for definitions of the scoring and procedure for obtaining the summary score.

<sup>38</sup> See Appendix B.

The participants arrived at a +4 score on the Ministry Resources axis, placing the final results in one of the upper two quadrants, but arrived at a score of 0 on the Missional Attitude axis, placing the final result centered between the two upper quadrants. How does one interpret such results? The fashioner of the tool left no instructions for such a scenario.

First instinct was to wonder about how open and honest the participants were in answering the questions. There were several questions in both categories where I felt the group answer let St. Paul's off the hook a little.<sup>39</sup> Were the participants too attached to St. Paul's to be objective? Was I too harsh in my assessment because of wounds suffered during the conflict? There is some truth in both of those propositions. Does that invalidate the results?

In true Lutheran fashion, putting the best construction on the results yields the following conclusion: St. Paul's is a congregation in transition. The inward looking impulse still beats strong; however, a new awareness is dawning that past attitudes and behaviors are no longer working. St. Paul's is moving from what Roxburgh and Boren term a "Reactive Church" to a "Developmental Church."<sup>40</sup>

A reactive church is one that circles the wagons in the face of changing cultural context in which it finds itself. "Reactive describes a church that knows much has

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<sup>39</sup> For example, under Ministry Resources the group listed location as a "+" whereas I believe it to be an "=" at best. St. Paul's can be a challenge to locate. It is not on one of the town's main streets as are the Methodists, the Roman Catholics, the Presbyterians, and the Baptists. However, St. Paul's is tucked away in the midst of a residential neighborhood, which helps define a clear area of service. Under Missional Attitude, Healthy Mission Support and A Vision for Ministry including clear goals, were both given an "=" by the group; whereas I would have given them a "-."

<sup>40</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, 126-129. For a look at the transition taking place at St. Paul's from a Family Systems perspective see Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, 2nd ed. (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 46-47. St. Paul's is moving away from being a Clergy-Focused Congregation to being a Mission-Focus Congregation. Even from this different perspective, the shift involves a renewed focus of energy toward mission.

changed but decides it will turn in and protect itself from what is going on outside.”<sup>41</sup> Such a church might seek answers by calling a new young pastor, in hopes that action alone will bring back all of the inactive members and reenergize the youth group, can solve everything. Such a mentality reigned at St. Paul’s for many years.

“A developmental church believes it can grow and reach people in the new space by improving on what it is already doing. This attractional perspective focuses on producing programs and content that attract people to the church.”<sup>42</sup> It is the “build it, and they will come” mentality that rules here. If we can just get people in the doors, they will see what a great bunch of people we are, and they will want to join us.

The move toward this mentality has gained momentum since the adoption of the Consultation Committee’s recommendations.<sup>43</sup> Antiquated office machinery has been updated; a web page developed and launched (as well as a Facebook presence maintained); aging doors to the church building replaced; the sign out front replaced and its supporting structure repaired; the parsonage roof replaced; a new outdoor playset donated; and plans undertaken to enlarge and make the restroom facilities ADA compliant. St Paul’s is cooperating with the local school system to provide a reserve of school supplies to meet the continuing needs of impoverished students and to supply food to be sent home with those students who rely on school meals during the week and who on the weekend might have little or nothing to eat.

These are good things. These are steps in the right direction. They are signs of St. Paul’s opening up toward the community around them. They are indicators that St.

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<sup>41</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, 126.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>43</sup> See Appendix A.

Paul's believes it has a future. They are harbingers of hope. These are the first halting steps of a toddler learning to walk or an elderly person learning to trust their new knee replacement. Such efforts need to be encouraged. They are good things. However, they are not an ultimate answer. In order to thrive in today's postmodern cultural milieu and beyond a paradigm shift needs to take place. The Attractional model (build it and they will come) which has driven the Church's thinking about mission for so long needs to be set aside. The time is ripe for the conception of a new model, a model driven not so much by the Church's institutional desire and need as by the desire to be led by the Spirit to envision where God is at work in the world around us and to join in those efforts.

*Hope Floats: The Missional River*

I have long suspected that the environment in which the Church finds itself today is more akin to that of the early followers of Jesus who lived in tension with the ruling Roman Empire than to the privileged position it has occupied since the time of Emperor Constantine. We live in the midst of a vast and teeming mission field; yet our ability to perceive correctly our situation has been dulled by the assumption that the surrounding culture shares and supports the life of faith in Christ. Walter Brueggemann summarizes the challenge of today's cultural environment,

In the long history of the United States, there has been a much too easy equation of "the American dream" and the promises of gospel faith, and they are presently equated in much religious talk. The critical task, faithful to the prophetic tradition is to disentangle the promises of the American dream from the promises of gospel faith, to see that they are in principle, quite distinct claims that live at least in tension with each other, and in many ways contradict each other... [T]he same issue is present when it is recognized that the early church lived amid the Roman Empire with its "Caesar worship."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Faith in the Empire," in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 37-38.

Ever since January of 2011 upon returning from a study trip to Rome, a trip centered upon the development of the Christian faith and the influence of the Roman Empire, one focus of my preaching and teaching has been to hold up the example of those early Roman Christians for our life together.<sup>45</sup>

From a missional standpoint, this means the willingness to experiment with new approaches to the life of missional witness. While old attractional patterns of witnessing to the hope that dwells within appear to work in some instances, they mainly succeed in “sheep swaping,” drawing followers from one community of faith to another that better meets their individual spiritual and programmatic needs. Some traditions are not even very adept at implementing attractional patterns and in time may fade from the scene.<sup>46</sup> Again, a new pattern is needed to address the current situation and to propel the Church outward in mission to the surrounding culture and the neighborhoods in which it finds itself planted.

Roxburgh and Boren suggest a missional pattern as just such an alternative. They argue that there is nothing wrong with being attractional, in fact the Church wants to do what it does well and possibly attract people (this isn’t an either/or proposition that they are making). However, “...the attractional pattern is not the goal or primary call of the church.”<sup>47</sup> They use the word “missional” to describe more of an imaginative approach

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<sup>45</sup> Appendix C contains one such attempt. It was my introductory piece to the 2011 Bulletin of Report for the Annual Congregational Meeting.

<sup>46</sup> For one such perspective on the Lutheran tradition see the following blog entry: David Householder, “The Lutherans Sterben Aus (Die Out),” *David Householder’s Journal: Live from the Beach in California*, January 9, 2010, accessed November 1, 2010, <http://robinwoodchurch.wordpress.com/2010/09/01/the-lutherans-sterben-aus-die-out>.

<sup>47</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, 21.

to the Church's current situation which defies straightforward definition, and is not be identified with any one set of strategies or approaches.<sup>48</sup> They describe missional life, missional imagination, as something "...discovered out on a wide, wild river... [This river] has been shaped by the confluence of three powerful currents we call mystery, memory, and mission."<sup>49</sup>

Mystery for Roxburgh and Boren has to do with the inability of the rational mind to comprehend the choices the God of the Bible often makes.<sup>50</sup> Why choose Israel over every other nation? Why choose the Church to communicate God's love to the rest of Creation? Mystery is not about the chosen, but rather the nature of the one who chooses and calls them

...to be a sign, witness, and foretaste of God's coming kingdom. To participate in the missional journey is to embrace this mystery and allow this reality to overwhelm and supersede the pressing matters of being a successful church or a growing church, which seem to dominate our imagination.<sup>51</sup>

Memory is not about sitting around with the scrapbook (church yearbook) and nostalgically recalling the days of yesteryear. Memory in its biblical usage carries with it the power to name and give shape to community identity. "[R]emembering is about being shaped and formed by a way of life in the present that determines the future. In this sense there can be no appropriate future without memory."<sup>52</sup> Without a future, there can be no hope.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 44.



Roxburgh and Boren's understanding of mission flows smoothly from their understanding of mystery and memory. "Mission is not something the church does as an activity; it is what the church is through the mystery of its formation and the memory of its calling. The Church is God's missionary people. There is no participation in Christ without participation in God's mission in the world."<sup>53</sup> This is who we are; this is how we live together.

These basic understandings form the foundation of The Missional Network, an organization created to assist congregations in developing a missional understanding of their life together.<sup>54</sup> The key to understanding the process developed by the Missional Network comes from time spent in group study, listening, and meditation on Luke 10:1-12.<sup>55</sup> From this passage it is noted that Jesus sent out the seventy with no provisions. Likewise, the Church is to be sent out into its surrounding neighborhoods not with pre-packaged programs and assumptions (attractional!), but to find out what God may be up to in the neighborhood and finding ways to join in.<sup>56</sup> The church does this by coming out into its neighborhood and engaging in dialog with those who dwell there, with their neighbors who too often are totally disengaged from the church that sits right next door to them. The needs of the neighborhood set the agenda for the work of the church and not vice versa.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>54</sup> For more on The Missional Network, consult their website, [www.themissionalnetwork.com](http://www.themissionalnetwork.com).

<sup>55</sup> The following comes from a Missional Network introductory workshop led by Mark Lau Branson. Handouts from this workshop are in Appendix D. They include an outline of the process in which the congregation is invited to join

<sup>56</sup> Branson made an interesting note about Luke 10:7, "the laborer deserves to be paid." He noted that this was not about receiving remuneration for their proclamation; rather it was about them earning their room and board by working side by side with their host families in the daily household routine. As they did this they would develop a relationship and learn of the needs of the family and the community.

The Southwestern Texas Synod upon doing some reflecting on past attempts to reach out into its neighborhood, has formed a partnership with The Missional Network. In a pilot project called, “Jumping into the Missional River: A Journey of Discovery and Hope,” about 25 congregations in the Austin and San Antonio areas have been invited to join in 15-18 month process of missional discovery.<sup>57</sup> St. Paul’s is one of these initial 25 congregations. This actually is a very fitting next step in the process begun in the Doctor of Ministry project. Rather than drawing up a Strategic Mission Plan, which according to Branson is not very effective in achieving what the Church needs in its current context, St. Paul’s can be a missional pioneer in this part of Texas. I am excited by the possibilities and a bit anxious about how the people of St. Paul’s will respond to the invitation to “take the plunge.” I need to remind myself to constantly pray that “the Lord of the harvest will send out laborers into his harvest.”<sup>58</sup>

*Living Hope: Signs and Stories*

Will St Paul’s take the plunge into the missional river? As of this writing, I cannot say. The over-commitment and busyness that plague many of St. Paul’s members do not bode well. There is an element of risk and danger, too. Entering the river and being carried along by its currents means releasing control and trusting the Spirit’s guidance completely, not an easy task for the Lutheran soul.

Perhaps it is a matter of timing. Like an alcoholic that has not yet reached bottom, perhaps St. Paul’s has not spent enough time experiencing the futility of the attractional model in today’s cultural context. The hold of attractional model is strong and deeply

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<sup>57</sup> As previously noted in footnote 55 a brief outline of this process is included in the Appendix D.

<sup>58</sup> Luke 10:2

ingrained.<sup>59</sup> The timing truly is in the Spirit's hands. That is a scary proposition for me, as pastor. I see the need so clearly, and am not sure when or if the opportunity to participate in this project will arise at another point sometime in the future. Naming and claiming my own anxiety in this matter, I will continue to pray in the spirit of Luke 10 that the Lord of the harvest will provide the laborers.

In the meantime, I want to share a few brief stories of the hope that dwells within the life of the people of St. Paul's. The instigators of the 2010 conflict have transferred their memberships to other congregations, and any of their supporters who have remained at St. Paul's have behaved in accordance with the Consultation Committee's Guidelines.<sup>60</sup>

When budgeting for 2013, St. Paul's Council increased the pastor's salary package into a full-time range, making it more likely that pastoral coverage at St. Paul's will continue into the future beyond the term of the present pastor. They also committed to pay the tuition for 2013 for the pastor's Doctor of Ministry program, a commitment to the ongoing pastoral relationship and the future ministry of the Church. The whole congregation without objection approved the 2013 budget.

St. Paul's has been graced by the presence of several newcomers. One couple was regularly involved in the life of St. Paul's for about a month, until moving on to a new job assignment in another area of the state; another woman, a lawyer who came to St. Paul's via our website, continues her involvement with us. One inactive member who had

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<sup>59</sup> For example, there has been some sentiment expressed that St. Paul's should be able to include some kind of a "brought to you by" label in with the food and school supplies furnished to the local schools, as a way of getting the St. Paul's name out into the community. I opposed this suggestion since these are intended as gifts of God's grace. I reminded those offering the suggestion of Jesus' words about giving alms in Matthew 6:1-4 (do not let your left hand know what your right is doing.).

<sup>60</sup> One former opponent slipped me a \$50 bill on the way out of Christmas Eve service and he and his wife participated in all of the Lenten services!

been alienated during the ongoing conflict has become involved with the group of women who meet each Monday to make quilts for Lutheran World Relief. She has expressed the desire to become a more active participant in the life of the congregation. Her story adds to the air of hopefulness that has begun to take over the atmosphere of anxiety and fear, which once hung in the air choking the life of the people.

Therefore, life at St Paul's goes on. It is a life empowered by a living hope. It is a life lived in three movements; a life lived out of its center in Christ, lifted upward toward God, sent out into the world by the Spirit. In the words of St. Paul, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>61</sup> Amen.

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<sup>61</sup> Romans 15:13, NRSV

## CHAPTER 5

### SENDING

#### *All Good Things*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Christ calls a man [sic], he calls him to come and die.”<sup>1</sup> Why does that prospect surprise us? We, who call ourselves followers of Christ, should know that the trail leads to Golgotha and to then to a borrowed tomb. Do we really believe the witness of the empty tomb any more than those first followers did?<sup>2</sup>

If we believed it, if we truly lived the promise of resurrection hope, then we would welcome the opportunity to let go, to abandon everything at the tomb’s entrance, for we would know that in order for resurrection to happen there has to be a death. If there is no death, then there is no resurrection. If there is no Good Friday, then there is no Easter Morning. It is that simple and that complicated. Fear and anxiety like that which sparked and fueled the conflict at St Paul’s are very palpable especially in the face of the power of death. In a world where all a person has to cling to is a word of promise, the most unlikely promise that the tomb is empty because Jesus has risen and because he is raised we are raised, too, fear and anxiety thrive.

Fear and anxiety may thrive in such an environment, but they need not rule. All one needs do is trust the promise. If one is unsure of the promise then the challenge is to take an “as if” approach. Proceed “as if” the promise were true. It is a risky proposition;

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 44.

<sup>2</sup> See the sermon entitled, *Empty Tomb Encounters*, in the Postlude.

one many are unwilling to take. It is no wonder that conflict producing fear and anxiety cripple so many of the Church's ministry efforts and threatens to tear apart so many faith communities, like St. Paul's. People are afraid to live "as if." People are afraid to look into the emptiness. People are afraid to answer the call of Christ, to come and die, to come and die trusting in the confidence of the promise of a living hope.

The Doctor of Ministry project has led the pastor and people of St. Paul's to take those first awkward and halting steps toward living into the promise of a living hope. At the November 2013 Church Council meeting, the Council unanimously decided to participate in the Synod's Missional River Initiative. This commits St. Paul's to a 12-15 month process of experimenting with reaching out into the surrounding neighborhood to discover where God may be at work and to seek to join in. It also commits the pastor to a comprehensive evaluation process and subsequent coaching sessions on developing his/her gifts as a missional leader. Both people and pastor are hopeful that this process can continue the work begun by the Spirit acting through the Synod's Consultation process and continued in the pastor's Doctor of Ministry project.

This process will not be a savior. This process will not miraculously restore St. Paul's to its imagined glory days. St. Paul's has experienced too many wannabe saviors and their empty promises. St. Paul's, pastor and people together, simply needs to trust that it already has a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, and to trust that even if it is Friday, Sunday is coming. "Trust the process," is what my 12 step friends always told me, "Just trust the process."

St Paul's will be further challenged by the receipt of oil royalties from oil already being pumped from under its property at the estimated rate of 2000 barrels per day.

Royalty payments should begin sometime in the summer of 2014 and are retroactive to when the well began pumping at the beginning of the year. How St Paul's leadership chooses to handle this windfall will be a real test of their faith and stewardship. Current giving levels which are adequate to sustain the current programming level could fall off dramatically if it is perceived that St Paul's doesn't need the money. Leadership needs to communicate clearly to the congregation that giving is not so much about the church's need to receive; as it is about the people's need to give. Careful long range planning and faithful stewardship education are essential to keep the future of St Paul's a hopeful one.

*Objects in the Rearview Mirror*

When I entered the Doctor of Ministry program at Drew, the future of St. Paul's was not a hopeful one. The congregation was racked with anxiety, fear, and conflict. Leadership was tired and on the verge of burn out. Key voices among the respected elders were silenced by death and the younger generations seemed reluctant to speak up and carry the tune forward. Wounds would begin to heal and then would be picked open and allowed to fester.

St. Paul's sense of mission had become overwhelmed and lost in the process. What was an inwardly focused congregation when I arrived in December of 2002 had completely turned in upon itself and was now devouring itself. There was no hope for the future. St. Paul's was dying.

By adopting the recommendations of the Synod Consultation Committee in March of 2012, a faint glimmer of hope shone forth. We had been at this point before only to lapse back into cycle of chaos and conflict. The cycle needed to be broken and new patterns established.

This was the goal of the Doctor of Ministry project: to step into the void created by the absence of conflict, working to establish a new pattern of behavior, a new focus for our life together. In order to accomplish this goal, the following steps were undertaken:

- 1.) With the help of the Lay Advisory Committee a survey of open ended response questions was devised and distributed.<sup>3</sup>
- 2.) A Lenten book study of Bradley Hansen's, *A Graceful Life: Lutheran Spirituality for Today*, was undertaken.
- 3.) Immediately following upon the conclusion of the book study a Lenten service of healing was conducted which culminated in the celebration of Holy Communion and a ritual of blessing and sending.
- 4.) A gathering was held to fill out a Synod provided congregational evaluation tool in order to begin the process of altering the congregation's focus and establish a Strategic Mission Plan.

The survey intended to generate narrative data around project themes, only managed to generate three responses and proved not particularly helpful. In retrospect, congregational leadership at St. Paul's had tried in the past to obtain input through the use of surveys with minimal success. Perhaps this may have proved a more generative exercise had the pastor and the LAC used these open ended statements as the basis for a series of one on one interviews with congregation members.

Likewise, the book study generated limited response. Attendance was sparse. Discussion was minimal. Some found the book too challenging.<sup>4</sup> The dynamic of the class became more like a professor in a lecture hall rather than the hoped for small group seminar. The overall feedback proved positive and may show some dividends down the

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix E.

<sup>4</sup> This comment came from several individuals who have a college degree. I did not consider it all that challenging a read ; although, ironically, I found it to be a bit intellectual in its approach to the topic of spirituality. (Should I have expected anything else from a Lutheran author?).



road. Because of their participation in this study, at least three people mentioned to me that maybe it is time for St. Paul's to move toward weekly celebration of Holy Communion. I am delighted by the prospect, but unsure of the timing. I suspect enough anxiety will be generated by stepping into the Missional River process, that perhaps such a major step as moving to weekly Communion will throw the congregation a little too far off balance to right itself. Holy Communion, which, as part of the Doctor of Ministry project, was featured in Lenten services for the first time in 2013, will be featured again in Lenten services in 2014. I hope for continued positive reaction and feedback on which to grow a longing in the people for more frequent celebration of Holy Communion as a part of our regular worship practice.

The Lenten services and the Congregational Evaluation Tool are discussed at length in Chapter 4 of this thesis.<sup>5</sup> The long-term effect of these pieces has yet to be seen. In the short term, the cloud of anxiety that hung over St. Paul's has begun to dissipate to a more manageable level. The atmosphere is more peaceful; the stories are more hopeful; the conversation more forward looking. Wounds are healing and one is more likely to hear words of encouragement and blessing rather than anger and derision.

The need for a Strategic Mission Plan has been supplanted by involvement in the Missional River Initiative. Would St. Paul's have become involved in the Missional River Initiative before the Doctor of Ministry project? I believe not. It was a gift of God's grace that as a result of my involvement in the Doctor of Ministry program the

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<sup>5</sup> See the discussion beginning on p. 47.

congregation was able to gain confidence and faith in me as their pastor and spiritual leader, even as I was able to grow in faith, self-confidence, and leadership.<sup>6</sup>

In the past, when I had proposed becoming involved in projects such as the Missional River Initiative, such proposals had been met with resistance and outright defiance. No one displayed interest; no one had time. Everyone was either too busy, too broke, or some combination thereof.

Something was different this time. Something had changed. We had changed. The congregation and its pastor, the nature of our relationship had changed. It had stopped being adversarial—lay versus clergy; clergy versus lay—and had become mutual and trusting. They paid my tuition and gave me time to do my work, and they got thoughtful and creative ministry in return. A class centered on a pilgrimage to Bardsey Island, Wales generated a sermon series on Celtic spirituality. A class in Spiritual Direction generated an Advent series where we practiced group Lectio Divina. A class on writing for worship generated opportunities for writing prayers for such community events as Relay For Life and Wreathes Across America. We are journeying on together, pastor and people together, and if we take a strange fork in the road (say, the use of a body prayer in worship), then we take that fork together trusting in the promise that God is there for us no matter what<sup>7</sup>, so we are there for each other.

The language of journey, of pilgrimage is very apt when looking at our life together through the lens of Constructive Narrative Theology. The theme of our Epiphany season worship has been “Walking in the Light of God.” The sermons have

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<sup>6</sup> Glancing over my notes from the Site Evaluation phrases such as, “appreciated something new,” “encourage and embrace pastoral offering,” and “growing in confidence for both parties” stand out.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:38-39

focused on how Jesus teaches us to walk together as a community of God's people, to walk a righteous path that exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees<sup>8</sup>, and that calls us to be whole and complete as is God<sup>9</sup>, so that presence of the Holy One can shine forth in us and through us. Perhaps prayer walks through the neighborhood surrounding the church can become a regular practice as we venture deeper into the Missional River Initiative, or a Labyrinth can be laid out in the enclosed pavilion that currently sits idle.

The language of journey also fits our experience when viewed through the lens of Canonical Narrative Theology. Post Doctor of Ministry classes and project I see our story as that of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness and learning to trust God to lead them. There were challenges and hiccups along the way to the Promised Land—a certain golden calf comes to mind—but God remained true to God's promise and brought them safely into the land. Prior to the Doctor of Ministry classes and project, I would have characterized our story as that of the Corinthian congregation, a group of competing factions pulling the community apart.<sup>10</sup> The Doctor of Ministry process has helped heal those factions and brought us together through a shared experience. It is very much a contextual degree.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:20

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5: 48

<sup>10</sup> One of the most creative sermons I preached was before a particularly contentious Congregational Annual Meeting in 2011. It was on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18. I divided the congregation into sections and gave each section a cheer that had to do with one of the Corinthian factions (Paul, Paul, Paul, he's better than them all, etc.) and then had them all yell their cheers while I tried to read Scripture. When I stopped them I asked them if they could hear me or each other. They answered, "No." In that sermon they were able to experience the reality that we were living. We could not hear God or one another through all of the conflict generated noise.

### *Connections*

I would summarize my personal experience of the program and project as one of connection. The connections I have made with colleagues from across the denominational and theological spectrum are priceless.<sup>11</sup> During the pilgrimage to Wales, as we experienced a taste of what the rhythm of life in a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century Celtic monastery might have been like, I became more connected to my Celtic heritage and to my source of inner strength in quiet and solitude. Dr. Mason even remarked to me one day that I probably would have been a good anchorite. I have struggled to carve out niches of that experience in my daily routine<sup>12</sup> that is marked by two teenage children on the autism spectrum as well as the challenges and interruptions of day to day life in the parish ministry. I have sometimes wondered at God’s sense of irony placing such a quiet soul in the midst of such chaos. However, I am learning to find that space of calm and quiet even as the chaos swirls around me. Staying connected to that space keeps me connected to God, to my soul, and ultimately to those around me. That connection helps to keep me centered and to be more creative in my work and in my play.

I have also become more connected with a deep sense of the mission of Christ’s church. Freed from fighting for my own survival, I have come to see that everything we do as the Church is mission. Everything we do as individual followers of Christ and as a community of God’s people—from worship and faith formation to council meetings and

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<sup>11</sup> When the people of St Paul’s met to vote on the recommendations from the Synod Consultation Committee, I let them know that they were being upheld in prayer by people from across the whole of Christ’s church. It made an impression and I believed help influence the outcome.

<sup>12</sup> Saying the Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, time spent in centering prayer in my “thin place” (a certain place in my study at the church), time spent in prayer while walking my neighborhood.

potlucks—is all about doing justice, living compassion, and walking in humility with God.<sup>13</sup> This is our mission, to make visible the presence of the invisible God.

At the beginning of the 2014 Annual Meeting, I donned a party hat, blew a noisemaker and reminded the congregation that what we were doing was celebrating the mission we were able to accomplish in the previous year and looking forward to the mission that we hoped to accomplish in the coming year. I held up the budget page and explained to them that these were not just two-dimensional numbers on a page, but they were the lifeblood of what we needed to accomplish our mission for the coming year. It is all about the mission. Moving forward into the future with a renewed sense of mission may be the greatest gift that comes out of our mutual involvement as pastor and people in the Doctor of Ministry program. We move forward in hope, but challenges remain.

### *Coda*

The sermon entitled, *Where is Jesus? Living Out from the Center*<sup>14</sup>, concludes with the following questions

Where is that wilderness place, that place of disquieting quiet for us today? What would it look like for us to let go of the past, to release it totally and without reservation to God, trusting that deeply embedded in every act of letting go is the promise of God's resurrection life, the promise of a living hope for the world? What would it look like for us to live out from our center in the loving embrace of our God who heals us and sets us free from all anxiety and fear, free to be living hope for the world?

These questions challenge the pastor and people of St. Paul's as they move forward together into God's future. Answering these questions demand a level of commitment and desire that has been lacking in the life of St. Paul's. A Sunday faith will no longer cut it. Christ is calling St. Paul's, calling it to come and die, trusting in the

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<sup>13</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>14</sup> See the Postlude.

promise of a living hope. The Missional River Initiative provides the best opportunity to envision together and experiment with what this may look like. Trust the process and never underestimate the power of God to surprise.

The Doctor of Ministry project was part of a process that aspired toward such a hopeful outcome. This process brought about personal transformation, congregational connections between pastor and people, people and people, and people and their missional identity as Christ's people in the world. The series of sermons found in the Postlude are also a major part of the process, a theological resource and gift of healing and hope to the Church. This process is the living legacy left by my involvement in the Drew Doctor of Ministry program, and provides a provisional answer to the questions asked above.

Ultimately, though, these questions find their answer in acknowledging that we are a wounded people. In our woundedness is our strength.<sup>15</sup> It is in this spirit that I offer as a concluding word a hymn that was written by me for one of the Doctor of Ministry classes. It speaks of the love of Christ which works in and through our wounds to bring healing to the world.

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<sup>15</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

### There Is a Wound That Will Not Heal

There is a wound that will not heal,  
 No balm in Gilead will seal.  
 This wound stays open and it grows;  
 The agony of love it shows.

Love's strength comes from its wounds, you know;  
 The piercings, stabbings, and the blows.  
 By cruelty and vicious hate  
 The flesh is torn; the heart is split.

Christ Jesus this world's wounds you wore;  
 The scourge of stark injustice bore.  
 Creation's groan; the captives thirst,  
 Your love enfolds us at our worst.

In you our wounds find meaning full;  
 The pain of love you do not dull.  
 Though limited our vision's scope;  
 In you our wounds are cleansed with hope.

(Tune: Maryton)

This is the best and only answer that I know how to give, the living hope of life as a wounded healer. The people of St. Paul's have been my wounders. They have become my healers. They are a blessing. As for me, my name is David, and I am a parish pastor. I am wounded. I am a healer. I am a blessing. *Sola dei gloria.* Amen.

POSTLUDE  
THE HEALING WORD

*The Big One*<sup>1</sup>

The crowd began to break up and disperse. A warm glow hung in the air. Little snippets of conversation floated gently on the evening breeze. “I didn’t mean to stay that long. I have a lot of work to do tomorrow. What was I thinking? I’m not going to want to get up in the morning.” “Wasn’t it lovely when he talked about the lilies of the field? I’ve always liked them. They are my favorite.” “Did you see that tunic Josiah was wearing? He ought to sue his tailor for malpractice. And Naomi looks like she is putting on weight again, after she worked so hard to lose it; poor girl...” “I wish he would have said more about the birds of the air. I always feel so free and light when imagining them.”

It had been a long day for Peter and his compadres. He sat in the prow of the boat watching the crowd wend their way home and reflecting on the evening’s events, something Peter did not find himself doing too often. Peter was a man of action. Life was hard. Life was short. A man had to make a living, feed his family, honor God and country. Reflection was a leisure that Peter did not feel he could afford.

He was a fisherman, not a philosopher or a rabbi. Peter was rough, plain spoken, a good man with a good heart; a man who spoke his mind even if it got him in trouble, which it did with alarming frequency. “Leave the diplomacy to the Sanhedrin,” he was often heard saying, “I call them as I see them.” It wasn’t his fault if people simply could not handle the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon on Luke 5:1-11, the Gospel for Epiphany 5 C.



Now the simple fisherman sat quietly in the prow of the boat reflecting on the day's events. Today the fish were particularly elusive, almost as if they were telepathic, anticipating his every move. There had been far too many days like that recently. Even trolling sure fire, can't miss, never fail, lucky spots brought about nothing but empty nets, sore backs, and curses born of frustration. They had put in to shore, oblivious to the gathering crowd until a stranger approached and asked for a favor.

Ah, so this was Jesus. Peter had heard the buzz. Young rabbi. Very promising. Very inspirational. But, really, come on, he is reported to have come out of Nazareth. What good ever came out of that sorry excuse of a village? Peter was intrigued, but too tired to deal with all of this. Not today. He was about to turn him down with his usual plainspoken brusqueness, but when he opened his mouth he heard himself say, "Sure climb aboard." Where did that come from? It was his voice, but certainly not his intention. Damage is done now. With a shrug of his shoulders, he turned to his compadres and weary and befuddled they retraced their wake back into the water, their precious cargo from Nazareth aboard.

Now Peter sat quietly in the prow of the boat reflecting. Jesus gave a nice message, one full of flowery and earthy images. That was fine and dandy for the masses, Peter supposed, but not for him. He had to put food on his table and pay his taxes and take care of his family and his business investment. He had no time or use for flowery and earthy images. He was Peter, man of action; Peter the fisherman. Trust in God? Fine, but where has God been these past few weeks? Evidently, God had gone over to the fishes' side. He felt like Peter the failure; Peter the loud-mouthed laughingstock. All

of this reflecting was beginning to make Peter feel very uncomfortable. He felt afraid and very vulnerable.

“Put out into deep water and let your nets down for a catch.” Peter blinked. Surely he did not just hear that. So this is what it had come to, taking professional advice from this flowery, earthy upstart of a rabbi from Nazareth. Peter did not know whether to laugh or cry. This was a challenge to all he believed about life and himself: Peter, the man of action, Peter the fisherman; Peter, who underneath all of the bluster and bravado, feared that he was Peter the failure, Peter the loud-mouthed laughingstock. He lashed out in a tone laced with a venomously sarcastic edge, “Master, we have worked all night long and have caught nothing. Yet, if *you* say so, I will let down the nets.” No sooner had he pronounced the words, spoken into being the hard truth that lay behind each syllable, then Peter’s life and that of his compadres changed forever.

I am not a fisherman. However, I suspect that it is most fishermen’s dream to catch the big one. I suspect that most fishermen desire to reel in that one large catch that becomes the picture at the center of the scrapbook, the trophy hung on the wall, the story that will amuse its hearers no matter how many times they have heard it before. I suspect most fishermen long for the big one, the career maker, the defining moment.

The myth of the big one drives our materialistic consumerist culture. It tells us that there is this one thing out there that will that will make us happy, make us feel fulfilled, make our life have meaning and purpose and direction.

When I was a child, those next big things that promised happiness and contentment filled my closet. They promised that my friends would always be home and always able to play and always able to play what I wanted to play. So, as a child, I

played with one toy for a while, found out that they were no better on delivering on their promises than the last one, and into the closet they would go as I moved on to the promise of the next big thing.

Now we are adults and have no need of such childish games. Wrong! Childhood was just the beginning of our indoctrination. The toys and stakes have changed, but the game goes on. More; bigger; faster. More; bigger; faster. The wheels on the bus go round and round as we make our way to easy street. However, we never arrive. It is never enough. We are always behind the curve, which always seems to be around the next bend on the horizon just in front of us. All is vanity and a chasing after wind.

The wind certainly blew through Peter's life on that day. He caught the big one, the catch of a lifetime. He caught so many fish that his vessel was overwhelmed and he had to call in reinforcements. However, did you notice Peter's reaction? Is he dancing around and high-fiving with his buds? Is he mugging for the camera next to his record-breaking catch? What is Peter doing?

Peter is down on his knees. Peter is down on his knees begging Jesus to leave him alone for he is a sinful man. Where is the love? Where is the gratitude? "Leave me alone for I am a sinful man," really, Peter? What is up with you?

As Johnny Cash might say, "Peter saw the light." In that moment Peter realized the truth penned by the Preacher, "All is vanity and a striving after wind." The catch had nothing to do with his skill, his effort, his striving. It was a gift. All of the striving and the scratching and the clawing, all of the straining and the aching and the swearing added up to nothing. All is vanity and a striving after wind. All he had built himself up to be, all he had desired and fought for was nothing. It was empty, bankrupt.

It was not about him at all. It never had been. It was about the gift. It always was, and now Peter realized, it always would be. Peter the man of action, Peter the fisherman, was now Peter the unworthy, Peter the sinful man. He did all he could do: Peter fell to his knees and begged for Jesus to leave, hoping the majesty of holiness would not squash him like a bug.

Jesus did not squash Peter like a bug. Instead, Jesus speaks reassuringly to Peter, “Do not be afraid.” Then Jesus goes on to give Peter a commission, “From now on you will fish for people.” The gift brings Peter to his knees and threatens to squash him. However, instead of squashing him, the gift lets him off the hook with words of reassurance, forgiveness, and hope. The gift sets him on his feet again and commissions him for service.

Peter found himself, or rather was found and claimed by Jesus and then was given the gift of his true self. Nice story, preacher; what about us? In the gift of Holy Baptism we have been found, claimed, and given our true self. Yet, we continue to struggle. We stumble and fall. We curse our misfortune and take it out on one another. We seek validation, inspiration, reassurance, forgiveness. Yet too often, we seek these things in the wrong places. Our closets are crammed full of the next big thing, and it is never enough. It is never enough.

Therefore, we gather on this day. We gather seeking a word of inspiration, a word of reassurance and comfort. We seek something to build us up. However, that is not what we find for we have not yet arrived at the point of absolute self-surrender, the point that was reached by Peter.

I have concluded that if you want a warm fuzzy, feel good experience, then get yourself a cashmere sweater or a puppy or a kitten. Do not look here. If you simply are seeking inspiration for life then subscribe to Guideposts, or talk with a wounded veteran struggling to be whole again whose only thoughts are to be back with his comrades in harm's way. Do not look here.

When I look here I find questions; hard questions; personal and invasive questions. Who am I? Who am I becoming? What drives me? What are my desires? What are my dreams? Am I worthy to receive the gift? I realize how short I fall; how much time I spend in the vain pursuit of the wind; how unworthy I am to receive the gift of life that confronts and calls me.

I know why people do not spend more time in the Word. It is not because they do not understand it; but because they do. It is not because it was written in a different time and place; but because the words leap off the page and bring the gift of God, the majesty of holiness, right in their face. The Word drives us to our knees (like Peter), a place we are not comfortable being, not because of age and/or arthritis, but because of the humility and vulnerability it engenders. Our inclination is the same as Peter's, "Get away from me, far away, for I am sinful and unworthy." We hope that the majesty of holiness will not squash us like a bug.

But just as with Peter, Jesus does not squash us, or berate us, or even point an accusing finger at us. Instead, Jesus reaches out his arms to us and reassures us, "Do not be afraid." Then Jesus reclaims us, lifts us up, sets us on our feet, and reissues our marching orders, "From now on I will make you fish for people."

Peter and his friends left that huge catch of fish there on the beach along with their boats and nets, like so much refuse set out by the curb. They finally caught the big one, but it turned out the big one caught them. All that had previously defined and guided their life became as nothing compared to the gift of Jesus and the call to follow him.

Do we dare be like Peter? What is God asking us to leave behind so that God can gift us with the call to fish for people? Dare we answer the call and follow? Dare we not? Amen.

*The Prodigal Wife/Mother Speaks<sup>2</sup>*

What do you do when your whole world is flying apart and you feel helpless, powerless, impotent? That was her daily question of God. It had been for some time now. She had been raised to be a dutiful wife, a loving mother, and a skilled runner of the household. She was all that and more. Attractive, witty, charming, and much smarter than she let on. The years had been kind to her, too, but none of that mattered now.

She looked out the window. Yes, there he was, sitting, staring off into the distance. Waiting. Hoping. He hardly did anything else anymore. He ate little and talked even less. If it weren't for the evening chill, he probably would stay out there all night.

He long ago had turned over the management of day to day operations to their oldest son. Too much too soon. She had done her best to help out, without helping out, after all, she was only a woman, and what did she know? But with her advising and

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<sup>2</sup> A sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, the Gospel for Lent 4 C.

pulling a few strings behind the scenes, her oldest son had matured in a hurry and now ran the place with consummate skill.

Even so, she could sense the growing distance and resentment between her oldest son and his father. His father who spent his days and nights waiting, watching, praying. Too engrossed to teach a maturing boy the things a father should teach, too preoccupied to work side by side with him the way that most of his friends' fathers did. These days the two barely spoke. They just sort of exchanged grunts in the morning. Her world was disintegrating right before her eyes...

It wasn't always this way. They were a happy family, a deliriously happy family, once. She and her beloved and her two boys. God had truly smiled on them. They laughed and worked and prayed together. They weren't rich, but they were comfortable, lacking for nothing. The boys were developing their own personalities: the oldest, dutiful, honor-bound, responsible; the youngest, carefree, curious, a dreamer and a free-thinker. She saw herself in both her sons, and she loved them both, more than life itself.

It hurt to admit to herself that she saw the cracks beginning to form, and was powerless to do anything to prevent them. Her youngest was always testing, always pushing the boundaries and limits. His father was patient and tolerant. But the relationship between the two seemed precarious at best. Her youngest felt confined, cornered, boxed in by the expectations of his father and of his place in the family. So, even though it broke her heart, it didn't surprise her at all when the day came that he asked for his share of the inheritance and walked off down the lane and out the main gate, stopping only to give a perfunctory hug to his father on the way out. A spot forever

memorialized, for on that exact spot is where his father, her beloved, kept his solitary vigil. From that exact spot radiated the cracks which threatened to shatter her world...

Every once in a while she would run into someone in the marketplace who in the course of their travels had seen her son. At first he was doing well. High hopes. Big dreams. But as time went by the reports became less frequent and less hopeful: This opportunity didn't pan out. That investor pulled out. After a time the reports dried up all together. She wasn't sure whether her son had moved on or something awful had happened and people were just trying to spare her from the truth.

She grew desperate for information. She finally succeeded in dragging some out of an old family friend who was told by a business associate that one of his field agents had spotted her son slopping hogs and occasionally sneaking a carob pod or two from the hogs feed. Her heart sank. Her son was alive, but that was no life. How could a Jew slop hogs? It was a disgusting and humiliating thought. Clearly outside the law of Moses. He must really be desperate. Her mother's instinct was to rush in and save him, she even said as much to her husband, but he just grunted something unintelligible and returned to sentry duty.

What was she to do? The rift grew wider. She loved her husband. She loved her boys. She loved her God. But love didn't seem to be enough to hold it all together. The resentments grew and the fault lines grew ever more dangerous and shifty. Her world was flying apart and she felt helpless, powerless, and impotent.

Suddenly, at the depths of her despair, she saw a figure approaching in the distance. Could it be? Dare she hope? As the figure drew closer and closer her heart leaped for joy and dread. He was home! He was home! Her baby boy was home! As



she watched her husband rush the gate and begin barking orders to the servants she feared for her older son, and wondered if this day that everything would finally disintegrate and perhaps never come back together again. Healing is a tricky business, and is seldom easy and rarely pain free. She said a quick prayer and hustled off to begin homecoming preparations...

Hard to tell the players without a scorecard? Sometimes that's the way it is. Let's see, we have the younger son who wants to do his own thing, live by his own rules, make his own way in the world; to whom his father is as good as dead, and who comes to himself, realizing that his relationship with his father is everything. We have the older son, who plays by the rules, does his duty, slaves away in his father's house, all the while taking his relationship with his father for granted. Perhaps, even secretly envying his brother for being his own person, while publicly keeping up appearances, all very PC, don't you know. Then there is this enigma of a father, whose life seems to go on pause until his younger son returns, and who welcomes him home with joy and honor and respect. For him, all is not right until relationship is restored, with both his sons, younger and older. And, he is willing to let them make their judgments in order for relationship to happen. He does not force, threaten or coerce, because relationship built on those terms is no relationship at all. Relationship in order to be true needs to be entered into freely. Neither son is truly a son, until they come to themselves and freely enter into relationship with their father.

Throughout the course of my life I have moved rather fluidly between the roles of the two sons. I have been the older son, slaving away out of duty or obligation, never fully appreciating the joy of day to day life in my Father's presence. I have been the

younger son, bound and determined to my own thing, to make my own way, to be my own person, only to have it all come crashing down and realize that perhaps life in the Father's presence wasn't so bad after all, and coming to myself, have headed home, tail between my legs, only to find my Father waiting and welcoming. That being said, I suspect most of us gathered here this morning, truth be told, have the most in common with the older son. Most of us have been loyal and dutiful; have never strayed too far from the fold; and probably feel we have earned our place in the household.

And that is where we get off track. Relationship is not earned. It simply is. We either live in relationship with our Father, or we live outside of it, trying to be our own person. Both sons are opposite sides of the same coin. The younger son comes to himself and realizes that he can only truly be himself in relationship to his father, on his father's terms. As it turns out his father's terms are gracious, welcoming, and forgiving.

The older son begrudges the father's graciousness, that graciousness which has surrounded him every day, if he only had the eyes to see it. The older son is blinded by his own sense of self-righteousness and entitlement, which will not allow him to enjoy the father's lavish graciousness, and keeps him locked away from his true self, that self which is defined on the father's terms. And still the Father is gracious and welcoming, not truly happy until all join the party, until all come to themselves. There is room for all in the Father's household, younger and older sons alike, and the Father will not rest until all come and join in the celebration.

Jesus leaves the parable open-ended. We do not know what the older brother did. We are left with the Father's invitation to restored relationship. How will we respond? And if we respond in the affirmative and join in the celebration, what will it cost us? For

you see, healing and restoration are a tricky business, seldom easy and rarely pain free. Dare we risk it? Dare we not? Amen.

*A Disciple's Testimony*<sup>3</sup>

The world used to make sense to me. It was not pretty or elegant, even though at times, it had its moments. It was just the way of things, the ceaseless unending turn of the wheel, round and round, without end, without hope of change or variation.

Hope was a commodity that I could not afford. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope leads a person to question the staid existence of the status quo. The “what if’s” of hope lead one down the path that maybe, just maybe, there is something better out there, something above and beyond the petty tyranny of this present moment, filling that moment’s quiet desperation full of meaning and purpose.

Hope tantalizes a person by dangling a promise of possibility in front of her/his weary, burning eyes, offering a vision of clarity in the midst of the clouds of fog and swirls of dust. Hope is the carrot and stick that keeps a person placing one leaden foot in front of another, moving forward despite one’s self, until... Until someone bigger and more powerful emerges out of the mist, chomps the carrot, spits it out in your face, then breaks the stick in half and soundly thrashes you with it. They walk away leaving you bruised and bloody and in worse shape than when you had started. No, hope was a commodity I could not afford, a luxury I did not dare allow myself, until... Jesus had gotten to me. For a moment I had let my guard down and had dared to believe, dared to hope.

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<sup>3</sup> A sermon on Luke 24:36b-48.

Before Jesus, life made sense in its own sort of ho-hum way. You are born. You die. The line drawn between those two endpoints was simply marking time, perhaps squeezing out some moments of joy in the midst of the grinding drudgery and oppressive suffering all around. Fishing made sense to me. It kept me grounded. The rhythm of the waves against the boat; the cycles of the seasons and the weather that they brought; the habits of the fish and of those who hunted them; with some variations on a theme, these all proved consistent and numbingly comforting. Fishing was my life. It even made the presence of those cursed Romans tolerable.

The Romans sucked our people drier than the desert winds. We were nothing more to them than another exploitable resource. They hated our land. They hated our customs. They hated us. The Romans kept us securely under their thumb, even though we dared to peek out around the edges now and again only to have greater pressure applied. It was the way of things. In this world, the strong oppress and exploit the weak. I had accepted my place in the long grey line of those to be exploited, until Jesus came along and the whole world was turned upside down.

Jesus proclaimed a different reality. Jesus proclaimed a reality free from exploitation and oppression. Jesus proclaimed a reality where power derived from service-oriented love that continued to serve and to love even those who spit out the carrot in your face and beat you with the splintered stick. Jesus taught. Jesus loved. Jesus healed. Jesus lived. Yes, Jesus lived and in him I began to see the possibilities. In Jesus, I began to believe that there was something more, something beyond which had broken into our midst and shattered the iron grip of the status quo. In Jesus dwelt something bright, beautiful, and enduring, something that even the likes of mighty Rome

could not match. I let my guard down, if only for a moment, and I dared to dream; I dared to believe; I dared to hope.

It did not last long. In the blink of an eye, it was gone. They arrested Jesus and held a sham of a trial. Then they handed him over to the Romans to be brutally executed by crucifixion. And that was that. It was over, over written in all capital letters and in bold, italic script, "***OVER.***" Now I was left wiping the putrid mess of chopped carrot from my face and doing the painful shuffle of those thrashed with the stick of broken hope. I had allowed myself to be drawn in, and was now suffering the consequences. "Never again," I promised myself, "never again."

Several days later, some women who had been part of the entourage came bursting breathlessly into our gathering with a wild tale of an empty tomb and an angelic vision. "He has risen," they proclaimed, just as the supposed heavenly apparition had charged them. "Impossible; the ravings of hysterical females; no wonder they could not be trusted as witnesses," I thought to myself. Jesus had done some pretty miraculous things while he was alive. But no, not this. Not this. Never again. Never again.

The women persisted in the details of their story and remained unshaken. Eventually Peter felt compelled to verify what he could. He returned and reported that indeed the tomb was empty. The body was nowhere to be found, and not a trace was left to indicate what might have happened to it. Strange. What to make of it all? Don't know. How to explain it? Can't say. Jesus has risen? H@#! no! Never again. Never again.

Later in that same day, as evening was settling in, one of our companions, Cleopas, came bursting through the doors. He regaled us with a breathless tale of an

anonymous traveler who appeared out of nowhere, led him and his traveling companion in a walking Bible study, and then was revealed to them to be none other than Jesus when he broke bread with them. What a story! And they say fishermen tell tall tales. This was even more incredible than the women's story from earlier in the day.

If it were anyone other than Cleopas doing the telling I would have dismissed it right away. However, I have known Cleopas for some time and he and I were of a very similar mind. He had left our midst earlier in the day, stunned, defeated, and muttering to himself. To me it sounded as if he were muttering, "Never again. Never again." I figured that was the last I would ever see of him; broken hope claims another victim. And yet here he was in our midst, sober and with a straight face telling us that a dead man had appeared to them on the road, led then in Bible study, and then revealed his presence around the dinner table. No! The world was spinning out of control. I would not believe. I dared not hope. Never again. Never again.

All of a sudden with no flash or fanfare (not even a, "Heeeeeeeere's Jesus!"), Jesus appeared in the midst of the chaos. It was Jesus, and yet, not Jesus. He just appeared. I have never been one to believe in paranormal experience. It was the stuff of hoaxes and the wild tales we would tell each other to make the long night watches bearable. Now here I was having a paranormal experience, there was no other logical explanation. It was Jesus, and yet, not Jesus. It had to be a ghost! It had to be a haunting hallucination of what could have been, should have been, of hope so cruelly torn away from us come back to torture us further.

"Peace be with you." It was the Lord's voice. There was no doubt about that. The apparition spoke with the Lord's voice. How was that possible? The mysterious

figure showed us its wounds, and as I looked, I happened to brush up against it. No, this could not be. This vision before us mocking our grief had substance. It was not a vision at all; it was real! “No,” I told myself, “Don’t you dare believe it. Never again. Never again.”

Then Jesus, yet not Jesus, ate a piece of broiled fish that was presented to him. I could not help but believe then. But what could this all mean? What were we supposed to do now? Were we supposed to just pick up and carry on as if none of the last few days had ever happened? No. I couldn’t; I wouldn’t; never again! However, my resolve was being overcome by an overwhelming joy and peace, joy and peace like I had never known before.

Slowly, bit by bit, the pieces of my shattered hope were being fitted back together in a new and surprising way. Jesus began to explain to us the Scriptures, and slowly like the sun rising in the east, it began to dawn on me: “Yes, yes, this makes sense. The world, life, everything began to shimmer with the light of resurrected purpose and meaning, of hope reborn.

“You are my witnesses,” the Lord told us that day, and, so I am. This is my story, my testimony to what I know to be true. I can only give testimony to what I have seen and heard and experienced. You may make of it what you will. However, know this, in Jesus, hope lives. In Jesus, hope is eternal; it will not die. In Jesus, hope outlasts, outlives, outloves whatever opposes it. It can be beaten down and trampled underfoot but it arises the flickering flame that cannot be extinguished. The living hope of the resurrected Christ turned my never again world totally and completely upside down and inside out. It took my greyscale existence and turned it up to a full 1080p HD living color.

Life is still life. It can be hard and cruel at times. However, I am different. Even in the worst of times, I can still catch glimmers, however faint, of possibility shining through the cracks. Because Jesus lives, I live also. I live and love, awash in the vastness of Christ's hope-filled embrace. It is a wonderful, wonder-filled experience. It is an experience to be savored and shared. So then, let us wonder together about the possibilities for love, for service, for life that abounds in the hope-filled presence of the resurrected Christ. Let us wonder together. Amen.

*Where is Jesus? Living Out from the Center<sup>4</sup>*

Where was Jesus? They looked everywhere they could think of, and then some. Jesus was nowhere to be found. He did not answer when they knocked on his door with his morning wake up call. Upon examination of his room, his bed appeared neat and tidy, like no one had slept in it.

Last night had been quite a night. Who knew there were so many sick people in Capernaum? Coughs, wheezes, rashes, twisted and broken limbs, runny noses, seeping wounds, they all came out of the woodwork last night. The pathetic, wretched, lost, forsaken, and abandoned, all those whom society had pushed aside, written off, placed on the Physically Unable to Perform (PUP) list, a veritable army of the walking wounded all converged last night on Peter's family dwelling. And it was on. And it didn't let up until the very last one came to Jesus to receive healing and his blessing. What a show! What a night!

It had all started so innocently with the arrival of Jesus and his followers at the home of Peter's family. Ever since he was a boy, Peter was infamous for bringing friends

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<sup>4</sup> A sermon on Mark 1:29-49, the Gospel for Epiphany 5 B.



home without so much as a moment's notice. He just couldn't seem to help himself. He always needed to be the center of attention, the boisterous storytelling life of the party. Extra provisions were always a necessity when Peter was at home. For their financial health's sake, his family thanked the heavens that he was often gone, spending many a night out on the boat, the water his most constant and trusted companion.

However, on this night, of all nights, he brought his crew home to a real mess. Peter's mother-in-law had been down for days with a fever. For Peter, it was a terrifying flashback to the time not so many years ago when he had lost his beloved wife to a similar fever. And now his mother-in-law, whom Peter loved deeply but could barely look in the eye without seeing the reflection of his beloved, was similarly smitten.

Peter, being Peter, tried to play it cool. However, inside he was in a feverish turmoil of his own, a lost boat on a treacherous and rolling sea. He didn't say a word, but Jesus somehow knew. Without word one from anyone, Jesus approached one of the servants and asked to be taken to her. The servant girl threw a quizzical glance in Peter's direction. All Peter could do was shrug his shoulders and awkwardly gesture for he to do as Jesus requested.

Moments later Jesus emerged from the back part of the house where the sleeping chambers were located. The familiar form of Peter's mother-in-law, who appeared unusually chipper and no worse for the wear, closely followed him. She began giving Peter her customary chiding for bringing home guests without proper notice, winked knowingly at Jesus, and then began barking out orders that sent the household servants scurrying off in all directions. There was no doubt who was in charge of this household. Now with her authority properly established, she settled in and became the hostess

extraordinaire that Peter loved (and even feared a little) and on which he knew he could rely.

No one was clear on who opened the floodgates to the walking wounded that began to appear at the door turning their private dinner party into a religious revival of epic proportions. Speculation was that it was the servant girl who had taken Jesus back to see Peter's mother-in-law. Awestruck, she had told someone, who told someone, who told someone else. Soon it seemed the whole of Capernaum was camped out on the front lawn. There was no turning them away. And Jesus, bless his heart, patiently healed and blessed everyone who came.

So it was no surprise to Peter that come sunrise, Jesus didn't even grunt when they first knocked on his door. No one even gave it a second thought. He had to be absolutely exhausted. However, when Jesus didn't come down for breakfast, Peter grew concerned and went to check on the matter himself. He found the bedding neat and undisturbed and no sign of Jesus anywhere. Where could he be? Where was Jesus?

Thus began a manhunt of desperate proportions. People couldn't get enough of Jesus. They clamored for him. They ached for him. They longed for him. Jesus gave them hope. Jesus made them feel as if they really mattered, that somehow their seemingly small and insignificant dreams and aspirations when brought into Jesus's presence were filled with dignity, and meaning, and purpose. Jesus healed not only their physical ailments, but also those lingering spiritual ones, that if left unchecked, were the kind the swallowed people whole and spit them out worn and broken, demoralized and dehumanized.

Where was he? Where was Jesus? Everyone was looking for him. Where was he? He was not in the market. He was not in the park. He was not in the town square. He was not at the school. He was not even at the home of the town rabbi. Where was he? Where was Jesus?

Finally, someone told Peter that the servant girl of a friend's niece's second cousin had seen a lone figure heading off toward the wasteland that existed just beyond the edge of town. Could that be where Jesus was, in that deserted, lonely place; that wilderness place, that place of wandering and wrestling, that place of temptation and learning to trust? It was an uncomfortable place. It was a place free of all distraction. It was a very disquieting place, that quiet, deserted, lonely, wilderness place. It was no wonder the region was tagged "the Badlands," for it seemed no earthly good could come out of time spent there. Surely, Jesus wasn't there?

However, that is exactly where Peter found Jesus. With every other lead exhausted, every other rock turned over, Peter corralled Andrew, James, and John and ventured off toward the Badlands. There they found Jesus: alone, serene, composed, and at peace with the universe. He looked as if this is exactly where he belonged and appeared a little bemused and puzzled by their apparent facial expressions of exasperation and concern. Jesus looked at them as if to say, "Well, duh! Where else would I be?"

It took Peter many years before he began to understand. It was exactly in that disquieting quietness, that inner stillness, as one wrestled with the demons of one's own existence that one found Jesus. And, once discovered in the midst of that struggle, his imprint became more clearly visible in all kinds of the least likely places. Jesus became

visible in the face of the homeless poor; in the request of a child to tell her/him a story; in the pained expression of an old friend as the cancer cells slowly eat away at their health, vitality, and dignity.

However, it all began in that inner stillness. It all began at the center, at the core. It all began in that encounter in the inner Badlands. That is where the conversation began. That is where Peter and the others found Jesus; and, to this day, that is where, when all else fails, Peter could find Jesus. That is where sight was restored. That was where vision was clarified. That was where wounds were healed. That was where peace was instilled. In the inner badlands, the wilderness wrestling, that is where Jesus can be found.

That was where it all began but it was not the end of the journey. Peter discovered something else that day: wilderness encounter is not an end in itself. Wilderness encounter is a launching pad, a place of beginning, a renewal point. Wilderness encounter is a base of operations from which to foray forth and return; it is a port of embarkation not a final destination.

The most curious thing for Peter and the others that day was that once they found Jesus and informed him that everyone was looking for him, all Jesus wanted to do was move on. Jesus did not want to hang around and capitalize on past victories; rather he wanted to move on to new challenges.

The journey goes ever onward. For the journey is all about the mission, the mission of proclaiming the gospel, the message of the nearness of the reign of God and the need for all to turn away from life centered in self and turn toward life centered in God. The mission cannot be accomplished by clinging to the past or by somehow trying to replicate it in the present. It cannot be accomplished by huddling behind doors held

fast by fear and anxiety. The mission happens when the doors are thrown wide open in trust. The mission happens when we live together in hope, hope that the future belongs to God no matter how bleak the present circumstance may appear.

It would have been so easy for Jesus and his followers to stay there in Capernaum, consolidate their gains, and build on their successes. They had accomplished much: healing, teaching, building a following. The ultimate truth lay beyond those accomplishments. Those accomplishments pointed to a greater reality—a reality which is the living foundation of all that is, a reality in which we all live and move and have our being. It is the reality of God’s love for us that calls us from the disquieting quiet at the center of our being, that equips us with a vision of living hope for the world, and that sends us out to be and proclaim that living hope for the world using words when necessary.

Peter and the others found Jesus that day long ago. Where is that wilderness place, that place of disquieting quiet for us today? What would it look like for us to let go of the past, to release it totally and without reservation to God, trusting that deeply embedded in every act of letting go is the promise of God’s resurrection life, the promise of a living hope for the world? What would it look like for us to live out from our center in the loving embrace of our God who heals us and sets us free from all anxiety and fear, free to be living hope for the world? I wonder... Amen.

### *Empty Tomb Encounters*<sup>5</sup>

Peter reached the tomb huffing and puffing. He leaned on the huge boulder that once had been rolled in front of the tomb guarding its entrance, now gone AWOL off to

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<sup>5</sup> A sermon on Luke 24:1-12, the Gospel for Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Day C.

one side. As he caught his breath, he thought to himself that he hadn't run that far that fast since he had called Zechariah's sister fat and ugly and Zechariah had chased all around the marketplace and back to his house. Peter chuckled to himself. Ironically, Zechariah's sister, Miriam, had matured into a fine young woman. She was now Peter's wife. If only this mad dash could end up as well as that one did, but Peter feared the worst.

That morning as those who had followed Jesus began to gather together to pick up the pieces, some women of their group came running in breathlessly telling a tale so far beyond belief most of the assembled company dismissed it out of hand. Apparently these women had gone to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, but had found the stone that sealed the entrance rolled back and the tomb empty. Strange.

And their tale got stranger still. Suddenly two men in dazzling apparel appeared, and told them that Jesus was not there. "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen." That is the message these dazzlingly arrayed strangers imparted to the women. The majority of those assembled that morning scoffed. "Grief induced hysteria and hallucinations," was the consensus opinion. There were good reasons why women were considered to be unreliable witnesses. This was a case in point. But not for Peter.

Peter's mind raced back to the day outside Caesarea Philippi when he had declared Jesus to be the Messiah. What was it that Jesus had said to him that day that had set him off, so that he the student actually had presumed to lecture his teacher? Think, Peter, think. It was something about being handed over to the religious leaders, and

being killed, and on the third day rising. Yes, that was it, Peter's memories came flooding back, handed over, killed, rising on the third day. Surely, Jesus hadn't meant...

And so it was that Peter had set off on his mad dash to the tomb. He was uncertain as to what he would find there and to what it all might mean. Now he had arrived, and upon catching his breath, he took a tentative glance inside. As his eyes adjusted to the change in light, he clearly saw the grave clothes folded neatly and laying on the shelf on the wall where the body should be, but there was no body. There were no men in dazzling apparel either.

What happened here? Peter didn't know what to think, what to believe, what to hope. Could Jesus really have...? Dare Peter hope? "Could there be redemption, even for the likes of me?" Peter wondered. Peter left the tomb empty. His head was spinning. His mind was giddy with the possibilities.

Perhaps you might remember where we last encountered Peter in Luke's telling of the gospel story. Peter, ever so full of himself, had bragged that he would follow Jesus all the way to prison and even to death if necessary. At the time, he truly meant it, every brash word of it. He tried to follow through on his words. He really did try. He followed Jesus as far as the High Priest's courtyard; however, that was as far as his bravado and resolve would carry him. Peter denied being a follower of Jesus, even denied he knew Jesus, three times he denied Jesus before the cock could crow. It was just as Jesus had said it would be. No sooner had that cockcrow echoed off into the distance, then Jesus turned and gave Peter a knowing look, an "O Peter, I wish I weren't right this time" kind of a look. That look that showed Peter how empty and useless his resolve really was.

Peter couldn't get away from that courtyard fast enough. He beat a hasty retreat, tail between his legs, weeping bitter tears born of the emptiness inside his soul.

That day Jesus had looked into Peter's emptiness, today it was Peter's turn to look into the emptiness, the emptiness of the tomb. However, Peter's was not a knowing glance. Peter's glance was the glance of one who had failed miserably despite his best efforts. Peter's glance was the desperate glance of one knowingly on need of redemption, yet unable to believe that such redemption was a possibility. Still, when Jesus had predicted his denial he had asked Peter to strengthen the believers when he had turned back. How was Peter to accomplish that? How could he turn back? Peter had no inner strength left. Peter was empty, totally spent. Peter was empty with a capital E. It was at the point where Peter's inner emptiness intersected with the emptiness of the tomb, that his resurrection experience, his redemption, began.

We are no strangers to emptiness. We know all too well, empty words, empty promises, empty dreams, empty experience. We try to fill the emptiness with whatever we can grasp onto, with stuff, with relationships, with noble concepts or noble living; however, it all is sucked into the vacuum of emptiness. Nothing fits. Nothing fills. Nothing remains. The emptiness, like the proverbial cheese, stands alone.

Three options exist for us: 1.) We could continue to fill the emptiness with what we know cannot fill it; 2.) We could surrender to the emptiness, as did Judas Iscariot, and end up just as badly; 3.) Lay our emptiness down at the entrance to the empty tomb and let resurrection power expand and explode our emptiness, clearing a path for redemption and life to begin.



We cannot come to the empty tomb full of ourselves, our pride, our accomplishments, our rationalizations and excuses and expect to experience anything other than an empty tomb. However, if like Peter, we come bearing only our own inner poverty and emptiness, we can experience that miracle that happens when our inner emptiness intersects with the emptiness of the tomb: resurrection, redemption, and life.

It doesn't take much imagination to picture Peter retelling his story again and again. Telling how he thought he was strong. Telling how he thought he was brave. Telling how his strength and bravery were useless. Telling how he, Peter the strong and brave, had betrayed his Lord, denied him, refused to acknowledge that even he knew him. And yet, when he was at his lowest, Jesus came to him and redeemed him. One can imagine Peter saying, "And if Jesus can do that for me, Jesus can do that for you, too."

As Peter stared into the empty tomb, his weakness became God's strength. Peter's inner emptiness intersected with the emptiness of the tomb and great signs and wonders ensued. The good news this morning, the good news of the Easter gospel, is that if it happened for Peter, it can happen for each one of us, it can happen for St. Paul's, too.

The tomb stands empty before us.<sup>6</sup> Dare we empty ourselves and approach? Dare we not? Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> For the last several years we actually have had a facsimile of an empty tomb present for our Easter Morning service. Literally the people of St. Paul's are confronted with "the empty tomb."

## APPENDIX A

### SYNOD CONSULTATION COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS



**Southwestern Texas**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

February 20, 2012

To: Pastor David Collins, III  
The Church Council of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Karnes City  
The Members of St. Paul Lutheran Congregation

From: Bishop Ray Tiemann, Pr. Luther Oelke, Rhonda Westerfield, Pr. Jennifer Gold

Re: Consultation Team Report

*Grace to you and peace from God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This letter formally brings the recommendations of the synod Consultation Team (CT) for St. Paul Lutheran Church, Karnes City, Texas. This CT was called in accordance with the congregation's constitution (\*C9.05.b), which states:

*When allegations of physical or mental incapacity of the pastor or ineffective conduct of the pastoral office have come to the attention of the bishop of this synod, the bishop in his or her sole discretion may, or when such allegations have been brought to this synod's attention by an official recital of allegations by the Congregation Council, or by a petition signed by at least one-third of the voting members of the congregation, the bishop shall, investigate such conditions personally in company with a Team of two ordained ministers and one lay person.*

As a matter of history, the synod office has been working with Pastor Collins and the leadership of St. Paul for some time. The synod held a previous CT process in 2005, whose recommendations were approved by the pastor and congregation. However, several members of the congregation met with Bishop Tiemann on September 12 and November 27, 2011, bringing documents and signatures noting that there is some continued dissatisfaction with Pastor Collins. They requested, through a petition signed by one-third of the congregation's voting members, for another CT process to be convened. After the Church Council confirmed the voting membership of the signers of the petition, the CT was assembled for interviews on Monday, January 30, from 3:00 - 8:00 p.m. and Tuesday, January 31, from 5:00 - 8:00 p.m. There were 40 interviews

held, involving 49 people. Seven people also mailed-in a completed questionnaire. The whole CT also met with the Church Council and Pastor Collins in separate meetings.

The members of the CT team included Bishop Ray Tiemann; Mrs. Rhonda Westerfield, retired teacher; Pastor Luther Oelke, retired; and Pastor Jennifer Gold, Cross Trails Ministry. The CT was graciously received both days of the interview and those attending were sincere in their comments and the seriousness of the process. We thank all who participated.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Of all the responses we received from those who participated in the consultation process, when asked whether the Pastor Collins' call should be terminated, 10 said "yes" and 26 said "no." That means that about 72% of those who met with the CT and answered that question definitively felt Pastor Collins should remain as pastor of the congregation. Approximately 10 others were unsure, with comments like: "Removing the pastor will not solve the problem." "The problem is not only him." "Conflict has clouded our mission." "People will leave no matter what decision is made." Therefore, the CT recommends that Pastor Collins continue his call at St. Paul Lutheran Church under the following provisions:
  - a) Pastor Collins will improve his interpersonal relationships within the congregation by spending five hours per week (of his 20-hour per week call) in home visitation to members, with the goal being to visit all members within six months. He shall provide a monthly report to the Council of the visits he has made.
  - b) For collegial support and growth, Pastor Collins will take part in conference deanery and synodical activities to develop networks of personal support.
  - c) Bishop Tiemann, or a member of the CT, will visit four times in 2012 on Sunday mornings – in April, July, October, and December – to meet with parishioners, Council members, and Pastor Collins. The pastor and Council will receive written reports and provide further recommendations to both the Council and pastor. Mileage for such visits will be paid by St. Paul's at the current IRS rate.
- 2) St. Paul Lutheran will welcome Bishop's Associate, Pastor Mike Robinson, to lead an Asset Based Planning event in the congregation to clarify the congregation's mission, set ministry goals, and write to a new mission statement for the congregation. This event will be held before the end of May, 2012.
- 3) The Church Council needs to communicate by letter, to the entire voting membership, that they affirm the ministry of Pastor Collins and find the charges in the petition to be without sufficient merit to interrupt the present pastoral ministry. Pastor Collins, along with the Council, will lead and facilitate the process for the Asset Based Planning event. We also encourage that new fellowship activities be developed in the congregation and service opportunities be pursued in the Karnes City community to provide a sense of joy and purpose for the congregation.

- 4) Each of you, as St. Paul Lutheran congregation members, promise to be involved in the Asset Based Planning event and help the congregation move forward together. Should the congregation approve these recommendations, it is a time for those who cannot move forward with St. Paul congregation to find another church home.

### Next Steps

The Church Council will call a Special Congregational Meeting to vote on the four recommendations listed above according to the constitution's guidelines. In preparation for the meeting, a copy of this report shall be mailed to all congregation members, along with the announcement of the meeting.

These recommendations come as a "package of four" and are not to be voted on individually. A majority vote is necessary for approval. Pastor Collins will make his announcement concerning his approval/disapproval of the recommendations prior to the vote at the meeting.

Should the congregation and Pastor Collins approve of the recommendations, they go into effect as described. If, however, either the congregation or the pastor does not approve of the recommendations, then the guidelines of \*C9.05.d apply:

*In the case of alleged local difficulties that imperil the effective functioning of the congregation, all concerned persons shall be heard, after which the bishop of this synod together with the Team described in \*C9.05.b. shall decide on the course of action to be recommended to the pastor and the congregation. If they agree to carry out such recommendations, no further action shall be taken by this synod. If either party fails to assent, the congregation may dismiss the pastor at a legally called meeting after consultation with the bishop, either (a) by a two-thirds majority vote of the voting members present and voting where the bishop and the Team did not recommend termination of the call, or (b) by a simple majority vote of the voting members present and voting where the bishop and the Team recommended termination of the call.*

For the sake of the well-being of the ministry of St. Paul congregation and for Pastor Collins' ministry among you, this is a time for diligent prayer by all members, asking the Holy Spirit for clear discernment. Many times in such situations there are those who will be tempted to leave the congregation, no matter what is decided. I urge you to keep the future welfare of the congregation's ministry in mind as you pray about the implications of these recommendations. May the Peace of the Lord be with you.

APPENDIX B

STRATEGIC MISSION PLAN TOOL

### Congregational Assessment Questions

The purpose of the Congregational Assessment Matrix is to self-evaluate a congregation's ministry resources and missional attitude. This assessment tool uses ten themes/questions for resource reevaluation and ten themes/questions for missional attitude. For each question, circle the plus sign (+) if this is a positive, strong attribute of your congregation, Circle the equal sign (=) if this is an average attribute of your congregation, Circle the minus sign (-) if this is a negative, weak attribute of your congregation. At the end, write the number of total plus (+), equal (=), and minus (-) signs at the bottom.

**Ministry Resources**

- + - - Capable, spiritually-healthy leadership  
Are leaders capable and committed to spiritual growth?
- + - - Adequate volunteers  
Are there enough volunteers to maintain and grow the ministry?
- + - - Membership trends  
Is the congregation growing in committed participants?
- + - - Stewardship and giving trends  
Does the congregation exhibit generosity toward ministry?
- + - - Ability to maintain budget  
Can the congregation pay its bills?
- + - - Ability to maintain clergy compensation  
Can the congregation afford the full-time pastoral ministry?
- + - - Endowment and savings  
Are there adequate reserves?
- + - - State of physical plant  
Is the condition of the building an asset or detriment?
- + - - Location (near main road/highway)  
Does the church have a good location and adequate parking?
- + - - Neighborhood/community  
Is the church in a strategic neighborhood/community for mission?
- Totals \_\_\_\_\_ Summary Number \_\_\_\_\_

**Missional Attitude**

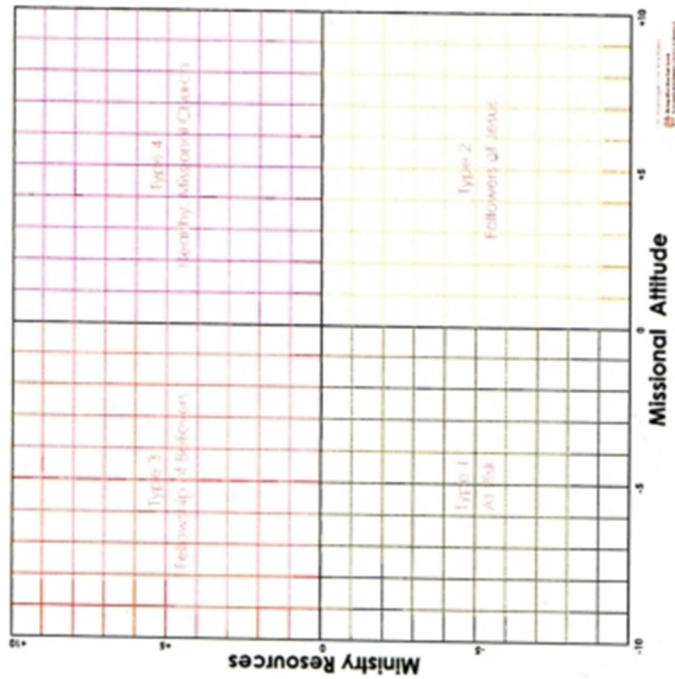
- + - - A vision for ministry including clear goals  
Does the congregation live its mission?
- + - - Worship attendance trends  
Is worship engaging a growing number of people?
- + - - Ability for clergy and laity to work collaboratively and creatively  
Is there active lay participation in ministry?
- + - - Regular engagement with the Bible in small groups  
Is the reading and study of the Bible a priority?
- + - - A spirit of prayer is present  
Does prayer infuse every level of the congregation
- + - - Engaging and spirit-filled worship  
Is worship participatory and spirited?
- + - - Reputation and engagement in the community  
If the congregation closed, would the community notice?
- + - - Healthy mission support  
Is the congregation generous in its support of the wider church?
- + - - Ability to adapt and change  
Is there a willingness to change when needed?
- + - - Membership reflective of neighborhood  
Does the congregation reflect the community?
- Totals \_\_\_\_\_ Summary Number \_\_\_\_\_

Subtract the total number minus signs (-) from the total number of plus signs (+) to compute the Summary Number. (The answer may be a negative number.)

## Congregational Assessment Matrix

Using the Summary Numbers from the other side, plot where your congregation falls on the graph below. Your Ministry Resources total shows where you fall on the vertical axis and your Missional Attitude total shows where you fall on the horizontal axis.

For instance, if your Ministry Resources summary number is +4, your congregation will be further toward the positive side of the spectrum, either Type 3 or Type 4. If your Missional Attitude summary number is -1, your congregation will be on the negative e side of the spectrum, in Type 3.



### Type 1: At Risk

This type of congregation has little resources to effectively carry on mission and care for its properties. It is now in survival mode and may have come to the fulfillment of its ministry carried so faithfully through the years.

**Course of Action/Available Resources:** Consult with the dean and the bishop's office to discuss the future. With its ministry completed, the congregation may discuss closing and the stewardship of its resources, or potential renewal strategies through missional partnership such as a merger, consolidation, cooperative ministry, or social ministry partnerships.

### Type 2: Followers of Jesus

This type of congregation is resource-poor, yet understands mission and outreach as being core to its life. Financial or other resources are at a minimum, yet there is a missional drive to share the gospel.

**Course of Action/Available Resources:** Create an ongoing and active stewardship ministry so the congregation can become self-supporting. Develop mission partnerships with Type 3 or 4 congregations.

### Type 3: Fellowship of Believers

This type of congregation has resources to guarantee making the budget. There may even be money in an endowment. They care about their building and have kept up with maintenance. Maintenance is a good description for their ministry as well. The members of the congregation like the family they are a part of. Missional outreach to the community is limited.

**Course of Action/Available Resources:** Encourage the Transformational Ministry process, discipleship, evangelism, and spiritual formation.

### Type 4: Healthy, Missional Church

This type of congregation has resources and wants to be a resource for other congregations. They teach generosity to their members and corporately are generous as a congregation in mission support and outreach. The leadership works hard to create a culture of mission and attentiveness to spiritual growth of the members. Seeking the Spirit's guidance for the ministry is sought at every level of the membership.

**Course of Action/Available Resources:** Seek out best practices. Encourage greater participation in synod events and activities as a teaching congregation. Encourage Natural Church Development (NCD) to continue to strengthen the congregation.

## APPENDIX C

### INTRODUCTION TO 2011 ST. PAUL'S BULLETIN OF REPORTS

Grace to you and peace from the one who is, who was and who is to come.

As I shared with the Council at our January 18, 2011 meeting, I am still in the process of digesting all that I experienced on my recent study trip to Rome, and will be for some time to come. Using Jesus parable of the final judgment in Matthew 25 as a backdrop, I reflected with the Council on the resolve of those early Christians in Rome to minister to “the least of these,” those whom proper Roman society had abandoned.

The early Christian community in Rome was located far from the gleaming white marble-clad seats of Roman power. The vast number of early Christians in Rome lived in the swampy marshland that existed on the other side of the Tiber River. They were numbered among what we today call “the working poor”, primarily employed in janitorial positions, in slaughter houses, and as longshoremen off-loading the barge loads of wine, oil, grain and other produce and tribute that fed the Roman economy.

They didn't have much. But what they did have they shared openly with one another and those in need. It was Roman practice that if for any reason and at any time a family decided that they did not want a child, they were free to simply abandon it outside the city walls, leaving it to die of exposure. Those early Christians would take these abandoned children into their own homes do what they could to nurse them back to health and if successful, raise them as their own. Many of these children died. In touring the catacombs it was sad to see the disheartening number of tiny graves dug out of the volcanic rock indicating the burial site of a young child or infant. But at least for the

latter part of their life they received the love and care that they needed. What you do for the least of these...

Another site that we saw was an island in the middle of the Tiber River, the site of a modern day hospital, but at one time home to a shrine to Aesculapius, the god of healing. It was there during outbreaks of small pox and plague that Roman families would abandon their sick to their fate. The early Christians would rescue those left for dead and take them into their own homes, attempt to nurse them back to health, and if successful continue to support them in whatever way they could, adopting them into their own families. What you do for the least of these...

There is a pattern here that can be instructive for us if we have the will and the wisdom to discern it. Who are those whom our society abandons to their fate? How can we take them into our community and share our life, our love with them? How do we in our life together minister to “the least of these” that populate the margins of our day to day experience? There is a pattern in the early Christian witness that can be instructive for us. Do we have the will and the wisdom to discern it?

Shalom,

Pastor Collins

Matthew 25:31-46



APPENDIX D  
MISSIONAL NETWORK HANDOUT



## Moving Back into the Neighborhood Schedule

- 9:00-10:30 Session 1:  
God is up to something in your neighborhood  
Dwelling in the Word – Listening to God through text  
and each other
- 10:30-10:45 Break
- 10:45-12:00 Session 2:  
Asking different questions  
What type of church are you?
- 12:00-12:45 Lunch
- 12:45-1:30 Session 3:  
Dwelling in the Word – shifting our imaginations
- 1:30-2:15 Session 4:  
God in the neighborhood – new awareness
- 2:15-2:30 Break
- 2:30-3:30 Session 5:  
Shaping next steps

## MOVING BACK INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

### Making “Missional” Practical

*"I was talking with a friend recently who said she had over 600 'friends' on Facebook but didn't know anyone in her neighborhood - what's that about?" BBC Report*

*"For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14, NRSV)*

**MBiN** is a workshop that gives congregations the encouragement, vision and tools for re-engaging their neighborhoods in very practical ways that express the Gospel. It is part of a growing movement of congregations across North America who believe God is calling them into fresh expressions of mission and ministry in their communities. This movement is energized by the conviction that the times of discouragement are passing as the Spirit invites us into the dawn of a new day for local churches. God is up to something out ahead of us in our neighborhoods and communities.

**MBiN gives you practical steps for getting started**

# Session 1

*God is up to something...in your neighborhood*

## **Welcome**

## **A little bit about who we are**

## **What MBiN is all about**

## **The Story We've Lived in for a while: It's not been easy...**

Those endless stats

The relentless change: *Did You Know*

The traditional efforts at being church aren't working anymore.

*A GREAT UNRAVELLING*

But this is also a wonderful moment for us as the church.

Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable*, video clip

**MBiN** is not about statistics or "ain't it awful!" or ideas on what you're supposed to believe. It's not even about a BIG VISION. It's shaped by deep-rooted convictions:

- **God is up to something among us.**
- **We're at the beginning of a new dawn for the church.**
- **The Spirit is already out ahead of us in our communities.**
- **We can begin where we are.**
- **The Spirit is in the midst of fundamentally remaking the church.**

**"God's future is already present among us and in our neighborhoods"**

## Session 2

*MBiN is a journey of LISTENING to God through one another.*

### **Dwelling in the Word**

#### **The Text (Luke 10: 1-12)**

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, “Peace to this house!” And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you.” But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, “Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.” I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. (NRSV)

#### **The Questions:**

- a. Where did your imagination stop?
- b. What question would you want to ask?
- c. What are we hearing in this text (where might the Spirit be nudging us)?

#### **Instructions**

#### **Feedback**

## **MBiN is about asking different questions**

Rather than “Church Questions”:

- How do we meet people’s needs?
- Where can we “help” in the community?
- How do we get people to come to our church?
- How do we get people to see that we are a warm, friendly, caring group?

We want to ask Luke 10 questions:

- What might God be up to ahead of us in the neighborhoods where we live?
- How do we discover where God is already at work?
- What will it be like to join in with what God is doing?

### **Group Interaction**

### **Group Feedback**

One of the amazing things is that God always begins where we are not where someone thinks we should be. Look at this great text of John 1:14 – *Jesus came and pitched his tent right beside us*. Jesus moved into the neighborhood and hung out with us where we were. He didn’t start by telling us what we ought to be.

## Session 3

### *What type of church are you right now?*

This is an exercise you can do in your own congregation. It gets people talking to one another and, best of all, it helps the people of your church really “get” what MBiN is all about. Let’s get started. We’re going to describe to you, in a fun way, four types of churches then invite you to talk to each other about your church.

Every congregation will have some elements of these types. What we want you to do is ask the question: “Of the four types **where is the primary focus or energy** of our church just now?”

### **The Four Types exercise**

- 1. Reactive**
- 2. Developmental**
- 3. Transitional**
- 4. Transformational**

***MBIN IS ABOUT HOW YOUR CHURCH CAN BUILD ON ITS  
DEVELOPMENTAL ENERGY TO BECOME A TRANSITIONAL CHURCH.***

### **Church Group Work**

1. What I am hearing to this point is...
2. The one question this raises is...
3. I think God might be saying to our church...

### **Feedback from Church Group Work**

# Session 4

## *Shifting a Church's Imagination*

### **Dwelling in the Word**

1. What am I hearing from my friendly "stranger" this time?
2. Are there fresh ways in which I might be hearing the Spirit through the text?
3. What are we hearing about how we go on this journey?

### **What is happening on the ground in your context?**

#### **Group Interactions:**

1. What are you hearing?
2. What are your questions?

### **Whole Group Feedback**



# Session 5

## *God in the Neighborhood – New Awareness*

### **Neighbors on your Street**

- ❖ On a sheet of paper draw your street (or apartment hallways) and maybe the adjacent streets
- ❖ Place houses, apartments, schools, parks, and other elements of your neighborhood
- ❖ Write the names of the people you know
- ❖ Make a note about something you know about these neighbors
- ❖ Are you currently aware of any ways that God is at work with individuals, families, or in the overall context?

### **Table discussions about our neighbors**

### **Whole group feedback**

# Session 6

## *Shaping Next Steps*

### **Discerning God in the Neighborhood (see additional materials)**

- Other mapping
- Walking and listening / seeing
- Places people gather
- Starting conversations
  - When did you first move to the neighborhood?
  - What do you like best here?
  - What would you love to see happen here?

### **Congregational Learning Communities: An 18-Month Journey**

<b><i>Preparing the Ground</i></b>	
• Form the Guiding Team	1 Month
<b><i>1. Listening &amp; Attending</i></b>	
• <i>Dwelling in the Word</i> • Listen to each other • Listen to the Neighborhood	3 months
<b><i>2. Discerning</i></b>	
• Continue <i>Dwelling in the Word</i> • Identify initial experiments	3 months
<b><i>3. Experimenting</i></b>	
• Continue <i>Dwelling in the Word</i> • Experiment Teams at work	6 months
<b><i>4. Evaluating</i></b>	
• Continue <i>Dwelling in the Word</i> • Share Stories • What have we learned? • What will we do differently?	3 months
<b><i>5. Living into a New Future</i></b>	
• Continue <i>Dwelling in the Word</i> • Next steps	2 months

APPENDIX E  
CONGREGATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

The following survey is being distributed to gain a narrative glimpse into a chapter of the story of St. Paul's and its people and to gather data for a doctoral project and thesis. It is to be submitted anonymously: please avoid including any obviously identifying information in the answers and do not sign the completed form.

Complete the following sentences as briefly, yet as thoroughly, as possible. If more space is needed, feel free to write on the back of the page or attach additional pages as needed. Completed surveys may be placed in the designated container in the rear of the sanctuary. Thank you for your time and insight.

1.) When I think of St. Paul's, I envision...

2.) I experience feeling disconnected from God when...

3.) I feel spiritual when...

4.) Conflict feels like...

5.) I pray when...

6.) For me healing occurs when...

7.) Because, as I confess in the Apostle's Creed, Jesus "descended into hell," I think...

8.) The mission of St. Paul's is...

9.) Lutheran spirituality involves...

10.) Hell is...

11.) Hope sounds like...

12.) The language of the Gospel is...

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