

**From Darkness to Light:
Finding Hope, Growth, and Life in a Multi-Cultural Spiritual Wilderness**

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ABSTRACT

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT:

FINDING HOPE, GROWTH, AND LIFE

IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SPIRITUAL WILDERNESS

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Can we ask the church to take heart, to take courage, or cross a threshold of liminality when she's living in and out of fear, anger, lack of trust, and bitterness stemming from its unresolved wounds? Can we ask clergy and leaders in a congregation to embrace a future of diversity, multi-culturalism, acceptance, and agape love when all it has been focused on is pain without resolution or reconciliation? In what ways can the ethnography and geographical context of a church help to reconcile its identity with its purpose? Can Greater New Jersey leaders listen to the stories of pain and hurt and find ways to help a church heal and become an agent of hope and life before deeming her a dying church? In what ways can pastors reconcile a diverse and multi-cultural context to advance the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in the community? These questions will be addressed in the opening section of this project; in Section II, the question of why context matters will be explored. When context changes there is a sense of loss for both the leaders and the congregation, often accompanied by grief, resistance, and isolation. This project will reflect upon my time at Christ United Methodist Church and the healing work accomplished in this deeply wounded, multi-cultural community. Section III will address how unresolved conflict and abuse can lead to a season of wilderness where one

encounters the Dark Night of the Soul that brings forth life. Section IV describes the underlying symptoms of a sick church that go unnoticed or are misdiagnosed by a hierarchical system that does not hear her. Section V describes the wilderness experience brought forth by external conflict and deception. In Section VI, new life emerges from the ashes. Ultimately, this project critiques the swiftness with which the UMC conference diagnoses a church as dead or dying. Every community has mission and outreach opportunities that keeps the church relevant and alive. A pulse and a willingness from both the church leader(s) and the congregation will help the church to heal, grow, follow, and lead.

DEDICATION

To the courageous leaders able to detect a pulse during the church's Dark Night of the Soul experiences and choose to walk alongside her and lead her into the hope of the resurrection because they have "been there, done that".

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My daughter Alexandra has been my ride or die in the uncertainties, challenges, risks, and joys of ministry. And she still is.

It is not easy being a clergy spouse. There are so many ins and outs in ministry, and I am grateful for all the moments Kevin chooses to go all in and serve alongside me.

Family is everything and without my family's support and prayers ministry would be difficult and lonely. My brother Danny, my sounding board in disagreements.

Christ United Methodist Church, Lakewood, is the motivation behind this project. Full of potential and missional possibilities, I was not about to let her go down without a fight for her life.

Writing a paper of this magnitude does not come easy for those of us who would rather preach than write. Many times, I found myself wanting to give up. Dr. Elizabeth Siegelman, my faculty advisor, saw something in the work that I was doing at the local church that could be helpful to other local churches and steered me in the right direction. Dr. Scott Hughes, my professional advisor, reminded me of the importance of this research at a time when the church is facing so many uncertainties.

Without God's grace and unfailing love and strength, I would not be in ministry today watching God at work in my life, in the lives of those around me, and in the lives of those I serve. "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." Ephesians 3:20-21, NRSV

I: Introduction

A newly appointed pastor walking into a church for the first time is filled with expectations, hope, vision, and passion. This is especially true when the welcoming members of the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC, as it is known in the United Methodist Church), perceive, in the initial interview, that the incoming pastor's leadership skills perfectly fit the needs of the congregation. However, some lay leaders and members of the congregation may see this as an opportunity to wield the power and authority they have grown accustomed to, thus shortening the honeymoon phase, quickly becoming a newly appointed pastor's nightmare.

Oftentimes these lay leaders are clinging to the "days of glory" when church membership reflected their specific cultural and/or racial demographics. The unwillingness of the congregation to change with the times and cultural shifts and its resistance to being a welcoming church to a diverse community will put the church through a period of inconsolable grief brought upon by the sense of loss that will eventually lead the church to isolate itself from the surrounding community. Such was my experience at Christ United Methodist Church in Lakewood, New Jersey. In this church context, the matriarchs, and patriarchs, served as guardians of the status quo and opponents of new leadership, ministries, and programs. Furthermore, these lay leaders will either die or be transferred to assisted living homes, nursing homes, or encouraged to reside with their adult children, leaving the congregation without the authoritative and dissenting voice that pose a threat to leaders with new ideas. Without addressing toxic tendencies, this same behavior will be carried out to other congregations and communities when dissatisfied members leave their current settings and join elsewhere.

For pastors serving difficult congregations, the task at hand requires more than coaching, organizational leadership trainings, anatomies of sorts, an outward mindset, or stepping out of the box. Even with the appointment of a new pastor expected to lead a congregation to experience growth and new ministry and mission opportunities, it often doesn't take long for a congregation with a history of antagonistic tendencies to show its true colors. Some may show hostility and resistance towards change in pastoral leadership, as early as the first day. Hostility is manifested through resistance towards new programs or the formation of antagonistic allies that encourage division within the church's lay leadership. Hostility also appears in the form of bullying members, leaders, and pastors by dissenting against well-intended programs that promote progress and change in the vision, goals, and ministry of the church.

In "Nine Traits of Church Bullies," Thom S. Rainer describes the characteristics of church bullies and how they wreak havoc and create dissension. He notes that church bullies "must have an 'enemy' in the church because they are not happy unless they are fighting a battle. They tend to maneuver to get an official leadership position in the church, such as chairman of the elders or deacons or treasurer. But they may have bully power without any official position."¹

Rainer argues that

...church bullies have always been around but are now more prevalent. Rainer identifies church bullies as those who do not recognize themselves as bullies but see themselves as heroes to save the church from her own self. They have personal and self-serving agendas and whatever is contrary to their perceived ideal must be eliminated. Church bullies seek

¹ Thom S. Rainer. "Nine Traits of Church Bullies". Church Answers. March 30, 2015. <https://www.churchanswers.com> (accessed April 23, 2021).

to perform power alliances with weak members in the church and will convince groups, committees, and persons to join their cause and those who are weak will succumb to their forceful personalities. They also tend to have intense emotional personalities and use the intensity to get their way. Church bullies are famous for saying, ‘people are saying’ and love to gather tidbits of information to shape their agendas. They find their greatest opportunities in low expectation churches where many church members have an entitlement view of church membership and can bully because church members will not stand up to them. Pastors and church staff have been attacked by church bullies and have felt even greater pain and hurt because most members stood silent and let it happen. A church bully always has his next mission and are not content unless they are exerting the full force of their manipulative behavior. Lastly, Rainer argues that church bullies often move to other churches after they have done their damage, or are forced out, or simply get bored. They move to other churches with the same bullying mission and wreak havoc in three or more churches. Rainer considers church bullying an epidemic in many of the congregations and the bullies must be stopped. And if they are not stopped, with their antagonistic behavior they become active contributors to the decline of the congregation, discipleship, and the mission and ministries of the church with and for the community.²

Dissenters and bullies tend to turn to the matriarchs of the church for support and leverage. Many times, the lay leadership is unaware of the implications of the existing toxic behavior or may succumb to it and become numb. How do such dysfunctional congregations continue to survive and how do their toxic tendencies continue to go unaddressed?

The Greater New Jersey Conference leadership, in its various attempts to revitalize the church through leadership workshops and trainings, overlooks the possibility that the church’s decline may be in part due to the outsized control and toxic actions of lay leaders and lay members, which can result in the dismissal of the visionary

² Ibid.

plans of the pastor. Workshops, trainings, and conferences focus on strategies to increase attendance, revitalize the church and the community, enhance the worship experience, reach out to the online community through technology, create mission and ministry opportunities, and to encourage full payment of shared ministries. However, what is not taken into consideration is the uniqueness of each congregation and its underlying issues, conflicts, and struggles that affect the spiritual health and well-being of a congregation.

Some of the GNJUMC's issues stem from clergy burnout and apathy specifically caused by their having to address constant conflicts within the church. Church decline is also attributed to power struggles within its leadership and members, disagreement in programs and ministries, the mishandling finances due to financial illiteracy, a lack of engagement from the community, or a refusal to engage with a rapidly changing culture. At the end of the day, the pastor is burdened with the responsibility to foresee, prevent, and address these matters before the situation escalates beyond repair.

The Greater New Jersey Conference's focus on maintaining a corporate structure keeps it from realizing that the church, far from dying, is deeply hurting. The insistence of using corporate terminology, corporate models, corporate status, and strategic planning to "rescue" and "move the church forward" and to refer to discipleship responsibilities as "kingdom business", with or without the "g", is an added stressor for a church in conflict within herself, with the pastor, and with the community. Statistical reports and demographics, which can be manipulated and misinterpreted, are used to determine the vitality of a church by recording growth through membership, small groups, outreach, inspiring worship, and stewardship. Yet, all these metrics fail to record the wider and underlying spiritual, theological, political, and socio-economic illnesses in its

congregations and communities that stem from the individual brokenness of its people and the inability or unwillingness to engage with its surrounding community.

When a congregation's wounds and pain go unacknowledged or dismissed, it affects her self-worth causing her to isolate herself and become derailed from her purpose, mission, and reason of being. In this season so foreign to her, unaware of how she got there, she grieves the loss of the past and refuses to embrace all she is capable of and who she is called to be. Instead, she resists change in any way it presents itself and wrestles with an illness seemingly incurable in a season of darkness experienced by her soul.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, suggests:

While the dark night of the soul is usually understood to descend on one person at a time, there are clearly times when whole communities of people lose sight of the sun in ways that unnerve them. This seems to be what is happening to a lot of church people right now, especially those in denominations that are losing members at an alarming rate. While they experiment with new worship styles and set up Facebook pages, most of them know that the problem runs deeper than that. The old ways of being Christian are not working anymore, not even for those who are old themselves. Something in the ways has died, or is dying—truly cause for great sorrow, even among those who know the time has come—and yet at the same time something is being born.³

A congregation then enters a spiritually depressed state when she is not heard, and her emotions are suppressed until she finds an outlet. As she begins to decline or succumb to her own pain, feelings of shame, guilt, and loss become unbearable. To add insult to injury, as she suffers her decline, she is simultaneously being condemned and judged by the church hierarchy, who rather than listening to her pain, tries to resolve the

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. New York: Harper One, 2014. 140-141.

problems by hiring corporate facilitators who further objectify the church by ignoring her cry of despair.

Mark Gregory Karris argues in his book *Religious Refugees*, that when the church says that it has been hurt by the church,

...[m]ost are describing the cocktail of feelings such as anger, sadness, and fear they can literally feel pulsating through the entire body. It is both physical and emotional because they feel both types of pain in the same region of their brain...Rejection from our faith community or having to reject due to growing apart or spiritual abuse, cuts deep to the deepest core of our emotional, physical, and spiritual being. It hurts our brains. It hurts our hearts. It hurts our bodies. It simply hurts.⁴

The church wrestles with the symptoms of an illness that some have already deemed incurable and one that presumably will imminently lead to death. When a congregation's hurt and pain go unacknowledged or are dismissed, it affects her spiritual self-worth and deters her from her purpose, mission, and reason for being. She grieves the loss of the past and refuses to embrace all she is capable of and who she is called to be. At times this is referred to as a season of liminality, which describes the church's stagnate state in relation to movement and not its current spiritual and emotional well-being.

These circumstances and symptoms produce grief and strife in the congregation who then looks back to its glory days and memorializes success stories when there was not an empty seat in the house on a Sunday morning, fellowship was like spending time with family, and those inside the building reflected and represented the community in and for which it was built. Is this grief measurable? Quantifiable? Do all congregations

⁴ Mark Gregory Karris. *Religious Refugees: (De)Constructing Toward Spiritual and Emotional Healing*. Orange: Quoir, 2020. p. 112.

grieve in the same manner and for the same causes and circumstances? What markers are used to quantify grief, calculate, and determine the period of grief, and the way one grieves for the beloved church that holds memories of baptisms, weddings, funerals, youth groups, relationships, and first encounters with the risen Lord?

Can we ask the church to take heart, to take courage, or even cross a threshold of liminality when she's living in and out of fear, anger, lack of trust, and bitterness from the weight of carrying its unresolved wounds? Can we ask clergy and leaders in a congregation to embrace a future of diversity, multi-culturalism, acceptance, harmony, and agape love when all it has been focused on for so long is pain without resolution or reconciliation? In what ways can the ethnography of a church and its geographical context help to reconcile its identity with its purpose? Can individual church leaders and the hierarchy of the UMC Church listen to the stories of pain and hurt and find ways to help the church heal and become an agent of hope before deeming her a dying church? In what ways can we restore and reconcile a community in a diverse and multi-cultural context in order advance the ministry of Jesus Christ in the community and context to which it is called to serve, amid differences and challenging times?

I contend that the church hierarchy needs to admit that the church is experiencing a season of wilderness and darkness of its soul and that this season may be for a short period of time, a month, a year, or more. For the church to fully understand what it means to be the church that Jesus has commissioned to "make disciples of all nations for the transformation of the world"⁵, she must experience spiritual, emotional, and communal healing that will open her up to the community she has been called to serve,

⁵ The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2016, Par. 120.

heal, revive, and connect with. Ultimately, this project critiques the swiftness with which the UMC conference hierarchy diagnoses a church as dead or dying. Every community has a mission and outreach opportunities that keeps the church relevant and alive. All that is needed is a pulse and a willingness from both the church leader(s) and the congregation to heal, grow, follow, and lead.

II: Social Location and Demographics

According to Christ United Methodist Church and Lakewood historians, “in 1871, Greenville Methodist Episcopal Church was led by a circuit elder who also served Bethel, Cedarbridge, and Herbertsville. Methodists living downtown formed a small congregation called the Bircksburg Methodist Church and joined the circuit of Greenville. The Greenville church grew large enough to warrant a full-time pastor, and the rest of the circuit split, and others formed their congregations. In 1892, a portion of the Bricksburg population became Lakewood and catered to the rich and the famous. Hotels sprang up, and tourism flourished. As the population grew, the Bricksburg Methodists left the circuit in 1897. They met in rented space, eventually becoming Lakewood Episcopal Methodist Church and then Lakewood Methodist Church on Clifton Avenue and Third Street in 1912.

When the elites left, the town changed dramatically. After two World Wars and the depression, Lakewood’s economic future was unstable, yet Lakewood and Greenville maintained their congregations with growing Sunday Schools. In 1963, an annex to the church building was constructed to accommodate the growing community. In 1967 the Methodist Church made an outreach to the Spanish-speaking community, and they began

meeting regularly in the main church building. However, the Board of Trustees misinterpreted the projected growth in Lakewood's population as the projected growth in the community would be neighbors of the Catholic faith. Due to financial hardships in both churches' decline, a search committee met to find a new location suitable for both congregations that would later merge as one in 1965, becoming Christ United Methodist Church in Lakewood. The church property sold to Christ UMC by Georgian Court University required many repairs. With the sale of the Greenville property, a new Sanctuary and building were built. By 1999, there was growth in number in the congregation, but the demographic changes that took effect in the community brought along cultural differences and non-Christian community members that caused the church to decline in members, mission, and ministry and caused financial hardships to increase.”⁶

Today, Christ United Methodist Church is in the heart of Lakewood, New Jersey, between Georgian Court University and Lake Carasaljo. The church building is large, spacious, beautiful, and entirely accessible. It is not a traditional sanctuary space with dark furniture, dimmed lights, and stained-glass windows. Instead, it has windows from top to bottom and wall to wall visibility to the beauty of a human-made lake, Lake Carasaljo, named after the three daughters of the pioneers of the community, “Caroline (nicknamed 'Carrie'), Sarah ('Sally') and Josephine ('Jo').”⁷

The fellowship hall is spacious and bright, with floor to ceiling and wall-to-wall windows. Years later, additional space for Sunday school classrooms is constructed, with

⁶ Armen Hagopian. “A Brief History of Methodism in Lakewood and Observations.” Lakewood, March 11, 2020.

⁷ <https://www.lakewoodnj.gov/history.php>

a vision of someday operating a school. I saw so much potential for mission and ministry as I walked around the building that would soon become the place for my next appointment.

In preparation for this appointment to begin on July 1st, 2015, I read and re-read the church profile for this congregation. The profile mentioned that the congregation had a children's ministry, a church van, a compelling mission, and ministries situated in a rapidly growing community. To further understand the community and its potential, I researched the town in Mission Insite (by ACS Technologies). This demographic tool provided me with the statistics and demographics of the city to help determine the areas in which I could better serve the community and build connections. According to the 2017 Census Reporter, Lakewood, New Jersey, had a population of 56,000 and rapidly increasing, with close to 90% of its population being White/Orthodox Jewish and Hassidic; 16% Hispanic/Latino; 2% Black, 1% Asian.

I was looking forward to beginning ministry in this new setting, meeting congregation members, and getting acquainted with the church leadership. It would be naïve to believe that there would not be challenges to face, and I hoped there would be more growth opportunities and new ministries. The church's profile stated that it was in an urban setting, with a population expected to grow in the next decade. The congregation I entered was multicultural and bilingual, with thirty percent of its members being Spanish speaking. As for mission and ministries, the church had a van ministry, and active United Methodist Men, and United Methodist Women groups. The church also served the community through a food pantry and through active participation with

Interfaith Hospitality Networks, and a yearly mission trip to Red Bird⁸ in Kentucky.

During Hurricane Sandy (2012), the congregation hosted relief groups who stayed in an additional parsonage the church owns. Small groups in the church were primarily educational, offering children's Sunday School and adult Bible study in both English and Spanish.

I quickly learned during my first week that the church's profile and Mission InSite demographics were inaccurate. The church profile did not disclose that the community population was predominantly white because it comprises Orthodox, Ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic, and a small group of Modern Orthodox Jews. Christ UMC's congregation was comprised of Anglo-Caucasian, mostly white members, and a smaller Hispanic/Latino community with Spanish-speaking members. I soon discovered that many families moved out of Lakewood due to the persistence of Orthodox Jewish leaders offering to buy their homes to build housing for their growing families. Realtors and community leaders would knock on doors and offer to purchase their homes with cash payments. A homeowner refusing the offer would later find themselves selling their properties for less to leave Lakewood. Community builders would then implode and rebuild homes to fit their needs and comply with religious and kosher practices.

For these reasons, Christ United Methodist Church is now a commuter church with families commuting from neighboring towns. Because of this, weekly evening worship services, events, and other evening activities do not have high participation. Driving at night is a risk not many are willing to take. The Orthodox Jewish community

⁸ Red Bird Mission, Inc. provides ministries through churches and individuals to the region of Appalachia to address critical needs of poverty in rural distressed areas. rbmission.org.

mainly dresses in dark-colored clothing; though there is an ordinance that requires persons out at night to wear a reflective sash, not all adhere to the regulation and therefore pose a risk for those driving at night.

Lakewood is home to the second-largest Yeshiva College globally, Beth Medrash Govoha, with Mir Yeshiva being the largest, located in Jerusalem. Beth Medrash Govoha is one street away from the church. Housing around the Yeshiva campus is mainly for students and their growing families. The heavy traffic from the Yeshiva affects the condition of the roads all year round. The number of accidents has caused auto insurance premiums to soar and non-kosher restaurants to close, leave, recreate their menus, or repurpose their buildings. It is nearly impossible to travel from one city to another without feeling the exhaustion and the desperation of bumper-to-bumper traffic. Given this rapid growth and its effects on traffic, Christ UMC commuters from neighboring towns are not able to form small group ministries in the church building for fear of accidents.

As we can appreciate from the history of Lakewood and the demographics, the church has been in decline for many years. In this ever-changing world, disagreements continue to divide the church, its people, and the community it hopes to serve. These changes bring forth a sense of loss and grief. In multi-cultural communities such as Lakewood, there are theological differences, social principles, cultural structures and dynamics, and hierarchical and local leadership styles that the church today must learn to navigate if it desires to survive and remain relevant in the community. History reminds us that the church faces many challenges, some new, some old, and some hidden in the core of its bones and community structures. While a predominantly Anglo/Caucasian

congregation, Christ UMC is a minority in a highly populated Orthodox Jewish community struggling to maintain its predominant status over the Hispanic/Latino ministry sharing the building. Outreach in such a diverse and multi-cultural community, having turned minority from being the majority, is complex and, at times, even frustrating for those who struggle with the loss of power and authority brought upon by sudden and inevitable change.

Christ United Methodist Church has endured the pain of numerous splits, divisions, and separations along with a history of change in clergy appointments. “Itinerancy refers specifically to the commitment by pastors to go and serve wherever their bishops send them.”⁹ Clergy itineracy may be painful to members of congregations that have grown accustomed to their pastor’s style, sermons, leadership, vision, and ministry; especially when clergy families have children that grow with other children in the congregation. For clergy, it is also a bittersweet moment. There are visions, plans, and mission projects that are not completed and there is no guarantee that the incoming pastor will pick up where the outgoing pastor left off. Though there is a transitioning process for leaders and clergy, incoming and outgoing, there really is not enough time to process the grief and loss associated with pastor itinerancy. Ethically, neither congregant or clergy should communicate for at least one year after their departure so that the congregation may get to know the incoming pastor and pastoral family and adapt to his or her leadership style. Some church members, especially the young at heart, do not

⁹ Adapted from “Chuck Knows Church”, Discipleship Ministries and the general Board of Higher Education and Ministry Website. “resourceumc.org.” To be United Methodist: What is “itineracy”? May-June 2015. (Accessed April 7, 2022).

understand the purpose of this rule and may grieve the most and struggle for the longest with feelings of abandonment.

Christ UMC has also weathered the pressures of a society succumbing to a dominant culture (the growing Orthodox and Hassidic community) foreign to them, causing a separation from the community they once called their own and for whom they were able to serve within their means. Aside from this shift in communal demographics, two different cultures share a worship space within Christ UMC; the only common belief that the two groups share is that mission and ministry are no longer possible in Lakewood. As a pastor living in Lakewood, investment and involvement in and with the community requires actively seeking ministry and mission opportunities. Contrary to the congregation's belief, there are mission opportunities to be had beyond the four walls of the church.

The community surrounding the church building is mainly Orthodox Jews. However, across from Lakewood's main highway, Route 9, is Clifton Ave., which leads to the other side of town and where one will find a melting pot of cultures, traditions, and nationalities where social and economic injustices, inequities, and disparities are visible. The church's call is to partner with the community in service and mission, with and for the least of these, and there are many opportunities in Lakewood. Through partnerships with town leaders, religious organizations, hospitals, and social agencies, the church identifies and addresses the community's needs and brings relief to those in despair through servant and volunteer programs. Whether it be homelessness, immigration, hunger, or joblessness, the church bridges the gap between despair and hope in the community.

III: Befriending Darkness: My Pastoral Journey and Congregational Contexts

I always find comfort and encouragement in my first experience as a pastor, which began in Puerto Rico in 2005. With parents and grandparents born and raised in Puerto Rico and later moved to New York seeking better opportunities, I identify with the underserved community surrounding my first church assignment. The church is in the middle of a low-income residential area with the children running around barefoot with unkempt hair and torn clothes. Ministry opportunities are visible and tangible. God's humble presence is in the community, waiting to be known. There are miracles everywhere! Despite being an intuitive introvert-turned-extrovert and being a perfectionist with a bachelor's degree in Administrative Sciences with a call to ministry that I had been avoiding, God was at work within me as the prodigal Methodist returning home in that small church.

There were a handful of children in the church, including my daughter, who was in elementary school at the time; quite the contrast to the many children running around on Sunday mornings at the low-income housing unit parking lot across the street from the church building. I wondered why the children didn't come to church. This wondering led me to cross the road and spark a conversation with the children. The conversation led to an invitation to the church. One of the children asked, "What do you do in there?" "We sing and dance because we're happy that God loves us!" I replied. "Dance?" was all the little girl captured from my response. In as little as six weeks, there were 28 children in church dancing to Christian contemporary, popular, and folk music, and we evangelized in city plazas almost every Saturday. The bishop heard of what we were doing in the little church and invited us to dance at Annual Conference. Soon after, the

small church from a remote place on the west coast of the island of Puerto Rico, “Iglesia Metodista de Puerto Rico Salem,” was on the map for its mission, ministries, outreach, and hospitality in the community.

A year later, I became the pastor of IMPR Salem church under “special assignment.” The senior pastor had taken a leave of absence, and appointment season had concluded with no one else to cover the appointment. I happened to be the district superintendent’s last resort to fill the pulpit of the small congregation. The success of the church’s children’s ministry allowed me to serve in pastoral leadership without any seminary education. For the following eight months in 2005-2006, this church became a fast-growing congregation. We held many community events, breakfasts, luncheons, fed the hungry, tended to those struggling with addictions, clothed the naked, and visited prisons. Over the course of 8 months a 23-member church turned into a 65-70-member church. We were evangelizing Monday through Sunday with prayer services, visitation, Bible studies, committee meetings, youth ministries and rehearsals, fasting services, Sunday school for all groups, and family worship. Worship instruments were makeshift until people from the community started donating tambourines, maracas, sticks, and a drum set. Vacation Bible School program during the summer was a two-week program that provided meals for children and families. And most church members and volunteers did not have vehicles; some would walk fifteen to twenty minutes to church, such was the power of community and a sense of belonging that we were able to foster together

Although the church was in an impoverished and underserved community, members of the congregation gave generously from what very little they had. Some church members tithed. Together we witnessed God’s abundance week after week,

month after month. To this congregation I was more than a young inexperienced recently divorced, single-parent pastor; I was their visionary apostolic companion.

We prayed for a van almost every Monday night during prayer service so that we could provide transportation for those who walked a distance to get to church. Then a miracle happened. At a district meeting a pastor from another church placed a title to a van in my hands. Someone had donated a newer model van to her church, and she gave us hers for “all the good things she heard we were doing.” I called the Trustee chairperson while in the meeting, and he called other church members to share the good news. When we arrived at the church with the van after the meeting, church and community members were waiting applauding and singing praises as we parked the van in front of the church! The youth were waiting, too, with buckets and sponges in hand and they gave the van a makeover. This is the most exciting moment in ministry that I hold dear to my heart to this day.

With all these great things happening, the district superintendent encouraged me to attend seminary and I did for one semester until I was laid off from my job due to an economic crisis in Puerto Rico. I was left with no other option but to toy with the idea of attending seminary in New Jersey. I engaged in prayer and discernment and a nudge from God affirmed that it was time to move. I enrolled into the MDiv program at Drew University in the spring of 2007 and was hired as a supply pastor in the summer of 2007 to a two-point charge, an Anglo/Caucasian and Hispanic congregation, thirty minutes apart from each other. I admit that I was very excited to begin ministry with these congregations, but my heart never left that small congregation that continued to grow with their new pastor and skilled and trained leaders.

A few weeks into the appointment in the Anglo/Caucasian church I was advised to tame the curls of my beach-waved hair and not wear shiny jewelry because they were a distraction from the pulpit. I invited the congregation to share words of peace and it was boycotted because I was too “Huggy-touchy-feely” and “we don’t do that here.” I was asked to tone down my body language and the excitement in my preaching for they were “more of a solemn” traditional congregation. For the Hispanic congregation I was too young, inexperienced, and too “Americanized” and I was missing “the accent.” One way or the other, it seemed that I simply did not fit in...anywhere. Perhaps one can say that I was experiencing culture shock; I felt as though I had lost my identity.

Fast forward eight years, I was appointed to Christ United Methodist Church in Lakewood, NJ, in 2015, where I currently serve as the senior pastor to two ministries functioning as one congregation: Anglo/Caucasian and Hispanic/Latino. This congregation is known to be a very difficult one that has had their fair share of dark moments within the church that have led them to experience divisions, grief, and loss. The consequences to these experiences have been left unattended, unaddressed, and unresolved.

Conflict is very common and frequent in both the Anglo and Hispanic/Latino ministries. Those who have come to serve or know this congregation describe it as difficult, isolated, angry, disconnected, and anti-Conference. On paper it is one congregation but, in practice it operated as two congregations with the appearance of a landlord-tenant relationship. Its members know very little of the other even after thirty years of coexisting under the same roof. There is a clashing of leadership and leadership styles. There is competition and conflict between leaders and between cultures. There

are matriarchs and then there are bullies to which no one dares to upset or challenge. There are wars on words and attitudes, some holy and others unholy. Attitudes and personalities clash like the cymbals used for worship. Some dare to say proudly that it is in their DNA. Others try to comfort me with “Don’t worry, Pastor. We do this to all the pastors that are appointed here.” With a reputation like this, it’s easy to shift the responsibility back to the congregation and some pastors may just give up and look forward to a change in appointment or retirement. However, as a perfectionist, I could not help but ask “What am I doing wrong?” “How can I fix this?” And then there are days when I say, “I see grace at work here. Not all is lost.” And so, I stayed.

I had come to Christ UMC after eight years of pastoral service to the congregations and New Jersey communities of Hasbrouck Heights and Paterson. Both congregations were relatively spiritually and emotionally healthy in comparison to what I was experiencing at Christ UMC. Into my fifth month at Christ UMC, there was so much negativity that the air walking into the church felt dense. During an Administrative Council Board meeting, which includes the chairpersons of committees, we were brainstorming ideas for upcoming events, new programming, and evaluating current mission projects and ministries. The meeting became so hostile that I was left speechless. I could not figure out what was going on and where or from whom the angry comments originated. I had never experienced such conflict in a church, and this was my third appointment since 2005.

At the beginning of each meeting, I became accustomed to sharing a time of devotion and prayer and lighting a candle that represented the presence, wisdom, and guidance of the Holy Spirit. In a topic of disagreement regarding the church’s finance

and clergy compensation report, one of the members stood up and blew out the candle in protest and in the same breath reminded me that the church was paying me and that I was expected to do what was demanded of me by church leadership. The committee chairperson concluded the meeting abruptly, and everyone left. Four of us remained, seated in silence. I was so confused I could not say a word. I was not prepared to address a confrontation of such magnitude.

The following month, in December, I had submitted receipts for reimbursement from my continuing education and other related reimbursable expenses. The treasurer at the time refused to pay them stating that all reimbursements were made quarterly and that I would have to wait until January to get reimbursed for expenses incurred between August and December of the prior year. The treasurer, in retaliation, left on vacation that same week taking the checkbook with them, without paying my reimbursements or my salary. The United Methodist Women issued a check that later the church reimbursed from the general account. This exertion of control over my financial compensation speaks to the culture of laity control at work within Christ UMC.

The following January the district superintendent held a special charge conference, and the financial chairperson and the treasurer were removed from their positions after new discoveries were made of unilateral financial decisions, which included the mishandling of the disciplinary process for the receipt and acceptance of an \$80,000 bequest made to the church. Soon after the removal of the financial chairperson and the treasurer the congregation divided, once again, and an exodus of fifteen church members occurred. Much to my dismay, I was deeply hurt by those who left and those who chose to stay out of curiosity to see how long I would last in the appointment and by

those who would continue to instigate conflict in the church and hinder its ministries. A few took to writing letters to the bishop questioning my leadership skills. The next few months were unbearable. Parking lot meetings, murmuring in the hallways, heckling during my sermons, and sabotaging meetings was constant and little to nothing was accomplished. The ministries and church programs were taking a hit and leaders were resigning from committees because they could no longer sit out the hostile environment in the meetings. No matter how many times I tried to restore a peaceful environment, in the eyes of the bullies and dissenters, I was responsible for emptying the church. The weight was placed on my shoulders, and I did not have the strength to carry the burden week after week.

During this season, walking into the church building felt like punishment. I felt like Hagar running away from Sarah, only to be sent back to the abuser by God. I recall attending clergy meetings and being asked about my experience in the new appointment, and I knew that my silence spoke volumes. If I did speak up with the truth, would it have made a difference, or would it be interpreted as complaining? It was at these meetings that I learned from others who had shepherded the congregation or had been a part of it in some way, that the church was known for its ability to rundown pastors to the point of burnout with its antagonistic lay leadership, and that it was something that the congregation was known for and took pride in. “That’s a difficult church” seemed to be the consensus, “Hang in there. You’re doing great!” But was I?

Preparing sermons was a difficult task. Any topic I chose, even when following the lectionary readings, would be perceived as an admonition. Leading meetings was futile, and it was difficult to gain consensus or agreement on simple topics. I did not feel

peace entering the building or leaving the building. During this time, the gospel did not feel like good news; there was no agape love, empathy, or unity. My suffering made me feel inadequate, ashamed, humiliated, and forsaken as a pastoral leader. And when I reached out to be heard, my pain was dismissed with innuendos of poor leadership, of taking things personally, and reacting to personalities. I was encouraged not to complain, to toughen up, to soften my approach, and to not be a stickler for the Book of Discipline. From this place of forsakenness all I could do was pass judgment, thinking to myself and repeating it aloud, “These people need Jesus.”

As the most recent pastor at Christ UMC, I inherited a variety of divisions between congregations, the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking congregants, and relatedly, divisions over the lay leadership within these subsets of each congregation. As much as I tried to be inclusive with each sub-group of the congregation and encourage unity, resistance grew towards anything I would suggest. For example, implying that I favored the Hispanic ministry over the Anglo/Caucasian ministry because I knew Spanish. Change in the status quo was not an option. For this group of lay leaders, the status quo meant security. Change meant insecurity and vulnerability, and loss of power and control.

It was difficult for me to find allies in this context. There were isolated groups and cliques tugging and pulling in different directions. So much so, that after having been together in the same building for more than thirty years, members from each sub-group of the congregation would pass each other in the church hallways between services and not greet one another or would just nod at each other because they did not know each other's names.

When members of a church engage in and feed off conflict, they constantly resist change. When they encounter change they seem to experience it as a loss, they are unable to catch a glimpse of a vision of hope. In this way, the congregation prefers to be alone and finds comfort in the darkness of her grieving and hurting soul. She succumbs to the possibility of dying alone in her pain and in her own love for the church she has come to know for so long. Inviting others to share in the pain she is experiencing is not an option and finds comfort in going through the motions with those who are familiar to her, unwilling to invite others to come to the church they once were proud to be a part of.

Tod Bolsinger quotes Heifetz and Linsky in his book titled, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, with a similar thought on transformation in leadership and programs:

...[p]eople do not resist change, per se. People resist loss. You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain.¹⁰

I knew of this pain, grief, loss, and hurt firsthand which is why when I was under the constant stress experienced during the first few months in this appointment, I thought to my first appointment in Puerto Rico. I did not have any seminary preparation and yet to be in ministry with others seemed natural for me. The congregation was receptive to new ideas, took risks, and made every effort to attend the weekly worship, meetings, studies, and activities. When I announced the names of those who were sick and, in the

¹⁰ Tod Bolsinger. *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015. p. 138.

hospital, we would take the church van on visitations, and we would go together. We would fill the seats in the hospital lobby and take turns to visit the patients. I could not help but grieve and long for my time serving the small church that courageously stopped at nothing to serve the community with the little resources she had.

Ministry in Lakewood was exhausting. My days were spent “putting out fires” rather than tending to the mission and vision of the church. I attended conferences and workshops, trainings, and coaching sessions to gain perspective as to what may be happening, hoping that these trainings would help me decipher why the members and leaders were so reactive towards me. During this time, I began to second guess myself, my leadership style, and my call to ministry. I thought to myself many times that it was impossible that all the preceding pastors at Christ UMC were ineffective leaders or that the congregation truly found pride in being difficult and making people’s and pastor’s lives unbearable. Whatever it was, it was serious enough to know that change, in me and in those I serve, had to occur if the church was to survive the downward spiral it was headed towards.

As I began my research related to topics of problem congregations, church bullies, and difficult congregations, I found more titles than I had hoped. However, there was an odd comfort in knowing that I was not alone in this journey and that most likely it had little to do with me and more to do with the personalities and authority of individual lay leaders. Every workshop and training for pastoral leadership that I attended at the conference level, taught on how we, as pastors, had to make changes in our self, our leadership styles, be more lenient and understanding with others and less arrogant always having the right answers, and how we had to be more open-minded and not see others as

“objects”. The questions I left those trainings and workshops with that remained unanswered were, “What about those persons who do not want to change or be transformed by the gospel, by Jesus? What about the abuse that I was being subjected to by the people I have been called to serve and be in ministry with? Who is going to listen to me and realize that I am not complaining but genuinely crying out for help before I am run down by an ill-intentioned power-hungry heart-hardened people? After all, I was the one experiencing the pain and the hurt while the hierarchy turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the realities of shepherding in the mission field with a “the customer is always right” policy as the general rule.

In *Ministering to Problem People in Your Church*, Marshall Shelley understood me and made me feel like I had someone in my corner. Shelley names the problem people in the church and refers to them as “dragons.” Though “dragons may be fictional beasts and exist in the imagination”¹¹, they are very real within the church. Shelley further details these dragons as:

- The Busybody, who enjoys telling others how to do their jobs.
- The Sniper, who avoids face-to-face conflict but picks off pastors with potshots in private conversation, such as the cryptic “Be sure and pray for our pastor. He has some problems, you know.”
- The Bookkeeper, who keeps written record of every-thing the pastor does that “isn’t in the spirit of Christ.”
- The Merchant of Muck, who breeds dissatisfaction by attracting others who know he’s more than willing to listen to, and elaborate on, things that are wrong in the church.
- The Legalist, whose list of absolutes stretches from the kind of car a pastor can drive to the dress code for the worship team to they of disposable coffee cups the church uses.¹²

¹¹ Marshall Shelley. *Ministering to Problem People in Your Church: What to Do with Well-Intentioned Dragons*. Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers, 2013. 11-12.

¹² Ibid., 46-7.

In reading Shelley's work, I was amazed at how common "dragons" are among churches. Shelley argues that dragons, at times well-intentioned, form habitats in the church. For example,

The worst dragons may be, in the beginning, the pastor's strongest supporters. Dragons often work overhard, initially, at befriending you. Dragons often compare you to their former pastor. Dragons thrive when the church's formal authority and informal power structure don't align. Dragons are often bred in counseling. Dragons often sensed a call to the ministry at one time.¹³

Shelley argues that "if pastors become preoccupied with the dragons, afraid to challenge them, or at least too concerned about "fighting battles that need to be fought," they often lose their spontaneity and creativity. Change is stifled, growth stunted, and the direction of ministry is the course that makes rivers crooked...When a pastor is forced to worry more about putting out brush fires than igniting the church's flame, the dragons have won, and the ministry to a needy world has lost."¹⁴ I have felt this way many times and out of fear of losing more members and being blamed and accused for "emptying the church", I have held back from confronting the "dragons" in my own church context.

Contrary to what some in the pews believe, no pastor takes pride in people leaving the church. Church folk are family, and some do not have families that they can visit once a week and spend time in small groups with and travel together like in mission trips and other church-related activities. When people leave, church members experience grief and loss and those that leave carry the pain and sorrow for a long time and sometimes into other congregations. Shelley states that

...[t]he church, indeed every Christian, is an odd combination of self-sacrificing saint and self-serving sinner. And the church, unlike some social organizations, doesn't have the luxury of choosing its members; the

¹³ Ibid., 48-54.

¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

church is an assembly of all who profess themselves believers. Within that gathering is found a full range of saint/sinner combinations. Ministry is a commitment to care for all members of the body, even those whose breath is tainted with dragon smoke.¹⁵

Speaking from the minister's mind, Shelley asks a question that I have asked myself and have asked in leadership trainings many times, "How does a leader deal with personal attacks, accusations against family, character, ministry, motives?" "When attacked by a dragon, do not become one...We do neither ourselves nor the dragons a favor by allowing them to wreak destruction unchecked."¹⁶ With this argument, I felt heard and validated. Abuse, in any shape or form, cannot go unchecked and the person must be held accountable. Shelley argues that "the trick is to accept the dragon as a person of worth, while not approving of his or her controlling tactics. It means trying to maintain an open relationship and keeping it current. Knowing what's going on in the lives of difficult members often proves helpful in their taming. Smart love also means trying to see the church and its perceived problems from their viewpoint."¹⁷

After a painful wilderness season of darkness at Christ UMC, I registered in a three-year program to be certified in the spiritual direction program at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas. I needed to be in a place where I could be myself, my authentic self, far from what I had come to know as abuse from church leaders in the congregation that I was called to serve and the weight from the abandonment by the hierarchy of the conference and with the sole support of a district superintendent. While studying in the program I learned that I was experiencing a season of darkness, what St. John of the Cross calls the Dark Night of the Soul. If I, as the pastoral leader was

¹⁵ Ibid.,56-57.

¹⁶ Ibid.,71-72.

¹⁷ Ibid., 170.

experiencing darkness, chances are, when Paul says to the Corinthians “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it,”¹⁸ then the congregation was experiencing darkness as well.

In her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Barbara Brown Taylor shares her version of St. John’s Dark Night of the soul. She argues that “there are clearly times when whole communities of people lose sight of the sun in ways that unnerve them. This seems to be what is happening to a lot of church people right now, especially those in denominations that are losing members at an alarming rate.”¹⁹

Contrary to Brown Taylor’s thoughts, I contend that most do not know that problems do run deep or how deep they truly run and because of this they are living in denial that there may be matters of soul unidentified and unaddressed in our congregations. It may be easier to place the blame on pastors, personalities, pastoral leadership, church leadership, political, social, and economic events and on the wider community and its changing culture, rather than engaging in the hard work of dealing with pain, grief, and hurt that stem from unresolved conflict or undisclosed personal trauma that has resulted in shame or guilt. The root of the cause is the individual’s brokenness as a member of the body that hurts along with it.

Beaumont, in her book *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, addresses the liminal space of the church assuming that the church members are all in the same space, plane, level, or of the same thought. While liminality within a group of people suggests ambiguity in a season of transition, it does not diagnose the stance of its members as individuals and fails to do so in their leadership roles. Liminal space creates

¹⁸ I Corinthians 12:26, New Revised Standard Version.

¹⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. New York: Harper One, 2014. 140-141.

an environment in which congregants can face challenges and opportunities. For example, “the interim between pastorates, the beginning of a new pastorate, consensus on the future, the end of building projects, search for beginnings and ends of strategic planning, the death of a matriarch or patriarch, liminal seasons are threshold of experiences where the community of tradition is called into question, and uncertainty about the future fuels doubt.”²⁰ Beaumont argues, and I agree, that in the face of liminal moments

...[o]ur old operating structures may no longer work. Our denominational polity, our governing board, and committee structures, our staffing arrangement—all were suited for conditions that have evolved. Our strategic identities—who we are, who we serve, and what we feel called to do or become—were shaped by old experiences. We may no longer be served well by these outdated constructs, but we aren’t certain what we need next.²¹

How can we ask the church to move forward into the new when the structure itself is using models that do not fit an evolving and ever-changing system? However, evaluating disorientation during transitions, and looking for patterns that may lead to reorientation, does not address the spiritual health of the leaders, congregants, constituents, or church member. In order for transformation to occur, we must also consider how the individual perceives him or herself and the role he or she plays or has played in the greater social dynamic of the church. Its wrestling with the pain, the hurt, the grief, and the loss stemming from ongoing conflict(s) that carries the church to sickness, grave illness, and in some cases, death. Sickness and/or the death of a church

²⁰ Susan Beaumont. *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 7.

²¹ Ibid.

can leave its people with a plethora of unanswered questions; they find themselves out in the wilderness.

Beaumont argues that

...[a]n effective leader must help individuals and groups remain in a liminal state for the time that it takes to get clear about identity and to discover new structures that are more appropriately suited to their emerging identity. They must invite and work in *communitas*. Leading in a liminal season requires helping people manage their anxiety, embrace the freedom of unknowing, explore new possible identities and pathways, and resist the temptation to reorient people before they are ready.”²²

Beaumont’s argument, however, does not address the willingness or unwillingness of church members or committees to want to remain in a liminal state, to study itself or to strategize an exit plan from the liminal state. In cases such as theses, there are often dissenters, including pastoral leaders, who resist anything new. They cling to the past, whether out of grief, fear, a sense of doubt, or the possibility of failure. For dissenters, the status quo seems much easier than the prospect of rolling up their sleeves and working towards a new vision and identity for themselves as a leader, and for the ailing or dying church itself.

Mark Karris argues in his book *Religious Refugees: (De)Constructing Toward Spiritual and Emotional Healing*, regarding to faith, that

...[t]he divine struggle means entering into the wilderness of piercing grief where the ferocious wolves of deconstruction are slowly nipping at our scarred heels. It means walking into the chasm of the unknown...we begin questioning our reality, faith, identity, and anything else that isn’t bolted to the ground...People typically avoid this journey because of the cognitive, physical, and emotional mayhem that comes along with it. The aftermath of disorientation and the overall experience of

²² Susan Beaumont. *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 20.

grief can oftentimes leave us feeling confused and anxious because we are entering uncharted territory...and leaves us feeling alone in a strange new land”.²³ How did the church, and most importantly, how did its leaders, pastoral and lay,

get to where she is and why didn’t anyone anticipate it? Are members unwilling to deny themselves, lay down their cross and differences, refusing to let go of the weight of bitterness, anger, resistance, or vindictiveness accumulated over time to receive something new? Was there hurt in the process, injustice, exclusion, favoritism that has not been addressed, overcome, or disclosed out of pride, fear, doubt, shame, or guilt? Does she feel like giving up and slowly watch a significant part of her life slip away without trying her best to rise from the ashes?

Although foreign to many and rarely discussed, spiritual depression has become a field of research specific to the spiritual aspect of the church. Symptoms of spiritual depression are like those found in clinical depression such as “trouble concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions; fatigue, feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and helplessness; pessimism and hopelessness, crankiness, restlessness, loss of interest in things once pleasurable, overeating or appetite loss, aches, pains, cramps, anxiousness, feelings of emptiness, and suicidal thoughts or attempts.”²⁴ Spiritual depression deals with matters of the soul when it is downcast. Spiritual depression can be caused by traumatic events such as the death of a church, or the wrongdoing of a pastor of a congregant. As a result, church members might suffer from feelings of inadequacy, unhappiness, unworthiness, unlove, betrayal, and forsakenness by God, all of which are

²³ Mark Gregory Karris. *Religious Refugees: (De)Constructing Toward Spiritual and Emotional Healing*. Orange: Quoir, 2020. 110-111

²⁴ MayoClinic.org: Depression (major depressive disorder)

symptoms of spiritual depression. A Christian person who is spiritually depressed often believes that God does not have time for him or her.

Howard W. Stone in his book *Depression and Hope* inquires if depression can be some kind of “common cold of emotional distress” with symptoms flourishing from “melancholy, inner barrenness, or dryness of spirit.”²⁵ Stone furthers his explanation by categorizing the four common symptoms of depression as “interpersonal, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral.”²⁶ Stone argues that “depressives are in church” and in “considerable numbers” and “much of their suffering goes unnoticed or at least uncared for.”²⁷ So, is there hope for the dying church? And if so, who provides it and how? How is spiritual depression detected? How can it be treated so that it does not progress into death?

Church leaders, especially clergy, have been caught up in many other tasks pertaining to church leadership causing “spiritual blindness” to imminent conditions that affect the life of the church. By attending workshops and reading articles on dying and difficult churches one learns of how spiritually blind and depressive the church is today.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his book *Spiritual Depression: Causes and Cures* argues that a depressed Christian

...[i]s a contradiction in terms, and [he] is a very poor recommendation for the gospel. We are living in a pragmatic age. People today are not interested in Truth, but they are interested in results...They are frantically seeking and searching for something that can help them...We are all in such a hurry, we want everything at once. We believe that all truth can be stated in a few minutes...the

²⁵ Howard W. Stone. *Depression and Hope: New Insights for Pastoral Counseling*. Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998, Minneapolis, MN. 3-4.

²⁶ Ibid., 6-8.

²⁷ Ibid., 9.

reason why so many today are living superficial Christian lives is because they will not take time to examine themselves.²⁸

An example of this spiritual hurriedness is when we are asked to prayerfully consider something, and the deadline to respond is yesterday. The same occurs with discernment.

Discernment, as defined by Elizabeth Liebert in her book *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*, “refers to the process of sifting what is of God, discriminating between that which expresses God’s call and anything that runs counter to it...Discernment is the process of intentionally becoming aware of how God is present, active, and calls us as individuals and communities so that we can respond with increasingly greater faithfulness.”²⁹ Liebert lists seven steps for discerning a decision and argues that discernment is a process of biblical and theological foundation that requires 1.)inner disposition, 2.)framing the issue, 3.)the gathering and evaluation of appropriate data about the issue, 4.)reflection and prayer, 5.)the formulation of a tentative decision, 6.)seeking confirmation, 7.)and assessing the process.³⁰ How can leaders, congregations, and communities discern the right direction while in the throes of a spiritual depression or during a period of darkness of the soul?

Dr. Steve Taylor, author of *The Leap and Spiritual Science*, shared an article in *Psychology Today* titled “Spiritual Depression: When Depression is Caused by Losing Touch with Our Spiritual Sensibility.” In this article, Taylor argues that spiritual depression

²⁸ Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures*. London: Marshall-Pickering, 1965-1998. 11-13.

²⁹ Elizabeth Liebert. *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. P. 8

³⁰ Ibid., 19-21.

...[a]rises from an alienation from our innate spirituality. This is when people have powerful spiritual experiences when they were younger but repress it because they do not understand it. It could also occur during a sudden spiritual experience in a time of intense stress. Suddenly the world around becomes intensely real and beautiful and without the proper framework to make sense of the experience, it is confusing and threatening. A naturally spiritual person might feel a strong sense of connection to nature, to solitude, and quietness, feel intense empathy and compassion and may suppress this innate spirituality because it conflicts with cultural norms. As well as feeling like an outsider, a feeling of deep hunger for a more meaningful life, and a deep frustration is experienced because the meaning that is sought cannot be found.”³¹

What, then, are some of the signs and symptoms of the Dark Night of the soul?

Michael Mirdad in his book *The Dark Night of the Soul: Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*, lists seven primary signs and symptoms as:

1. There are several areas of life that have fallen apart, have been dismantled such as health, work, friendships, and so forth.
2. Usually, it lasts for one to three years minimum.
3. There is a feeling of being stuck, in a rut and possibly depressed.
4. Nothing repairs the current condition.
5. Feelings of either like a failure or a hypocrite.
6. Feelings of having lost faith in God or in the process of life.
7. Feelings of being in a state of shock³²

Mirdad shares a quote from professor of comparative religion, Joseph Campbell, who wrote that “The Dark Night of the soul comes just before revelation. When everything is lost, and all seems darkness, then comes the new life and all that is

³¹ Steve Taylor, PhD. “*Spiritual Depression: When Depression is Caused by Losing Touch with Our Spiritual Sensibility.*” *Psychology Today*, 2020.

³² Michael Mirdad. *The Dark Night of the Soul: Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*. Sedona: Grail Press, 2019. 32-35.

needed.”³³ If we hold Campbell’s wise words to be true, then why is the church afraid of the dark or of entering a season of wilderness? Is she afraid that that which is done in the dark will come to light? Is she so traumatized and depressed that she cannot even see that she is in the dark, let alone see the light the end of the proverbial tunnel?³⁴

To this end, Mirdad argues that “The Dark Night is all around us, but many are not paying attention. The Dark Night is found in movies, songs, and in life stories of people we know and/or admire. It is also featured in the lives of the most popular cartoon characters, such as Bambi and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. The theme of The Dark Night is feeling lost in life itself, or a time when life was going well and took a turn for the worst, evoking a major awakening, and then everything turns out possibly better than when it started. Everyone experiences The Dark Night. “The only difference between each person is how this phase is handled.”³⁵

There are biblical references to the Dark Night of the Soul and Mirdad directs the reader’s attention to Psalm 23:

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths
 for his name’s sake.
⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil,
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff,
 they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The Gospel according to Luke 12:2-2, New Revised Standard Version

³⁵ Michael Mirdad. *The Dark Night of the Soul: Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*. Sedona: Grail Press, 2019. 35-37.

my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 my whole life long.³⁶

Mirdad argues that despite the darkness that one must go through during the cleansing period, the focus needs to be on the Light of God at the End of the Tunnel and affirm that nothing on earth has the power over us that we once thought it did.³⁷

The field of psychology, specifically trauma studies, offers some significant insights into trauma recovery that can be applied to the church, pastors, and congregants experiencing a dark night of the soul. For example, In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk explores “how trauma reshapes both body and brain, compromising sufferer’s capacities for pleasure, engagement, self-control, and trust.”³⁸ Van Der Kolk argues that the path to recovery begins with self-discovery and self-acceptance. Owning who we are and accepting others is an intentional process that leads to healing, purpose, and relationships with self, God, and others in and with the community.³⁹

Mirdad argues that since we,

...[a]s human beings, so clearly have forgotten our true identity in God (and as a part of God) and because our choices are to find flaws and judge ourselves and others—it is clear that we need to remember our innate divinity and to heal our soul of all that seems unholy. The Dark Night of the Soul exposes all such holiness by tossing us right into the middle of it, so we can choose to release it—either the easy way or the hard way. The Dark Night of the Soul helps us to purge away our old, limiting patterns and beliefs so that we can make room for a new, expansive and unlimited life. The Dark Night could be seen as a “soul-level healing process” which renders benefits such as helps us to let go of old, unhealthy patterns

³⁶ Psalm 23, New Revised Standard Version.

³⁷ Ibid. 35-7.

³⁸ Bessel Van Der Kolk, M. D. *The Body Keeps the Score—Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2014. 89-104.

³⁹ Ibid.

and beliefs; it teaches us to integrate all that we once read, heard, thought, and spoke; it changes all that we once loved conditionally into unconditional love; it encourages us to learn and practice humility and surrender; it helps to develop divine patience; it teaches us to release all attachments to things of this world and limiting beliefs within our mind.⁴⁰

In Jesus' Farewell Discourse from the Gospel of John⁴¹ there are glimpses of what a journey through the Dark Night looks like. Jesus is leading his disciples in deep conversation into the unknown that is about to unfold and known by Jesus, his death. By washing his disciples' feet Jesus is readying his disciples for the necessary darkness which is to come. With this example of love, Jesus shows his disciples what it means to have part with him while sitting at the table with friends, in their human condition, who would later betray, deny, and remain silent when voices were needed most. Having walked with Jesus for three years, how would they face the journey ahead without their leader and friend?

In chapter 14, Jesus begins to share with his disciples' details of what the world will look like once he is no longer with them. There will be troubles, but Jesus will always be with them; he will never leave them as orphans. Instead, Jesus will go and prepare a place for them, he promises them the Holy Spirit who will be there to guide when Jesus is no longer physically present with them. The Holy Spirit, through the provision of guidance, peace, and comfort, will help, teach, and remind the disciples of everything Jesus has said to them. Jesus says to his disciples, "And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe. I will no longer talk

⁴⁰ Michael Mirdad. *The Dark Night of the Soul: Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*. Sedona: Grail Press, 2019. 41-42.

⁴¹ Farewell Discourse, Gospel of John, Chapters 13-17, New Revised Standard Version

much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”⁴²

With this Jesus alerts the disciples that it is time for him to go. As they walk together, Jesus reminds them of the importance of abiding in him since it will be the only way that they will bear fruit. Without Jesus they will be able to do nothing. Once again Jesus speaks to them about the importance of love and leaves them with a commandment: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”⁴³ Affirming that they are friends, Jesus prepares them for the cost of discipleship. The world will hate them for as long as they are his friends. However, “the Advocate, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling.”⁴⁴

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus knows that this conversation has not been an easy one. He knows that the disciples are filled with sorrow and grief as they learn that Jesus will leave them. Yet, Jesus assures them that he will be with them in the journey through the Advocate. There are many more things that Jesus has to say, and he knows that they are not prepared for more sorrow and grief. Jesus asks them to wait a little while longer before they see him again and the disciples are not sure what waiting a little while longer means. Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn,

⁴² Gospel of John, Chapter 14:29-30, NRSV

⁴³ Gospel of John, Chapter 15:12-14, NRSV

⁴⁴ Gospel of John, Chapter 15:26-27, NRSV

but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy... So, you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”⁴⁵ Jesus prays for his disciples a very intimate prayer before he goes on a personal journey to pick up his cross to lay down his life for his friends. In this prayer Jesus announces that the time has come for God to glorify God’s self so that the world may come to know him, too.

By placing ourselves in this gospel story, we can relate to the moments of darkness, grief, sorrow, and loss experienced by Jesus and his disciples. There are times that while trying to listen attentively to the reassuring and comforting words of Jesus, we, like his disciples, succumb to our sadness, crying and lamenting the present moment, and wondering how long our suffering will last. In these moments of fear and bitterness we must remember Jesus’ words, imploring us to wait and to keep the faith. Jesus’ comforting words echo in the ears of the hopeless and downtrodden: “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.”⁴⁶ Marc Foley argues in *The Dark Night: Psychological Experience and Spiritual Reality*: “We know that this longing has its origin in God because it dilates the soul and gives it the capacity to be connected to the world by love. In contrast, there are longings that shrink the soul and isolate it from the world.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Gospel of John, Chapter 16:20-24, NRSV

⁴⁶ Gospel of John, Chapter 16:16, NRSV

⁴⁷ Marc Foley, O. C. D. *The Dark Night: Psychological Experience and Spiritual Reality*. Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2018. 173.

The disciples did not know with certainty what Jesus' words meant or did they know what life without Jesus would look like. They did know and perceive that Jesus' words were filled with a powerful message of love. Jesus commanded them to love. Today we know that Jesus' death leads to abundant and everlasting life that will be experienced when one dies to self. At a time when the church may feel like she is dying she is waiting, for as long as need be, for its resurrection if she chooses.

Experiencing the Dark Night of the Soul may seem in many ways indicative of death. Rather it is the preface to a new life after having died to self. Spiritual and emotional wilderness goes beyond the threshold of liminality, it addresses the matters of the soul individually and collectively which can then shed light to a new relationship with God, with self, and with the community. It is in the season of the Dark Night of the soul where one comes to terms with self after listening carefully to what the heart is trying to communicate to the soul and what the soul is trying to communicate to the spirit, all the while trusting that God is creating all things new.

What does it mean to die to self? According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."⁴⁸ According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus says, "Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves?" These two verses refer to death, loss, and life with life being the ultimate gain. In Jesus' resurrection the cross is admired and loved for the life-giving

⁴⁸ Matthew 10:39, NRSV

message it offers to humanity. Death was conquered at the cross and life was given at the empty tomb.

In *Self to Lose and Self to Find: Using the Enneagram to Uncover Your True, God-Gifted Self*, Marilyn Vancil⁴⁹ uses the Enneagram personality model for the exploration and discovery of self and our relationship with the world. Vancil dedicates a chapter to self-denial or dying to self “in order to enjoy the freedom of living out our divine destiny and finding our true selves in Him (God).” Vancil argues that in the biblical verses on self-denial there are three invitations: an invitation to disown self, to take up the cross daily, and an invitation to follow.

In disowning self, Vancil argues that the expanded version of disowning self could be interpreted as

...If anyone wishes to come after me, he or she must say no to the pretend self, saying, ‘I don’t know you. You are not the real me.’” We are to disown and renounce the self that God did not create—and possess the self that was created to be known intimately by our Creator. Our tendency is to lump these two selves together, and either hang on to them both or dismiss them both rather than understand their differences and learn to distinguish between them. To make a distinction between what to disown and what to embrace about ourselves, we must pay careful attention to how we operate in our everyday lives.”⁵⁰

The second invitation is to take up the cross daily. Vancil refers to Paul’s words to the Galatians, “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave

⁴⁹ Marilyn Vancil, *Self to Lose Self to Find: Using the Enneagram to Uncover Your True, God-Gifted Self*. New York: Convergent, 2020. 25-42.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

himself for me.”⁵¹ Vancil argues that the reason Jesus says that taking up the cross is a daily act is because

...[p]utting to death our habitual and ingrained ways of old-self living won't end as long as we have breath. We will fall short daily and often hourly, clinging to our ways of meeting our needs and getting what we want. We can-and will often-let our false, Adapted Self determine the choices we make. We might even enjoy our self-absorption and the implications of it in our everyday existence. Like one of the criminals who carried his cross next to Jesus, we can hold on to the shell of protection and defensiveness, because it seems easier than letting it go.⁵²

“Follow Me” is the third invitation, Vancil argues, that Jesus gave his disciples in helping us find “the treasure of our true selves. Vancil summarizes this last invitation with what she contends is the meaning of being a disciple of Jesus:

...[i]t is to adopt the attitude of self-emptying, of not grasping, of letting go. To live into or true destiny as a unique image bearer of God means taking a humble position and relinquishing our self-absorbed ways of living. It requires our Adapted Self to make room for our Authentic Self to emerge. It means taking up one's cross and declaring oneself dead to sin and alive to God. These are not just nice-sounding pious words, but the ongoing challenge of the spiritual journey toward transformation into the ones God created us to become.” Dying to self can be a somber yet rewarding experience.⁵³

Building upon Vancil's observations on the emotional and spiritual difficulty one can experience when dying to self, Michael Mirdad argues that The Dark Night of the Soul can be depressing. He writes that, “The Dark Night can sometimes make us feel like we have descended into a surreal world: the darkest levels of loneliness, confusion, and despair...There are certainly moments when we will grasp for any lifeline we can find. However, no partner friends, family members, nor even a legion of angels can “save”

⁵¹ Galatians 20:20, NRSV

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

us—because we are going through a necessary process—a process that our own soul has designed for us...It tends to make us feel like we're dying inside, and we are; we are dying of the old to make room for the new.”⁵⁴

The Dark Night is like having a dark cloud oppressing us from all seven directions: above, below, in front, behind, to the right, to the left, and on the inside. Unfortunately, while we are going through the Dark Night, instead of focusing on the Light at the End of the Tunnel, we may be distracted by the deep, dark thoughts and emotions that are haunting us—against which we often feel powerless...When we are going through the Dark Night of the Soul, it is imperative that we continually remember to connect with God and various human systems of assistance for support and to remind ourselves that this experience has no real power over us—as This too shall pass!”⁵⁵

IV: Identifying the Underlying Symptoms of a Dying Church: A Case Study of Christ UMC

The words “dying church”, “legacy church”, and “declining congregations” have been used to describe a congregation’s vitality, mission, and purpose. Though attendance may be statistically quantifiable and measurable, does it speak of the spiritual health, vision, and strategizing capabilities of a congregation or to its relevance in the community? How can one statistically measure and determine the spiritual health of a congregation and its ability to survive and thrive? Afterall, spirituality and faith are not measurable through statistical reports or other quantifiable recording methods, which are essential for the growth of the church. Is anyone able to measure their faith other than by

⁵⁴ Michael Mirdad, *The Dark Night of the Soul: Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*. Sedona: Grail Press, 2019. 48-49.

⁵⁵ Michael Mirdad. *The Dark Night of the Soul: Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*. Sedona: Grail Press, 2019. 48-49.

comparing it to the size of a mustard seed which, scripturally, is the bare minimum needed to move mountains? Could death be prevented with early detection thus ensuring that the life of the church is restored and renewed for generations to come? Is the church in decline or is it a victim, having been unattended, unaddressed, and overlooked by power structures that are in denial of its grievances? In what ways can the church be brought back to life and experience a revival powered by the Holy Spirit to serve and engage with the community she represents?

There are detectable symptoms in a church that when addressed in a timely manner, can prevent its decline, but there is no one-size-fits-all model. It will take a lot more than workshops, conferences, and trainings because the hard work that needs to be put into the church is soul work as a member of the body. Much time and resources continue to be invested in corporate-like strategies that ignore the spiritual nature of the Church. Just like a person can perceive that they have been given up on, so can the church. When trust is broken, everything else is lost. Hope remains, and faith persists. Patrick Nouwen says it best in his article “Why Deconstruction Is Essential for Genuine Faith,” writing that “Nothing of spiritual significance can be reborn without dying first.”⁵⁶

For Nouwen “faith is a form of confidence or trust, it can never be traded for certainty, always requires risk, and is never fair.”⁵⁷ As mentioned previously, there is hard work that needs to be put into a church in order to prevent sickness from persisting, and death from occurring. The church is commanded to follow through on the

⁵⁶ Patrick Nouwen. “Why Deconstruction is Essential for Genuine Faith.” PatrickNouwen.com, March 18, 2021.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

commission that Jesus commanded in the gospel of Matthew “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age, before she can think of programming, small groups, vital and meaningful worship, and healthy stewardship.”⁵⁸ The church, if ill, hurting, and grieving finds it difficult to teach, learn, and walk in the obedience that Jesus instructed to fulfill the Great Commission. And it will also find it difficult to invite others to grow in their faith and witness to potential newcomers.

After spending forty days with Jesus after his resurrection, the disciples lived transformed lives. This transformation equipped them to live into the commission set forth by Jesus. The disciples, walking alongside Jesus did not make them the most qualified leaders, but disciplined followers. However, their lived experiences with Jesus left the disciples with a defined purpose of making disciples of others. Making disciples is not a human thing; it is an act of conversion aided by the Holy Spirit that requires the letting go of and denying of oneself. The disciples were followers of Jesus that learned from Jesus and obeyed Jesus before they became disciples of Jesus with the authority to go forth and make disciples. Today the commission and mission of the Church continues to be “making disciples of all nations for the transformation of the world.”⁵⁹

A congregation may have a mega list of programs and activities only to find that membership continues to decline, and that burnout may occur when the same members work hard to keep the church relevant in the community. Conflict and the lack of resolution is also a major setback in a church’s spiritual health and a congregation’s

⁵⁸ Gospel of Matthew 28:19-20. (New Revised Standard Version).

⁵⁹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2016, Par. 120.

vitality. Is the church reaching souls? Is the church making disciples that make disciples? Is the church making a difference or being the difference? Factors contributing to the decline of a church can be attributed to power struggles within the church and its leaders against pastoral leadership, resistance to change, comfort in the status quo, poor stewardship campaigns, or the mishandling of finances. Ultimately, defiance or refusal to engage with the community and its changing culture hinders efforts for outreach programs and contributes to declining membership.

Thom S. Rainer, an author passionate about providing hope to churches facing death, detailed his metric for determining the health of a church in his 2015 blog post titled, “Anatomy of a Sick Church-10 Symptoms to Watch.” In this article, Rainer lists the potential symptoms of a sick church that require immediate attention to restore health as: “declining worship attendance, the decline in the frequency of attendance of church members, the lack of joy and vibrancy in the worship service, little evangelistic fruit, low community impact, more meetings than ministry, acrimonious business meetings, very few guests in worship services, worship wars, and unrealistic expectations of pastoral care.”⁶⁰

Rainer further categorizes the severity of the unhealthy church, arguing that,

A church with one to two symptoms is considered normal for most churches if this occurs for a short time. A church with three to four signs is sick and needs immediate attention. Five to six symptoms signal that a church is very ill and in danger of moving into the phase of a terminal illness. A church at risk of dying shows seven to ten symptoms and has a projected life span of five to ten years without immediate action.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Thom S. Rainer. “Anatomy of a Sick Church-10 Symptoms to Watch” *Church Answers* June 22, 2015. <https://churchanswers.com> (accessed December 6, 2021)

⁶¹ Ibid.

In the “Autopsy of a Deceased Church: Twelve Ways to Keep Yours Alive,” Rainer suggests that there is hope for the dying church, offering three stages the Church may experience, and twelve responses that may lead to a turnaround to escape death. The three stages include: “symptoms of sickness, when the Church is very sick, and when the Church is dying.”⁶²

Rainer argues that one of the signs that “sickness is taking hold of the church is its pervasive attitude that its best days are in the past, there’s a decline in worship attendance, its mission and ministries mindset are focused inwardly (for church members) rather than outwardly (into the community), disciple-making process is lacking, and there’s a lot of busyness due to a clutter of ministry programs without meaningful purpose because ‘that’s the way we’ve always done it’”.⁶³ “Conditions worsen gradually and do not happen overnight”, argues Rainer, and he suggests that “it is difficult to notice from the inside until the Church is very sick and it is difficult for her to get better.” Rainer believes that 40 percent of American congregations find themselves in this category. Rainer also contends that

...[s]ignificant decline in worship attendance over ten to twenty years, apathy and conflict, its presence in the community is unknown, new members are rare with more leaving than joining, constant change in pastoral leadership, and the church no longer feels good about herself are symptoms of a very sick church.”⁶⁴ “But individual congregations die, and we may be in denial, but it is time to let go. Holding on will do no one any good. A dying church is of little benefit to the Kingdom...unless it dies well,”⁶⁵ argues Rainer.

⁶² Thom S. Rainer. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014.

⁶³ Ibid., 87-88

⁶⁴ Ibid., 93-94

⁶⁵ Ibid., 97-100.

In the Greater New Jersey Conference of The United Methodist Church, there are five markers used to determine the vitality of a congregation all of which are taught in clergy and laity training sessions. These are discipleship, vital worship, small groups, stewardship, and mission outreach. When we look at each marker closely, there is a common denominator: people. Without people, the SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) cannot be applied to any of the markers listed above to measure the vitality of a congregation. Therefore, vitality determined by membership, worship attendance, the amount and variety of small groups, the financial situation of a congregation, or the amount of mission programs a congregation engages or has to offer the community, is futile when the people, who are the main resource in ministry, are not spiritually healthy or willing to engage with a community that is spiritually, physically, and culturally different from those inside the building.

Church members at Christ UMC attend a worship service for many reasons, not necessarily to worship. Some attend church for tradition, others to be with family, and still others approach church participation with a “what’s in it for me” mentality, which is reflected in their stewardship practices and lack of participation in church ministry and mission. When on vacation, absent, or disappointed with the pastor or leadership of the church, dissatisfied members tend to withhold their offering and pledges demonstrating a lack of commitment and loyalty to membership vows of “attending, praying, giving, serving, and witnessing in and through a congregation.”⁶⁶ Others leave the church without bidding farewell to church members they considered family. This adversely affects church finances and the stability of its programs and mission outreach and the

⁶⁶ Our United Methodist Vows. umc.org.

self-esteem of the congregation. Small groups, without a healthy leader or facilitator, may become a toxic group in which the dissenters may isolate the small group for personal gain or struggle for power within the local church structure. Prayer groups become an opportunity for gossip rather than to pray for those in need. Bible study, without a biblically sound facilitator, can easily transform into a sounding board for personal issues, which may lead to using scripture to harm and isolate instead of teaching and healing. Furthermore, when it comes to mission and ministries, these small groups become volunteer groups between “us and them” than one servanthood in service alongside and with the community.

As evidence to the leadership challenges within the congregations, upon my arrival at Christ UMC, the church was selected to receive an outreach communications grant which included three billboards to be placed throughout the city with the church’s name, address, and Christmas programs in Spanish; these billboards were specifically, geared towards outreach to the Hispanic and Latino community. The congregation’s leadership committee would not approve to receive a grant of no cost to the church unless the billboard was designed in English and in Spanish. Fortunately, I was able to request that the billboards be printed in both languages, and they were successfully placed in strategic locations throughout the city.

Some church leaders were not impressed by my willingness to increase membership, engage with the community, or by my acumen for applying to grants for new programming. They were comfortable with the way things were and were not willing to open their doors to those less fortunate or to those who do not look like them. There was fear that the Hispanic membership would grow through community outreach

to the Hispanic and Latino community and that the Hispanic subset of the congregation would take over the church, leaving the English-speaking subset as a minority in relation to the surrounding Orthodox and Hassidic community, and in the church building itself. This is a clear example of what a spiritually unhealthy congregation experiences regarding to race, culture, and community.

Christ UMC was at one time two separate congregations, one English-speaking and the other Spanish-speaking, housed in the same building. Each had their own full-time pastor appointed by the bishop and each resided in their own parsonage. Due to constant conflict between both congregations over church finances and other issues, there was an irreparable rift between congregants and the pastors. Another split occurred prior to my arrival in 2015 and the dwindling financial resources was the catalyst to merge both congregations into one with a bilingual pastor serving both ministries. The initial intent was to form a multi-cultural appointment with a bi-cultural pastor leading a multi-ethnic congregation in its mission and ministries in service to the community. What was not taken into consideration was the willingness or unwillingness of church members to engage in this relationship. To this day, both ministries have a difficult time-sharing space, finances, and a pastoral leader.

Ed Stetzer in *Hard Truths about Multicultural Churches* agrees that “pursuing diversity is a good thing and clarifies the distinction between multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Multiethnic has persons of different ethnic backgrounds who attend and listen to the same music, eat the same foods, hang out at the same entertainment venues, and go to church together, does not mean that it is multicultural. They have assimilated to a common culture and is considered monocultural. Stetzer argues that being multicultural

is much harder than simply being multiethnic. A multicultural church will engage to some degree in cultural contexts. People from Latin America will not only attend, but the church will intentionally engage Latino cultures and contexts...The multicultural church will seek to celebrate, encourage, accommodate, and engage those cultures.”⁶⁷

Stetzer argues that multicultural ministry “requires humility and Christlikeness to pursue unity among diverse ethnicities and cultures. Stetzer suggests that there are hard questions that need to be asked before attempting to pursue multicultural ministry. These questions are: Are you willing to do what it takes to move your church in a more multiethnic and multicultural direction? Are you willing to cross barriers and start a multicultural shift by joining a church of a different ethnicity and culture other than your own? Are you willing to lay aside your own preferences to be on mission in your community?”⁶⁸

If questions like the ones Stetzer poses are not asked of a congregation or congregations before any attempt to form a multicultural ministry between two different cultures, it will be perceived as forceful or imposed. This imposition can only result in resistance that will lead to conflict and ultimately division. A sense of loss and grief of this kind, when unaddressed and uninformed, perpetuates power struggles and dissension in an already divided and fragile community, which inevitably affects current pastoral leadership and future appointments. Any pastor that inherits a culturally divided congregation will be faced with the challenge to unify and heal the church. However, the pastors might find themselves and their new congregation in dire sickness when the hierarchical structure of the denomination has failed to promote inclusion within the

⁶⁷ Ed Stetzer. *Hard Truths about Multicultural Churches*. Lifeway Research, October 7, 2014.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

congregation. Furthermore, the church hierarchy's willingness to define a church as dead or dying, absolves them of their responsibility, placing the blame on the congregation and the congregants, which can be painful and alienating for all. Such was the situation that I found myself in as a newly appointed pastor at Christ UMC.

Aside from the fear over demographic changes, the congregation's knowledge of the Book of Discipline, polity, and leadership positions and responsibilities was limited. The relationship with the conference office was non-existent, in part due to a fall-out regarding a trust fund that had been issued through a bequest to the church to better serve the community and Ocean County. The conference was managing the grant through Global Ministries and somehow the dividends were not being sent to the church. This was discovered a couple of years later and negotiations were made that the funds would be sent to the church, if retroactive funds were forfeited. Because of this, the church leaders supported the lay leadership's decision to disengage with the conference and withhold shared ministries. This alleged complicated financial deception on behalf of the Greater New Jersey conference allowed the matriarchs and the patriarchs to hold fast to their leadership positions in an attempt to maintain power and control over financial, administrative, and leadership matters. This included lay leaders taking authority and assuming the responsibility in making unilateral decisions without consulting the pastor, who is expected to be faithful to the connection.

As the pastor and visionary leader of the church, I learned of transactions and negotiations that later seriously affected the ministries and the mission of the church. Withholding of shared ministries, the filing of incomplete financial statements, and inaccurate year-end statistical reports are only some of the findings that required further

analysis. Subsequently, it was the unilateral decision by a group of church leaders to lease the building to a charter school that divided the church, destroyed relationships, created an environment of mistrust, and severely impacted opportunities to build strong relationships with the community.

Another example of a spiritual illness that took place in 2015 during my time at Christ UMC had to do with children, who contrary to what we have been accustomed to believing, are not the future but the present. There was a considerably large group of children of migrant, immigrant, and undocumented families attending the church. A church member would drive the children in the church van with a lady from the community as their guardian. Not only was the van unsafe, but it was also overpacked with children riding without seatbelts. The Safe Sanctuary Policy was outdated and there was no way to verify if the children had permission from their parents to be under the care of the lady, if the parents knew the whereabouts of their children, or if the children were covered by the church's insurance policy. The person responsible for the children's group refused to provide contact information for the children. The church van was unsafe and in much need of maintenance and more so, replacement. Furthermore, a background check was needed for the staff-person transporting the children to and from the church. The lady in charge of the children was made aware of these irregularities and what needed to be corrected to strengthen the program and make it safe. Instead of adhering to the policies, she decided to take the children elsewhere claiming that we no longer wanted them in the church. This created another discord which further divided the church.

The assumption that I would favor the Spanish-speaking congregation over the English-speaking congregation because of my being bilingual, also increased the existing tension between both congregations that had difficulty serving and worshiping in ministry together. These divisions made holding joint services during church holidays such as Pentecost Sunday, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, and Father's Day, seem impossible. Not only because of cultural differences, but because of the refusal to engage with folk that did not act, look, speak, and worship like they did. In the past, this congregation had bilingual services that took hours, and many were not willing to stay longer than one hour for Sunday service; and translation from one language to another usually extended the service beyond one and a half hours. As a bilingual person, I was able to prepare a fully bilingual service that would not go over one hour. The secret to this was to prepare bulletins in both languages for both congregations to follow in their preferred language. The only thing that would be translated during the service would be the message, and I was able to translate the message without the use of a translator. This would cut the sermon time in half.

The idea of a bilingual/joint service would not be easy to execute. With so much resistance and tension between the Spanish- and English-speaking congregations to worship together, this event was bound to be an epic failure if announced and I decided to go ahead with what I believed would be the only way to demonstrate that bilingual and joint services are possible. I asked the Spanish-speaking members to attend the 9:30 am service instead of the 11:00 am service on a given Sunday. It was then when I noticed, as the Hispanic/Latino church members walked into the sanctuary, that the resistance to a joint service was not about the length of the service, but the unwillingness to accept

people of another culture and race in their worship space. The joint service went as planned and I was able to demonstrate that the joint worship service would have a duration of one hour and it did. However, as I processed to the narthex at the end of the service, the antagonistic group of the English-speaking congregation that would sit together during worship made it clear that if I ever tried to hold a joint service without prior announcement, “there would be hell to pay.”

Although both services were held at different times and in different languages, all committees and boards were supposed to be represented by members of both subgroups. Except that most of the meetings were scheduled to be held in the early afternoon hours. As I read minutes of prior meetings, I noticed that members of the Hispanic ministry were listed as absent. As I was getting acquainted with the church dynamics, I realized that members of the Hispanic ministry had jobs to attend, some held two jobs. The other board members were retired from their jobs and had a flexible schedule, thus controlling the agenda and the decision-making process. Since the members of the Hispanic ministry were not present at the meeting, they would have to adhere to decisions made at the meetings. This is yet another example of the unwillingness the subgroups had to engage with people of different races and cultures. This also affected outreach in the community and engagement with the least of these.

Christ UMC is known for hands on community ministries such as Red Bird Mission, Interfaith Hospitality Network, and the food pantry among other outreach ministries that have been added to the list since my appointment in 2015. These programs were led, and controlled, by the English ministry. The food pantry served an average of ten families every month which I found to be lacking since the Lakewood

demographics show a growing Hispanic and Latino community. This growth was relative to the growing Orthodox Jewish community who hire the undocumented for house cleaning, childcare assistance, and building maintenance.

I noticed that the food pantry shelves had food items that Hispanics and Latinos do not frequently consume, such as canned vegetables, ramen noodles, and pasta. When I suggested that more items be added to the shelves, like rice, beans, canned meat, chicken, and beef, their response was that “beggars can’t be choosers.” The food pantry volunteers felt that I was undermining their efforts. The idea that I was “trying to take over the food pantry” was brought up in one of the meetings and the food pantry coordinator resigned following the meeting. A few days later she appeared at the parsonage, and with insults, threw the church and food pantry keys and yelled, “Thank you for shutting down the food pantry!” among other obscenities before storming out the door.

A week later, members of the Hispanic ministry offered to volunteer at the food pantry. They were trained at the food bank and certified on food handling, food, health, and safety regulations, and the food pantry was inspected and certified for use. The shelves were stocked with staple items, fresh produce, meats, poultry, rice and beans, kid-friendly healthy snacks, cereals (hot and cold), and macaroni and cheese. Within one month, the food pantry was serving twenty to thirty families per month.

As the English subset of the congregation noticed these changes, they were feeling threatened and the best way they knew how to counteract the emotion was with retaliation and antagonism. The fear of losing control and the resentment towards the Hispanic ministry that some members of the English ministry harbored, brought upon

hostility against anyone and anything that would challenge their authority. Their anger surfaced through subtle displays of discrimination, prejudice, and racism between both ministries and subgroups.

While diversity, equity, and inclusion, cultural competence, and multiculturalism are included in trainings, not all lay and/or clergy leaders are spiritually or emotionally prepared for what a multicultural or bicultural appointment means and represents. There are layers and layers that need to be exposed and for some it is quite painful to admit prejudice, bias, and racism. When congregations feel that they are being forced to accept what has been foreign to them for so long because of privilege, power, and authority, it creates resistance and animosity and ultimately divides the church. Church decline is a matter of an ill soul that needs healing before discipleship can be begin.

At Christ UMC the church's education building was used for Sunday School and empty classrooms had been leased to a non-profit organization. This income was helpful for the upkeep and maintenance of the building. As the number of church members continued to decrease due to division stemming from conflicts, the need to maintain the cost of the building and maintenance increased.

Prior to my arrival in 2015, the Board of Trustees had been planning to lease the classrooms in the education building to a charter school. When I asked for minutes of meetings to get up to date on negotiations, I was told that it was a matter that they had been working on and did not concern me. I was totally blindsided when it came time to sign a contract for negotiations that did not follow disciplinary polity procedures found in the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church. I requested a meeting with the District Board of Location and Church Buildings for guidance and next steps.

The District Board found no reason that the church could not share the facilities with a charter school that would help community children. What the district board did not understand was the way in which these negotiations were taking place and that it was the treasurer who had been removed from her position by the district superintendent and members of the Administrative Council in 2016, who was spearheading the negotiations as the acting president of the charter school board while still being a member of the church, a clear conflict of interest. My opposition to the building being leased to the charter school was perceived as a personal slight. In fact, I knew that it wouldn't be long before the former treasurer would gather the support of the antagonistic church members that remained in the church after the split.

Christ UMC had not been paying their shared ministries due to a fall out with the Conference and that would be something the church would have to pay while the charter school was a tenant. It didn't take long for inconveniences and disagreements to arise between the charter school and the church. Fences and gates, alarms, and cameras were installed leaving the church with use of the sanctuary and church office. We had to ask for permission, as the landlord, to use the bathrooms since they were on the other side of the gates. I could not use the church office for meetings or pastoral counseling because there was no access to the bathrooms. There was constant conflict, and the church was no longer a refuge for the weary. Every Wednesday and Sunday there was a complaint about the gates being locked and not having access to bathrooms and to the parking because the school staff forgot to unlock the gates after school hours. I could do no more than refer the complaints to the Administrative Council. Soon enough some were regretting the transaction, but the money was good to pay the bills and survive.

At an Administrative Council meeting I suggested that some of the monies received from the charter school lease be invested for posterity. Some of the church members did not feel the need to contribute financially to the church through giving because the church had enough money from the charter school lease. The congregation grew complacent while others were numbed by the constant conflict. To say that having the charter school as a tenant was a three-year nightmare is an understatement. For three years the church's ministries were hindered, access to the building denied, and conflicts, division, and decline were adversely affecting the church and its engagement with the community.

With the charter school lease ending in 2019 and with the regaining the church facilities looming, change needed to happen in all areas. The congregation was declining, and mission and ministries were stagnated. Members of the congregation still placed the blame on the pastor (me) for driving members out of the church and the Orthodox Jewish community for forcing them out of Lakewood. Some were just satisfied to be in the same setting where they were married, their children baptized, and their grandchildren confirmed. The most difficult challenge was trying to find ways in which our current ministry programs could build relationships in and with the community. Our mission opportunities were much more than delivering backpacks or giving out food; there needed to be a desire to cultivate community and engage with those we served so that they may be heard, and their struggles be made known.

In December of 2019, the charter school, which had outgrown the building, asked to renew the lease for another year. The Administrative Council and Trustees turned to me for my opinion or vote. I voted against the lease renewal and to my surprise, so did

many others. The lease renewal was not approved. I was then invited to start up all the ideas for mission and ministry that we had envisioned before the lease. It was a bit late for the past ministries but there was room for creativity and for all things new.

The December 29th worship service was an informal “Wear your ugly sweater Sunday”, and the sermon was titled “2020 Vision” (the following year would be 2020). We prayed for a clear vision as to what direction God would be leading us in the new year. We prayed that God would show us that which breaks God’s heart so that we may be a beacon of hope for the community of Lakewood. The SPRC Chairperson encouraged the congregation to heed the call to live into a visionary year. He extended an invitation to join in on the vision, share their vision. He closes his invitation with the assurance that there are endless opportunities for growth and with an exhortation, “Let’s grab it and GO!”

It has been said that it only takes a spark to light a fire. In ministry it only takes one person, other than the pastor, to capture the vision and own it for dreams and visions to become a reality. It may have taken four years for one person to catch the spark and lean toward the wick to ignite it. It may take another four for the fire to catch on and spread. Either way, one with faith and trust in God does not give up on a faint pulse when there’s always hope. The congregation was energized to say the least. It was quite the closing of an old year and welcoming of the new.

V: Lessons from the Dark: Bringing Forth Light and All Things New

In January of 2020 we continued the “2020 Vision” sermon series with John Wesley’s Covenant Service and the Epiphany Service. We were looking forward to

seeing what God had in store for us. Little did we know that a COVID-19 pandemic was on the rise. It was one week before Lent when CDC guidelines required that all public places where people gathered be closed. Church members experienced a rude awakening in that the place they so revered and held as sacred was no longer the place where they would go to find Jesus or the place in which to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Some were concerned that they had left Jesus with the building completely losing sight of what true worship really is and requires. The church building was the place where Sunday after Sunday church family met for worship and fellowship despite the cliques and division occurring in the building itself. Regardless of how the folk in the building saw themselves in relationship to one another, there was a connection that no longer was being experienced because of the lockdown and scatteredness in their own homes.

Adapting to the new normal would take more than getting accustomed to being isolated from one another. It required finding ways to connect and stay connected. It also required finding new ways for the church to continue with its mission and ministries. It did not take long before the congregation realized that everything they had been resisting, from online services to online giving and all things technology including platforms of all sorts, is what would keep them together in the season of scatteredness. It was a lesson learned that the building was not the church, but the people. And a congregation cannot reach its full potential, fulfill its purpose, and live out its mission without learning how to walk in the dark, deconstruct emotionally and spiritually, learn to define its personal faith, and heal from its brokenness together...beyond culture, ethnicity, and race. It is time to work together as one body, both ministries as one congregation.

It was quite the challenge trying to keep the congregation connected with members of the congregation lacking computer skills, owning computer devices, or having internet service in their homes. A subscription with Constant Contact and Zoom helped us stay connected electronically, through the phone, and via snail mail. I put together an email with detailed instructions on how to download a free version of Zoom and how to sign in and log in to Zoom for Sunday services. We did weekly trial runs during the week and prior to Sunday services. Every Sunday, as members would figure out how to log on to Zoom with the instructions previously sent, we celebrated with applause and cheerful celebratory comments. With these applications we were able to reach members of the congregation that did not attend small groups because they are unable to drive at night. We were also able to reach family and friends who no longer live in the Lakewood area. We were blessed to have a small group of persons worshipping with us faithfully since the beginning of the pandemic who live in the Bronx, Trenton, Philadelphia, and Jersey City.

With one week away from Lent, material was mailed to those interested in participating in the Zoom Ash Wednesday Service. Others were delivered directly to their homes; my husband drove, and I dropped off the materials greeting members through the window. The main text used for the Lent sermon series was based on the Gospel of John, chapter 16, verse 32: “The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me.” (NRSV)

For the ministries at Christ UMC to continue throughout the year and bear fruit it was necessary to get creative together. Christ United Methodist Church’s Food Pantry

was preparing to supply the needs of the community. The months of April, May, October, and November were the busiest; serving 229 families out of the 443 families fed in 2020. With CDC guidelines and physical distancing set in place for most of the year, 901 adults and 737 children were served in 2020. The Food Pantry Coordinator worked tirelessly to maintain the pantry stocked with the essentials. To maintain the food pantry stocked and provide families with groceries, full week orders were placed with Fulfill, Monmouth and Ocean County Food Bank. When the Fulfill bank was low on food items, several church members placed online orders with local supermarkets and Amazon to have food delivered to the church where it would be stocked, shelved, and served to community members via roadside pickup. Monetary donations were made adding a substantial amount to the existing food pantry funds. The food pantry received a \$5,000 grant from Fulfill which came just in time for Thanksgiving along with a \$1,500 grant from GNJ. With a donation of thirty turkeys from the Food Bank, we were able to purchase enough food items to give each family a week's worth of groceries and in addition, food items for a full Thanksgiving Dinner which included a 10-15 lb. turkey, assorted organic juices, apple sauce, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, stuffing, gravy, rice, beans, cooking oil, sweet potato and tomato sauce and all the herbs and spices that go into preparing a full meal for a family of six. These items were given to the families in a grocery bag personalized with the church's name, address, and telephone number so that families could reach out if any other need may arise. We made sure that each family knew that they were not to go hungry and that we would be there for them.

Monmouth Medical Southern Campus partnered with us and provided us with a numerous supply of masks and hand sanitizers for children and adults, food items that

were donated by hospital staff and volunteers, and over 100 boxes of fresh produce for hurting families experiencing food insecurity due to job loss and lay-offs.

Another of Christ UMC's ministries is the Back-to-School Backpack ministry. Church members had no idea how these ministries would be organized with the church building closed and through emails and Zoom worship were able to get the word out and raised enough funds to buy school bags, notebooks, and essential school supplies through the generosity of church members and once again, the donations from Monmouth Medical Southern Campus. Over forty children received school supplies prior to the beginning of the school year.

The Giving Tree is another one of the ministries that is held close to the heart at Christ UMC. Christmas decorations and a tree in the Sanctuary were decorated with tags. A Virtual Giving Tree lighting was prepared and was well attended and funded by a generous group of church members. A sum of 36 children received new clothing for the holidays. Monmouth Medical Southern Campus donated socks for men, women, and children and \$1,100 in gift cards for what was needed. Church members donated \$850 towards the Giving Tree. Another church member donated knitted scarves and a wide variety of store-bought scarves. Another church member donated gift cards to local fast-food restaurants to be given to families. With these donations every child received a brand-new winter coat with a scarf, clothes, and an age-appropriate toy for Christmas. Each parent received a gift card towards the purchase of a coat for the adult members of the family or for additional groceries or Christmas related expenses. A gift receipt was attached to the clothing items so that they may be exchanged for a different size if needed.

Interfaith Hospitality Network is a beloved ministry of Christ UMC. Hosting families, providing meals, engaging in conversation, and listening to their stories is part of the transformative experience that enriches discipleship in all its forms. Covid-19 has prevented the use of our facilities, and families remain at the community center. Limitations have not discouraged church members from giving generously and serving with heart and passion. No matter the distance, detours, and roadblocks this pandemic presents, the congregation knows full well “the why” of their existence in a community that is in many ways very different. If Covid-19 and demographics present obstacles, Christ UMC seeks out opportunities.

Discovering new gifts, graces, and talents that keep our mission and ministries going was one of the many highlights born anew during Christ UMC’s journey through the darkness of the wilderness brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a particular non-toxic pride that one experiences as a pastor when looking on from the sidelines. Watching church members grow in faith and action fills the heart with joy and the community with hope. Through the creation of small groups, Bible Study, Prayer Services, and worship, this newly formed congregation draws people to Christ in person and through Zoom through generosity, hospitality, community, connection, and example of unity.

It has been a challenging year, as indeed for many other congregations. During this past year, most of the members in leadership and other church members have been absent from the life of the church claiming their dislike with Zoom as a platform for worship, do not have a Facebook account for Facebook live, and are not interested in YouTube because there is no person-to-person interaction. Some members have left the

church because they did not agree with the direction the Greater New Jersey Conference was taking with the Black Lives Matter movement, the stance on racism and the legislation to end the sin of racism, the post-election results and events, and the delay in reopening the church building amid the COVID19 pandemic and surge. A few other members have left the church to attend other churches holding in-person worship. Another handful of members have given up on the church because they do not see it financially surviving the COVID19 crisis with the exodus of families and decline of membership. From forty in worship pre-pandemic, there are now 30 faithful worshippers in-person and 12-15 on Zoom, 11 in Bible study, and six in prayer service, with an increase in small groups and attendance of housebound and elderly members.

Aside from experiencing all sorts of loss during the pandemic and grieving the inability to fellowship and worship together, those who have been faithful to the church have had to bear and grieve the loss of church members that have been family for so long. The uncertainty of what the congregation will look like post-pandemic, adds to the stressor of grief and loss. From the wilderness and dark night, new discoveries are promised and discovering possibilities and new opportunities amid difficult times has been a source of encouragement in looking into the fruits of days ahead and new beginnings. With newly committed team players and a recently discovered purpose, a small and mighty congregation will take on the future filled with hope and trust in God, who can do abundantly and exceedingly more than her plans can carry.

VI: Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic provided new insights into health, demographics, politics, socio-economic structures, disparities and injustices, power influences and abuse, and religious struggles and challenges. It also provides us with a wide variety of statistics, from divorce rates to the birth of infants to suicide rates all increasing during the pandemic. Job loss, food scarcity, and homelessness are pre-existing societal conditions stemming from years of injustice, disparities, inequalities, and inequities that have become more noticeable during the pandemic. The roles and significance of the essential nature of healthcare workers, first responders, and frontline workers have also surfaced and changed how we perceive them and the importance of their work.

Racism, discrimination, hate crimes, sexual harassment, abuse, violence, and cultural incompetence have magnified what some may refer to as an unprecedented political season during this pandemic era that has birthed social unrests of sorts. Businesses, organizations, schools, and religious entities and organizations have forcibly learned to work beyond the four walls of offices, classrooms, conference rooms, and church buildings. Many have left their jobs, some for religious reasons and others ascribing to constitutional rights, in opposition to vaccine mandates exercised by states and local governments, and others for better opportunities taking advantage of jobs that others have left behind to tend to children and immunocompromised loved ones.

What will the church look like in a post-pandemic era? After having experienced uncertainty, financial hardship, isolation, and trauma, tragedy, and fear experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and all the events that have unfolded because of it, all while carrying a history of its unresolved trauma, what will the church look like in a post-

pandemic era? If the church is not a building or structure but the people, what will the body of Christ look like while undergoing pain from the loss and grief that it is experiencing? What challenges must the congregation face before it sees itself striving once again? In what ways will challenges become opportunities for something new to be birthed? Is leadership training and adding new programs the only answers to the revitalization of a traumatized church? Once again, these questions address the life or imminent death of the church. However, I have come to realize that it will not necessarily require courage to be a leader in these times more than it will require courage to accept the changes and the transformation that will be occurring on the path to wholeness, peace, and justice.

Since context is different for all, everyone's faith journey is also different because it is shaped by individual experiences, traditions, and scriptural interpretation. When one feels forced to experience a culture other than their own there can be resistance. When resistance is not handled properly conflict rises creating separation, especially when not addressed in the interest of wholeness of a given community. By listening to the myriad of stories a given culture must share, a new conversation is had in community. This new conversation reveals the commonalities beyond the difference in community as well as the biases, judgments, and preconceived notions that aid and abet in social injustice by losing sight of the overall mission of the church jeopardizing the ability to fulfill the ministries and the needs of community.

The question that remains is not so much "why is it that our church leaders do not share or buy into the vision", but rather "In what ways can we restore to wholeness and unity and reconcile a community in a diverse and multi-cultural context to further and

advance together the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ as the Church in the community and context to which it is called to serve, amid differences and challenging times?”

When most church leaders left the church during the pandemic, the resilience, faith, and passion of members in the pews and Zoom demonstrated grit that would steer the direction of the church into a pilgrimage journey. Ministries and missions continued, and church members grew into their God-given gifts to serve in ways they did not imagine themselves equipped to lead.

The Food Pantry continues to serve the community by providing food items. In 2021 the CUMC Food Pantry served 285 families composed of 617 adults and 490 children. Fulfill of Monmouth and Ocean County donated thirty-five turkeys for Thanksgiving. CUMC’s food pantry, through donations from church members, families, and friends and a community-driven food raiser at Monmouth Medical South, was able to package all the fixings to serve small and large families.

The Thrift Store operates through donations from church members and the community. This year we have included household items in the inventory. The Thrift Store serves the community at no cost. College students also participate and provide items for the Thrift Store through community service programs. For the first time in almost a year, community members could “shop” for warm clothes indoors in time for the cold weather ahead.

We have seen God at work this past year and in the life of those we serve and connect with in the community of Lakewood. One of our food pantry participants shared a heart-breaking story of her husband suffering a stroke right before Christmas that left

him paralyzed this past month. As we filled her trunk with food items and clothes, and toys for her five children for Christmas, she shared how a wheelchair for her husband would help. When one was offered to her, she was overwhelmed, and tears flowed from her eyes as we handed her the wheelchair we had in the church.

Another God moment was when in conversation with food pantry participants and extending an invitation to our worship services, we learned of their willingness to congregate. The difficulty was finding a place to worship that would hold services on Saturday because they work for the Jewish community on Sunday. Another mission opportunity is to reach out to high school students from the music department who are technologically savvy and offer them a stipend for sharing their gifts and talents with us.

From the Gospel of Luke 8:49-55, New Revised Standard Version we read:

⁴⁹ While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer." ⁵⁰ When Jesus heard this, he replied, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." ⁵¹ When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. ⁵² They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, "Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping." ⁵³ And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. ⁵⁴ But he took her by the hand and called out, "Child, get up!" ⁵⁵ Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat.

Christ United Methodist Church is not a dying church or a dead one. She had been sleeping in the wilderness befriending her Dark Night of the Soul. She was asleep, numbed by her own pain, tired of waiting for someone to sit with her or walk her through The Dark Night. While there, in The Dark Night, she found comfort in her pain. Some weep and wail for her. Others laugh at her and suggest that it is over, she is dead.

But she is not dead. She was waiting for her resurrection. She has awoken from her sleep and has walked out from The Dark Night together with others who do not look like her or think like her. She acknowledges that she had been looking for light at the end

of a tunnel that could only offer her hope. Rising from the ashes she realizes that she had been walking with The Light all along during her Dark Night of the Soul. She emerges on the other side with a new vision, and a new-found purpose and identity. She is not dying. She is not dead. She lives unafraid. Because she believed, she has been healed and made whole.

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