THE CHURCH IN OUR TIME: NURTURING CONGREGATIONS OF FAITHFUL PRESENCE

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THE CHURCH IN OUR TIME:

CALLING, CHALLENGE, AND OPPORTUNITY

The Christian church is a community defined by the joyful confession that in Jesus Christ God has graciously acted to bring salvation to sinners and to our sin-marred world. We believe that our God, because He is love, has moved toward us: sending His Son to demonstrate His love and His Spirit to extend His love unto the renewing of all things (Jn. 3). This is the animating hope and joyful confession of our community.

This confession, however, is not to be understood as the mere affirmation of ideas. It is, rather, a *call*. It is a call to *receive* God's salvation: to embrace the reality that God's creation has been ruined by sin, that we are in desperate need of His saving work, and that by the grace of Jesus Christ this salvation comes to all who believe (Acts 2). It is a call to *embody* this salvation in the community of the redeemed the Christian church: to celebrate it in our worship, to reflect it in our community, and to enact it in our lives (Eph. 4). And it is a call to *bear* God's salvation to the world in the time in which we find ourselves: to join Him in extending His redeeming love to our friends, our cities, and our world until our animating hope becomes theirs (Matt. 28). This is the beautiful calling of the Christian church: to receive, embody, and bear God's salvation in our time.

But the task of living out this calling is fraught with difficulty. At the start of the twenty-first century, the church carries out her work in the midst of enormous challenges from both the culture and the church itself.

Culture refers to the historically mediated and yet profoundly normative confluence of ideas, institutions, and individuals that frames the conditions for human life. The shape of this particular confluence changes across time and across locale, but culture itself is nonetheless an inescapable constant. And it is under the conditions of a *given* culture with both its particular glories and horrors that God's people musty carry out their unwavering redemptive calling to God's larger world.

The culture under which we live and labor the culture of *late modernity* is endowed with its own glory and horror. On the one hand, western culture embodies so many of the *promises* of modernity: a rise in stable political systems, broadly held convictions of human dignity, widespread material affluence, and extraordinary scientific and technological development. Each of these is witnessed and experienced in our time to an unprecedented degree.

On the other hand, our culture is marked by modernity's unfulfilled promises. There is increasing cynicism about the efficacy of contemporary political orders. There is deep confusion about what it means to be human. There is a profound and growing gulf between the world's rich and poor. There is deep

if ineffectual alarm over technology's instrumental service to the banal and the violent. And underneath it all, there is a deep ambivalence about the possibility of any sort of normative moral order even from the church that can provide a constructive vision for interpreting or responding to this state of affairs.

Not only do these cultural contradictions make the task of living lives of faith incredibly difficult, they also present world-historical challenges to the work of bearing God's saving, healing love in our time.

And yet unfortunately, there are other challenges too challenges not only from the culture, but also from the *church* and its own burdensome contradictions.

Church refers to both to the *global* family of God the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic body, with all of its various subsets spread throughout time and across space and to the *local* congregational expression of this larger family which bears out this global identity under the conditions of a given time and place. Both of these are, properly speaking, the church.

In our time, and in our culture, the church both in its global and local expressions enjoys considerable success: the Christian message continues to spread and take root in exciting ways around the world, especially in the southern hemisphere. In North America, much of the church continues to experience significant numerical growth, boasting some of the largest congregations in the world. Ordinary Christian believers have access to a range of educational resources that would have been unimaginable even to our greatest scholars just 100 years ago. Christian believers especially in America live with an historically unprecedented degree of affluence and material wealth and have developed innovative structures for using that affluence for the good of their neighbors. And Christian churches, despite the cultural challenges they face, continue to aspire to make a difference in the world.

And yet, in the midst of these very great gifts, one senses that all is not well. Even as the Christian message spreads around the world, it continues to lack credibility in much of western culture. Even as the church grows numerically, it does so along the same divisions of race, class, and politics that mark the rest of society. In spite of the enormous quantity of educational materials available, the biblical, theological, and cultural understanding of ordinary believers is acutely impoverished. In spite of the enormous possibilities for social good inherent in material affluence, the church remains deeply shaped by the mindset and

lifestyle of empty materialism. And in spite of ongoing aspirations for cultural impact, the church's failure to bring about cultural renewal is now broadly beheld. It can, in fact, be persuasively argued that in some regards the church is itself a participant in some of the most destructive aspects of late modernity.

And so at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the church graced with a confession of such joy and a calling of such beauty nonetheless finds itself burdened with deep questions over the nature of its identity, the efficacy of its labors, the character of the culture around it, and the possibility of faithfully being the church in the late modern world. To all appearances, the answers to these questions are far from certain.

But God is faithful. He loves the world. And He promises to use His church to extend His salvation in our time, as he has done in ages past even in the midst of profound challenges (Jn. 16).

These concurrent realities the challenges of our time and the faithfulness of our God present an opportunity for a serious and sustained conversation about the renewal of the church in our time. What might such a renewal look like? And what will be required of us if we are to undertake it? What will it mean for us to renew the church towards faithfulness in our time?

What follows is an attempt both to nurture this conversation by providing a framework for engaging these questions and to gesture towards a vision of the renewal the church in our time.

TWO

RENEWING THE CHURCH IN OUR TIME:

A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

The task of renewing the church toward faithfulness in our time is highly complex. It will require the cooperation of multiple ecclesial traditions, multiple generations, and multiple vocational spheres each animated by the living and active presence of God in our midst. No one person, tradition, or initiative is sufficient to map much less to walk the way before us.

And yet it remains the case that any effort toward renewing the church in her calling for our time will inevitably require us to give sustained attention to three fundamental tasks. The first of these is *reconsidering operative paradigms.* We must take stock of the current ineffective working models for understanding the church's relationship to the world, and embrace a more faithful alternative. The second of these is *recovering theological foundations*. In this, we must ask what neglected theological convictions must be recovered and held in common in order for the church to sustain faithfulness in our time. The third of these is *refocusing pastoral priorities*. To this end, we must ask what practical priorities pastors must embrace if the church's calling is to be faithfully sustained.

1. Reconsidering Operative Paradigms

Because of the complexity of being the church in and for our time Christians of good faith have conceived of this task in distinctive and often competing ways. Generally speaking, in the North American church there are three different paradigms for understanding the church's calling. In some cases, these paradigms exist as fully articulated visions of the church's life. In other cases, they exist simply as unselfconscious patterns of thought and action that shape individual believers and their congregations. Only in very few cases do they map specifically or exhaustively onto the whole life of a given congregation. But, because they play a defining role in both the church's understanding and embodiment of her calling, any attempt to renew that calling must attend to them.

i. Fortification

The fortification paradigm suggests that the fundamental calling of the church is to guard the integrity of its divinely wrought life against the assaults of the world. In this view, the basic *task* of the church is vigilant preservation and the basic *threat* to the church is the destructive character of the larger culture. This paradigm may be expressed in any number of ways and with varying degrees of intensity, but in virtually every case the net result is the same: the church actively cultivates a separate existence, removed from the corrupting travails of the world.

The strength of this model, and one reason that it is so broadly embraced, is that it takes seriously both the Bible's call to be God's peculiar people and its warning about the destructive and idolatrous nature of so much of life in the world. And yet its weaknesses are very serious indeed. First, this paradigm tends to portray God's relationship to the world almost exclusively in terms of opposition. And secondly, it conceives of the church's relationship to the world

in precisely the same way, often expressing this understanding through an ethos of anxiety, anger, or fear.

While it is true that God is opposed to sin and will in the end bring judgment against it (Rev. 20), and while it is true that the church because it seeks to follow God's own heart also opposes sin and longs for it to be judged (Ps. 2), two things must be remembered. First, God's *heart* toward the world is not one of opposition but of love (Jn. 3). His just and righteous judgment is not against the world in general but against the sin that deforms the world (Gen. 6). Secondly, God's *way* with the world is not to move away from it in disgusted hostility, but to move toward it in redemptive love (Jn. 1). The fortification paradigm fails as a model for the church's calling because in adopting a hostile posture toward the world and a separatist manner within it, it belies these two truths about God and creates congregations that are, in the end, neither in nor for the world.

ii. Accommodation

Contrary to fortification, the accommodation paradigm suggests that the fundamental calling of the church is collaboration with the world in the service of the larger good. From this perspective the basic *task* of the church is active partnership with its neighbors in the interest of social renewal, and the basic *threat* to the church is its own separatist tendencies.

The strength of this model, and one reason it persists, is that it takes seriously the Bible's call to "go into all the world" (Matt. 28). And many churches that operate out of this paradigm do so with admirable compassion and attentiveness to the culture around them. And yet in spite of these good intentions, the end result in many cases is clear: the church, in prioritizing collaboration with culture becomes indistinct from it embracing not only its aims, but also its ideologies and methods. This is because the accommodation paradigm fails to seriously reckon with the fact that the work of the church is not only to partner with its neighbors collaboratively, but also to bear witness to its neighbors *prophetically*. That is, the work of the church is not simply to participate in the world that is, but also must bear witness to the world that ought to be. This is the way of God participating in the life of the world, and yet calling the world beyond itself and into *His* life and it is also to be the way of His people.

iii. Domination

The domination paradigm suggests that the fundamental calling of the church is to triumph over her cultural enemies. In this view the basic *task* of the church is to extend its own values into the world while the basic *threat* to the church is those whose values differ from its own.

The strengths of this paradigm are that, unlike fortification churches, these churches rightly believe that God has called His people into the world and as a result tend to move intentionally into the culture. And unlike accommodation churches, they believe that God has called them to retain their "peculiar" identity (1 Peter 2), and thus tend to labor intentionally to preserve the integrity of their communities. But its weaknesses are profound. Like fortification, this paradigm tends to view the world in fundamentally oppositional terms. And yet it expresses this opposition not in withdrawal, but in aggression. Inherent in this aggression — which most frequently takes a *political* form — is a sort of aspiration to triumph, a perspective in which neighbors with whom one differs are viewed not as people to be loved, but as people to be defeated. In this respect and with bitter irony, it is now widely beheld that churches governed by the dominance paradigm come tragically to embody the Nietzschean character of the very culture they seek to subvert. But such a character is not reflective of the call of the God who lays down His life for the good of His enemies, and who calls His church to do the same (Matt. 5).

iv. In Sum

While it is true that each of these paradigms seeks to do justice to a particular aspect of God's word, and while it is undeniable that individual congregations influenced by these paradigms bring real good to their communities, it must nonetheless be said that because of the sustained and manifold failures of these paradigms to faithfully embody God's call on the church, the church must conceive of her life in a different way. It is time, in other words, for a new paradigm.

v. Incarnation

The new paradigm that must be embraced — or rather, an old paradigm embraced anew — is that of *incarnation*. The incarnation paradigm suggests that the calling of the church is to go into the fullness of the culture, bearing the fullness of the gospel, for the purposes of redemption (Jn. 1).

Unlike fortification, the incarnational church seeks to follow Jesus into every sphere of creation. Unlike accommodation, the incarnational church not only moves fully into the world but also retains the integrity of its God-given character and proclamation as it does so. And unlike domination, the incarnational church sees its movement into the world not as an angry movement of conquest but as a hopeful movement of redemptive love; seeking not to triumph over its neighbors, but to work for their flourishing.

This vision of the church's calling as a movement into the fullness of culture, bearing the fullness of the gospel, and yet doing so for the purposes of redeeming love is what James Davison Hunter has referred to as *faithful presence*. And it is this paradigm that must be embraced if the church is truly to be the church in and for our time.

2. Recovering Theological Foundations

Any faithful paradigm for the church's life in our time must be fully grounded in the timeless truths of the church's theological identity. The theological identity of the church universal rests in both its canonical revelation and its creedal formulations, while the theological identity of each of the many sub-traditions of the church is shaped by deeply held confessional distinctives. Each of these canon, creed, and confession must be faithfully embraced, proclaimed, and embodied in their entirety by churches around the world. And yet, in our time, there are four theological foundations that must be recovered across traditions if the incarnational paradigm of faithful presence is to take shape among us.

i. The Enduring Goodness of Creation

The Scriptural account of God's work begins with creation (Gen. 1). Out of no compulsion other than the greatness of His loving heart and the joy of His creative power, God made the world. And not only did God make the world, He also delighted in it. Seven times in the earliest pages of Scripture, God celebrated the world, rejoicing in its goodness. And then, as the final act of creation, God made human beings, not only as emblems of this goodness, but also as stewards of it bearing the noble calling to nurture the world's native goodness unto fullness. These things God's creation of the world, His seven-fold benediction over its goodness, and His call to nurture this goodness suggest that the world God made is not only worthy of His delight, but also central to His purposes.

And yet in much of the Christian church, the goodness of the world and its importance in God's purposes has been diminished.

One source of this diminishment is a long-standing inclination towards *anti-materialism.* While it has many forms and varies in degree, its basic perspective about the nature of the world is both widespread and consistent: there are two parts to creation, the "spiritual" and the "material." The spiritual part of

creation is the "higher," the home of wisdom and virtue. The material parts of creation — the earth, the body, and the artifacts of our lives — are the lower parts. In the anti-material perspective, these lower parts are variously portrayed as (at best) a backdrop to the cultivation of higher spiritual goods or (at worst) as a hostile obstruction to them. And while this broadly held anti-materialism must be commended for maintaining an extraordinary devotion to the goodness of God's spiritual creation — the beauty of the virtues and the glory of the soul — it is nonetheless the case that in renouncing the material parts of creation, the Scriptural picture of the *overall* goodness of God's world is diminished.

Another (related) source of this diminishment is *pietism*. While anti-materialism is a claim about the nature of creation, pietism is a claim about the nature of redemption and its relationship to the created order. Built upon an anti-material foundation, pietism suggests not only that the spiritual realm is higher in the order of creation, but also that it is more important — perhaps exclusively important — in the order of redemption. In this account, God's fundamental concern is with the spiritual aspects of a person's life — the heart or "the life of the soul." And while in the pietist perspective the meaning of the material aspects of creation is variously interpreted — ranging from a useful backdrop to redemption to an obstacle to it — it remains universally the case that these material aspects have no *fundamental* role in God's larger redemptive purposes. That this is so may be seen in several widespread expressions of pietism. First, we see it in *pietistic preaching*, which fails to *positively* address larger social or material concerns. Second, we see it in *pietistic ethics*, in which renunciation of the world functions as the animating conviction. And third — and perhaps most clearly — we see it in *pietistic eschatology* in which the actual trajectory of salvation is to be *literally* taken out of — or raptured from — the world. And while the emphasis on spiritual vibrancy and a certain form of detachment from the world is biblical, it is nonetheless the case that the pietist vision radicalizes this detachment and in so doing diminishes the goodness of creation, robbing it of its role in God's larger purposes.

The net result of these twin afflictions — anti-materialism and pietism — is a widespread and enduring *dualism*, a separation between God's work of creation and His work of redemption. This dualism has come to profoundly shape the Christian understanding of God's world. But this dualism is false. Creation and redemption are not opposed — they are *wed* (Rm. 8). The same God who made the world in creation entered into the world in incarnation (1 Jn. 1), and began the process of healing the world in resurrection — the first-fruits of the coming renewal of all things (1 Cor. 15). Thus if the scriptural witness and theological confession of the Christian church are to be fully embraced, we must set this dualism aside and once again embrace the goodness of God's creation and its

role in God's redemptive purposes. Only as we do this will we begin to meaningfully move toward the world as bearers of faithful presence.

ii. The Pervasive Nature of Sin

Attending the Christian delight in the goodness of creation must be an equivalent sorrow over the pervasive horror of sin. In the Christian view of the world, human beings, though made with and for an original divine goodness, have rejected that goodness and replaced it with our own lesser good. Through this act of sin we have become *sinners* — people marked both in our selves and in our lives with the wound of sin — bearing both its *guilt* and *corruption.*

In Christian theology, the language of guilt is fundamental to the doctrine of sin (Ps. 51). Human beings, clean and innocent by nature, are now, because of sin, unclean — marred with the shameful stain of guilt. This stain manifests itself first, in the *status* of guilt; the fact that we now stand justly accused as sinners before God, before our selves, before others, and before the world. And secondly, it manifests itself in the *experience* of guilt. That is, not only has sin burdened us with the actual status of guilt, it has also burdened us with the existential trial of it. Thus because of sin, we who were made to be clean and innocent now find ourselves plagued by both the terrible status and the shameful experience of guilt.

And yet in Christian theology, guilt is not the only consequence of sin. Added to it is what has historically been called *corruption*. Corruption refers neither to the status of guilt nor to the experience of it, but rather to the *disintegration of the world that sin has wrought* (Gen. 3). Though God intended creation to reflect the state of peaceful wholeness between God, humans, and the world — a state the Bible calls *shalom* — sin has broken this wholeness, splintering it into the ruin of corruption. Unlike guilt, which is both a status and an experience unique to human beings, corruption extends its sorrows to all of creation: embracing not only our broken inner lives, but also our broken bodies, our broken relationships, our broken cities, and our broken world. Thus in Christian theology, because of sin, a world that was made for the wholeness of shalom, now languishes under the grief of corruption (Rm. 8).

This view of sin — that it stems from a rejection of God's goodness and results in both pervasive guilt and corruption — is fundamental to the Christian understanding of what is wrong with both our selves and our world.

And yet in much of the Christian church this view of the pervasive nature of sin is truncated.

On the one hand are those who take a merely *spiritual* view of sin. In this account, which identifies sin largely with guilt, the human fall from grace is rendered primarily as a breach of the human relationship with God. Because of sin, human beings — made for loving relationship with God — have been exiled from His presence and stand in deep need of the redemptive cleansing secured by Jesus' crucifixion. The strength of this view is that it is deeply faithful to one aspect of the Bible's teaching on sin. Because of sin, humanity *is* in fact exiled from intimacy with God and in absolute need of His cleansing redemption.

And yet the weakness of this view is the corollary to its strength — it is faithful to only *one* aspect of the Bible's teaching on sin — guilt. And because of this, it tends to ignore (often with cruel consequence) the deep and equally biblical significance of corruption. The result of this curtailed faithfulness is an inclination toward an individualistic notion of iniquity, focusing on the presence of sin in the chambers of the heart, and yet ignoring the presence of sin in the structures of the world. Because of this, we must recognize that in spite of its very real strengths, the merely spiritual view of sin is unfaithful to the pervasive view of sin presented in the Bible.

On the other hand are those who take a merely *systemic* view of sin. In this account, which identifies sin largely with corruption, the human fall from grace is rendered primarily as a breach in human relationships, with one another and with the world. Because of sin, human beings — made for love, justice, and the peaceful stewardship of the creation — have been corrupted into selfishness, injustice, and violent exploitation of God's world. As a result, humanity groans — with all creation — for the redemptive healing secured by Jesus' resurrection.

Like the merely spiritual view of sin, the strength of this view is that it is deeply faithful to one aspect of the Bible's teaching on sin. Because of sin, God's creation *does* in fact groan under selfishness, injustice, and violence and stands in deep need of God's healing power of resurrection. And yet once again, the weakness of this view is the twin of its strength. In being faithful to the Biblical vision of corruption, it fails to take guilt seriously. As a result, the brokenness of the world stands at center stage while the guilty heart from which this brokenness springs recedes from view.

These reductionistic perspectives on sin are widely held and deeply embedded in the contemporary Christian imagination. But they are mistaken. This is

because each, when taken in isolation, underestimates the pervasive nature of sin. If the church is to take sin seriously, and truly labor against it as a faithful presence in this world, we must rejoin these perspectives, insisting on the reality of both guilt and corruption.

iii. The Expansive Scope of the Gospel

The gospel — the good news that in Jesus Christ, God has graciously acted to bring salvation to a sin-marred world — is the redemptive hope of the Christian church. Throughout history and across the world this deeply held conviction is personally embraced, liturgically celebrated, and ethically embodied. Even so, there is confusion about the breadth of this gospel and its meaning for the world. All Christian churches confess that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. But to save them from what? And to what? *What is the scope of this saving work?* To properly grasp the answer to this question, we must remember the Scriptural story.

We begin with *creation*. The Scriptures begin with a vision of the creation that is tantalizing in its beauty. We see God in a posture of unqualified delight towards His creatures. We see human beings, bearing the very dignity of heaven in their selves and extending the purposes of heaven into the world. We see human relationships marked by mutual delight and freedom from shame. We see a material world, celebrated in beauty and nurtured by loving hands. This — the loving co-existence of God, our selves, others, and the world — is God's original vision for creation (Gen. 2).

And yet in the Scriptural story, the glory of creation is shadowed by the sorrow of the *fall.* According to the Scriptures, God's people turned away from God's created intention — with all of its goodness — and plunged both themselves and the world into the shadow of sin. As a result of this sin, the loving co-existence of God, our selves, others, and the world has been broken, and the world in which we now live is — for all of its undeniable glory — nonetheless only the barest image of this original vision. God's relationship with His creatures — once marked solely by loving delight — is now marked by grief, holy anger, and the justice of judgment. Our own selves — once shining with the full glory of God's image and the deep dignity of His purpose — have been diminished into a shadow of our former selves. Human relationships — once a source of freedom and mutual delight — have become a source of violence, shame, and fear. And the material world — which once promised such glorious fruitfulness — now groans under the curse of exploitation and futility. Because of sin, God's

original creative intention — with all of its manifold beauty — has fallen into the tragedy of ruin (Gen. 3).

But this ruin is not the end of the Scriptural story. As it unfolds, we find that the sorrow of the fall gives way to the promise of *redemption.* God, rather than abandoning His intentions for creation, has — in Jesus — *entered into creation* for the redemptive purpose of restoring creation from the ravages of the fall. How does he bring about this restoration?

- First, by *restoring human beings to God*. Because of the crucifixion of Jesus, humanity — made for God in creation, and alienated from Him by the fall — may now be restored to God (2 Cor. 5). Through faith, all who have become enemies of God and exiles from His kingdom may now become children of God and friends of the very King of heaven. And yet this is not all.

- Second, by *restoring human beings to themselves*. At creation humanity was graced with the glorious dignity of bearing the image of God. At the fall, this image — though still irrepressibly present — was diminished and obscured by sin. But through the power of the resurrection of Jesus, all who trust in Him may be made new, free from death and all of its corruption, and restored again into the glory of the image of Christ (Col. 3), the second Adam (Rm. 5)

- Third, by *restoring human beings to one another*. In creation, God declared that it was not good for human beings to be alone, that we were somehow not fully ourselves until we were ourselves with another. And yet at the fall, human relationships made with such glorious promise began to disintegrate, collapsing into the misery of loneliness. In Jesus this loneliness may be healed. This is because all who trust in Him are joined — really and truly — not only to Christ Himself, but also to one another, as members of His body. It is in this Christ-shaped community of love, constituted by the Spirit, that God's relational intentions for humanity — so broken by sin — may be realized anew (Jn. 17).

- Finally, by *restoring the world itself*. The material world matters deeply to God. That this is so is seen in the creation account, in both God's seven-fold affirmation of its goodness and in His twice-repeated command for human beings to nurture the earth, and multiply its glories. God's intention for this material world was an endless future of creative care. And yet because of sin, this world — in spite of its overwhelming beauty — has become a place of exploitation and futility. But in Jesus, the material ravages of sin, so clearly evident in the world in which we live, will be washed away. The prophets who anticipated Jesus' coming spoke not only of a coming sacrifice for sin,

> of the renewal of sinners, and the restoration of God's people, but also of the healing of deserts, the fruitfulness of fields, and the joy of trees (Ezek. 47, Rev. 22). Jesus' ministry was deeply marked not only by words of spiritual forgiveness, but also by works of material restoration: the healing of illness, the creation of wine, the calming of storms, and most dramatically the resurrection of the material body. And these actions rather than being mere signs of a deeper spiritual meaning are *themselves* witnesses to the material aspects of God's redemptive intentions, foretastes of the healing of all things (Rom. 8). Because of this, Christians confess that the material order now groaning deeply under the curse of sin will one day be itself liberated, washed clean, and made new.

And yet even the glories of redemption do not exhaust God's restorative intentions. For one day, those intentions take the beatific shape of *consummation.* If creation may be understood as establishing the *trajectory* of God's intentions; the fall, the *deformation* of God's intentions; and redemption, the process of *renewing* God's intentions; the scriptural vision of consummation may be understood as the *realization* of God's intentions. A day will come, the Scriptures promise, when Jesus will return and will bring the longed awaited "reconciliation of all things" (Col. 1) In this day, at long last, God will be fully restored to His creation His posture towards His creatures only and always one of joyful delight. Human beings will be restored to themselves the twin follies of pride and shame graciously replaced with the thrilling dignity of the very image of Christ. Human beings will be restored to one another. The long shadows of loneliness and violence finally set aside in the warm relief of embrace. And the world itself will be fully and finally restored: no more sorrow, no more pain, no more tears only unabated fruitfulness giving rise to a perpetual orchard of joy. And in this consummate moment, the good news of the gospel of Jesus so long proclaimed, and in such bitter darkness, will be fully realized and beheld in the radiant face of Christ Himself (Rev. 21).

What then is the Scriptural vision of the gospel? *That in Jesus Christ, God is taking his creation—which has, because of sin, fallen into ruin—and redemptively restoring it in every part, until the time of consummation, in which all things will at last be made new*. It is *this Christ-centered*, *comprehensive*, and *restorational* gospel that should animate the life and witness of the Christian church.

And yet it remains the case that in the contemporary church, the expansive scope of the Scriptural gospel has been sadly reduced. On the one hand, one encounters what may be referred to as the *merely personal gospel.* In this widely embraced understanding of the Christian gospel, God's redeeming work is understood to be primarily if not *exclusively* about human restoration to God

through the sin-atoning work of Jesus. Jesus came into a sinful world to die for our sins, and through this death, to secure our forgiveness, deliver us from the just judgment of God, and to bring us back into that state for which we were made: fellowship with God. The obvious good of this perspective is that it faithfully represents part of what Jesus came to do. He *did* come into the world to die for our sins, to secure our forgiveness, to deliver us from condemnation, and to reconcile us to God. This is a foundational, unequivocal, and enduring teaching of the Christian Scriptures and is the joyful confession of the Christian church. And it is wonderfully evident that through the proclamation of this message, countless men, women, and children, have been restored to God.

And yet the weakness of this perspective is that it tends to ignore other things that Jesus came to do, which are also part of the gospel. Restoration of our own selves, restoration of our communities, restoration of the material world — these are seen as (at best) secondary "entailments" of the gospel, rather than the gospel itself or (at worst) as distractions from the pure gospel of Jesus. But restoration of our humanity, our relationships, and our world are not secondary to Jesus' purposes, and they are certainly not distractions from them. They are an intrinsic part of the good news of Jesus' redemptive work in the world. And the faithful gospel is the one that will proclaim them as such.

On the other hand, we find the *merely social gospel*. In this perspective, God's redeeming work in Jesus is understood *primarily* in terms of personal and social renewal. Jesus came into a sin-sick world so that He — through His Easter resurrection and Pentecostal presence — might restore broken lives, lift up the poor, liberate the oppressed, and establish God's justice over the whole of the earth. The strength of this perspective — and the reason it is so deeply motivating as a force for good in the world — is that it faithfully articulates part of what Jesus came to do in this world. He *did* come to heal the sin-sick world. He *did* come so that the kingdom of God — with its healing, deliverance, liberation, and justice (Lk. 4) — might come on earth, just as it is in heaven (Matt. 6). And it is manifestly the case that the proclamation and embodiment of this part of Jesus' work has brought untold good to God's people and their neighbors throughout the world.

The very serious weakness of this perspective is that it tends to ignore the personal reality of sin and therefore the need for the personal reconciliation with God found only in Jesus (2 Cor. 5). These things cannot be ignored, because the Christian gospel teaches us that before we move to address the sins of the world, we must take responsibility for our own sins. And before we

participate in God's reconciliation of all things, we must first through Christ be reconciled to God ourselves.

Because of these profound weaknesses, the tendency to both a *merely personal* and a *merely social* gospel must be strongly resisted in our time. Doing so will require us to self-consciously embrace the *expansive scope* of the gospel of Jesus; a gospel that contains within it the glorious promise that, in Jesus, God is reconciling *all things*. For if the church is to be a presence that faithfully bears witness to the gospel, we must proclaim it, not just in part but in whole.

iv. The Missional Vocation of the Church

The Scriptures teach that in Jesus Christ, God is taking his sin-marred creation and redemptively restoring it in every part, until at last all things are made new. This is the *missio Dei*, the redemptive mission of God to the world. But how does God extend these redemptive purposes? How does He accomplish this mission? The answer to this question both mysterious and ennobling is that God intends to accomplish this mission by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Christian church (Matt. 5). The church, that *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic* community that is both global in its reach and local in its expression is the intended instrument for the mission of God.

But how does the church participate in this *missio Dei*? How can such an ordinary community of men, women, and children take the mission of God and embrace that mission as its own? The answer to this question is manifold, consisting both of the endless series of ordinary decisions as well as the heroic acts of God's people in time. But in general, the church may be said to participate in the mission of God in three ways.

First, as a *recipient* of the mission of God. The calling of the church is not to originate the *missio Dei*, but to receive it: to bring our sin-marred lives to God by faith, and to open ourselves to the restorational power of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rm. 5). The identity and work of the church are therefore received from God himself: from the Father, who has loved us before time (Eph. 1); from the Son, to whom we are united by faith (Philipp. 1); and from the Spirit, who indwells us with power (Acts 2). This is where the church's participation in the mission of God begins.

But this is not where it ends. For the church exists not only as a recipient of the mission of God, but also as a *foretaste* of it. That is to say, the church, in the ordinary work of its common life, becomes in itself an embodied

anticipation of God's redemptive intentions for the world. How? First, in our restoration to God through faith in Christ, we become a foretaste of the coming day when at long last God and His people will dwell together, when He will be their God and they will be His people (Rev. 21). In our restoration to ourselves, we become a foretaste of the coming day when the image of God, so battered by sin and death, will be fully and finally restored. In our restoration to one another we become a foretaste of the coming union of the family of God, the day when loneliness and violence will be put away. And in the small and varied creation-restoring acts of our lives, we become foretastes of God's intentions for the creation itself. Thus the church is rightly understood only insofar as it not only receives the mission of God, but also *embodies* it in its own spiritual, liturgical, relational, and vocational life. Through these things, the church becomes an hors d'oeuvre of the coming banquet of the new world.

The final way in which the church participates in the mission of God is as a *bearer* of it. That is to say, the call of the church is not only to receive God's mission by faith, nor simply to pre-figure it in its own life, but also to *extend* that mission to its neighbors and to the whole of creation, in the very particular time in which it finds itself (Matt. 28). In the *word* we proclaim, our intention is not only to nurture the life of the church, but also to speak to the deepest questions of our time. *This means that one of the central theological tasks of the church is to identify and understand the central questions of our own age*. In the *worship* we enact, our intention is to bring joy to God, not only by making Him our highest good, but also by reminding our neighbors that He is their highest good as well. *This means that one of the central liturgical tasks of the church is to hold the reality of God and His new kingdom before the eyes of our neighbors.* In the *welcome* we extend, our purpose is not only to heal the loneliness of ourselves and of our brothers and sisters in the church, but also to bear God's hospitality to our neighbors. *This means that one of the central communal tasks of the church is to invite and embrace its neighbors into its life*. In the *work* that we do, our purpose is not only to care for ourselves, but also to bring God's restorational care to creation. *This means that one of the central vocational tasks of the church is to labor to bring God's redemptive purposes to bear in the callings that God has given us.* Thus the calling of God is for the church — through the ordinariness of its life — to not only receive the mission of God, nor to become mere foretastes of it, but also, by the Spirit, to take it up and bear it into the heart of the world.

This vision of the missional vocation of the church helps us to guard against two tendencies that diminish both the meaning of the church and the integrity of its mission.

The first of these tendencies is a *church-less mission.* By God's kindness there are many, many of His people in the world who have been enthralled with the beauty of His redemptive mission to the world. They rejoice in it in their hearts, practice it in their homes, instantiate it in their friendships, and pursue it in their vocations. And yet it remains the case that for many of these people — too many — this pursuit of the mission of God is fundamentally detached from the institution of the church. For some, this detachment from the church is rooted in the deeply sad but historically manifest experience that the church — rather than being an instrument of God's mission — is, in fact, often an obstacle to it. For others, this detachment from the church is less experiential and more deeply ideological growing out of both the individualism and anti-institutionalism of late modern culture. But for all, the net effect is that the work of the mission of God is understood as something fundamentally distinct from the life of the people of God. The strength of this perspective is that it prioritizes, in a general sense, the purposes of God, and rightly grows impatient with any person or institution that obstructs those purposes. *But its weakness is that it fails to see that God's purposes are inexorably bound to the church; that the church is neither an abstract idea, nor an aggregate of individual redemptive aims, nor a merely utilitarian instrument to be taken up or set aside at will, but the very body of God* — united to Him by faith in Jesus Christ, indwelled by His Spirit, and on mission with Him together in the world. And by neglecting this reality, those who embrace a *church-less mission* inadvertently refuse from God the very gift He has given to bear his purposes into His world.

The second of these tendencies is a *mission-less church*. God has given the church to the world as a bearer of His mission of love. And by His grace, many churches have, for centuries, taken up this mission with faithfulness and joy. And yet it is now broadly understood that many, many Christian churches — too many — exhibit a life apparently unrelated to the restorational mission of God. They have simply and sadly come to define their lives in some other way. Some, influenced by the paradigm of *fortification*, have begun to see the work of their church not as mission to the world, but as purity from it. Others, influenced by the irrepressible rationale of the market, seem to see their work fundamentally as the purveyance of religious goods and services. And still others, tragically bereft of anything meaningful to say and of anyone to whom to say it, have come to define their work in the most self-interested manner possible: as the mere preservation of their own institutional past. These churches have forgotten that their identities consist — not in fleeing the culture, nor in satisfying consumers, nor in perpetuating institutional identity — but in participating in the great redemptive mission of God. And as a result, they not only deform the dignity of the church — which has been given such an extraordinary role in this mission — they also hinder the mission itself.

Over and against these reductive ecclesial visions, we must remember that it is by the church that God continues to extend himself through the Spirit to the world. Because of this, we must encourage both those who embrace the church-less mission and those who inhabit the mission-less church to recover the missional vocation of the church.

v. In Sum

If the church in our time is to be a community of faithful presence, we must in the midst of all of our various confessional commitments recover these four theological foundations. Without them, the call to faithful presence will simply remain unintelligible to us. The *enduring goodness of creation* grounds us in the fact that our work is not elsewhere, but here among both the spiritual and material dimensions of God's world in all its particularity at the start of the twenty-first century. The *pervasive nature of sin* reminds us that this creation has been broken in every respect not only in the guilty heart, but also in the corrupted world and that our redemptive responsibility is to engage both of these. The *expansive scope of the gospel* leads us to remember that Jesus' intentions for the world are comprehensive in breadth and restorational in nature, calling us to labor for the renewal of every part of creation. And the *missional vocation of the church* reminds us that is through the Spirit-shaped people of God that God extends His redemptive mission into the world and not through some other means.

3. Refocusing Pastoral Priorities

Having reconsidered the operative paradigms for understanding the church's calling in the late modern world, and our need to recover certain theological foundations to ground that calling in our time, we turn now to what will be required for extending this calling into the life of the church today — *refocusing pastoral priorities*.

The pastoral life consists of a wonderful and yet bewildering array of spiritual, theological, liturgical, relational, institutional, and social demands. And any faithful pastor must be able — in a given moment and over a lifetime — to attend to these varied demands.

And yet, if the church is to embody the incarnational paradigm of faithful presence, we must self-consciously strive to refocus our pastoral labors around three critical priorities: *nurturing congregations of faithful presence, forming leaders for faithful presence, and building partnerships for faithful presence.*

i. Nurturing Congregations of Faithful Presence

For the paradigm of incarnation to take meaningful shape in the late modern world, it must first take shape in the *local* congregation. It is in this place that men, women, and children will both receive and embody the life of faithful presence. And it is from this place that they will go to bear that faithful presence into the world. And while pastors must be wary of presumption (in the end, it is the Holy Spirit who creates congregations of faithful presence), it remains the case that God — in His great kindness — desires to use the pastoral vocation in the formation of His church. Because of this, the aspiration to nurture congregations of faithful presence must be at the heart of the pastoral vocation.

How can pastors nurture congregations of faithful presence? What concrete steps might be taken to see this incarnational paradigm take shape in the life of the local church?

Ultimately, the answer to these questions is as expansive as the pastoral vocation itself, requiring attention not only to its enduring tasks, but also its oscillating contexts. And yet it remains the case that any strategy for nurturing congregations of faithful presence today will invariably entail devoting deliberate and sustained attention to the following:

- *Understanding the Congregational Locale*

  Pastoral ministry is predicated upon the prior work of God and the prior lives of people. That is to say, when pastors step into the midst of a congregation — to preach, to pray, to sing — we do so assuming that both the work of God and the lives of the congregation predate us. Before we are, they *were*. This means that the pastoral work of congregational nurture begins not with speaking but with *listening*, with the work of giving sustained contemplative attention to who and where our people are, and what nurturing them will require (1 Cor. 9). We simply have to understand — not out of judgment, but out of love — where our people are *located* before we can understand what it will mean to lead them to where, by God's grace, they will go. In this regard, three particular aspects of the congregational locale seem especially important.

  First, we must listen for the congregation's *cultural setting*. What is the culture in which the congregation is located? What are the characteristics of that culture? What is their posture to that culture? Is it one of *fortification* — in which they seek to rightly guard the gospel, but to wrongly guard themselves from the culture? Is it one of *accommodation* — in which they rightly move into the life of the culture, but do so uncritically? Is it one of *domination* in which they seek rightly to see the gospel change the culture, but wrongly seek that change through triumph? Or have they embraced the posture of *incarnation* — bearing the full gospel into the fullness of the culture for the purposes of love?

  Second, we must listen for their *theological framework*. What is their posture toward creation? Are they marked by an anti-material pietism or do they embrace creation's enduring significance in God's purposes? What is their understanding of sin? Do they tend towards a *merely personal* or *merely systemic* view of sin, or do they see in it both the guilt *and* the corruption of God's world? How expansive is their view of the gospel? What is it that they believe Jesus came to do? Is it the *merely personal* work of dying for our sins, securing our forgiveness, delivering us from condemnation, reconciling us to God, and removing us from the perils of this world? Is it the *merely social* work of restoring broken lives, lifting up the poor, liberating the oppressed,

and establishing God's justice over the whole of the earth? Or is it the *comprehensive* work of taking his creation and redemptively restoring it *in every part*, until at last all things will be made new?

Finally, we must listen for their *missional ambition*. Does the congregation have a missional burden, and, if so, what is it? Is it evangelism? Is it social action? If evangelism, to whom? If social action, of what kind? Is it a combination of the two? What are the unique gifts that they bring to their missional endeavors? What are the limitations that they bring? Where are their ambitions realistic and where might they need to find constructive redirection? Where might new ambitions need to grow?

The answers to these questions of cultural setting, theological framework, and missional ambition are extremely important because they indicate where our congregation is on their inevitable journey into the beauty of God's redemptive purposes. And if we are to labor credibly to nurture our congregations toward faithful presence, we must listen to these answers with care.

- *Converting the Congregational Imagination*

One of the central purposes of the pastoral vocation is to prayerfully convert the people around us — both Christians and non-Christians — into a vision of the world that is fundamentally defined by the gospel of Jesus Christ. We want them to see that, no matter how utterly determinative the desires of our hearts, the presuppositions of our minds, and the travails of our age *seem* to be, the world is in fact God's and is — as we are — inescapably bound to His redemptive purposes. This means that one of the central tasks of the pastoral vocation is to convert the congregational imagination by proclaiming — without ceasing — the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we proclaim *God's original creational intention* — the loving co-existence of God, our selves, others, and the world (Gen. 1–2). This is God's intended world, the world for which we were made and for which we long at every moment. *By this proclamation we remind our people that this world is fundamentally about God and His purposes, and call them to reorient their lives around Him*.

We proclaim the *terrible truth of the fall* — of how sin has plunged this original vision into ruin (Gen. 3). And how, as a result, we have become — really and truly — estranged from God, from our own selves, from others, and the from the created order; shadowed by guilt and bound to corruption.

This is the world in which we wake day after day, and from which we groan for deliverance. *By this proclamation we remind our people that this world is fundamentally broken and in desperate need of God's saving love.*

We proclaim the *beautiful promise of redemption* of how in Jesus Christ, God has entered the world to renew the fallen creation (Jn. 1). That by grace and through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2), we may be reconciled to God returned from our bitter exile, forgiven for our sins, and restored to our true home in Him (Lk. 15). That in Him, we may once again become our true selves the creational image of God, marred by sin, once again restored to the holiness and glory of the image of Christ (Col. 3). That in Him we may be restored to others once again enjoying the delighted community of the household of God (Eph. 2). That in Him, we may have earnest and fully requited hopes for the renewal of the material world the created order, befouled by sin, at long last washed clean (Rm. 8). *By this proclamation we remind our people that because of Jesus, sin will not have the last word, and that all who trust in Him will find full and final restoration from the travails of the fall.*

We proclaim the *unspeakable glory of consummation* of how through Jesus Christ the true future of the world is coming in which sin will be fully and finally swept away (Rev. 20), God will dwell with His people, and all will be made new (Rev. 21). *By this proclamation we remind our people the future is God's and that in time all things—including we ourselves—must be ordered around Him in love.*

This Christocentric, comprehensive, and restorational gospel heralded in our preaching, enacted in our liturgy, and embodied in our life is our proclamation to the church and the world. As this proclamation goes out, not only will we find men, women, and children really and truly restored to God, to themselves, to one another, and to the world we will also find a growing redemptive imagination for what it might mean incarnationally to bear this restoration into the world.

- *Cultivating Congregational Virtue*

At the heart of the pastoral vocation is the desire to see the gospel of Jesus Christ maturely embodied in the lives of His people. Because of this, pastors must give themselves not only to the work of proclaiming the gospel, but also to the work of *forming* the gospel into the life of the church.

This work of formation begins, as Paul says, with the *renewal of the mind* (Rm. 12). Part of God's work in the life of His people is to change the way

that we see. By His Spirit, He removes the scales from our eyes and teaches us to see reality — no longer through the lens of sin-wrought blindness — but through the lens of His eternal Word.

Pastors are called to participate in this work, to self-consciously and deliberately devote ourselves — through preaching, theological education, liturgical leadership, and pastoral care — to the work of renewing the mind of the congregation into the mind of Christ. In this respect we must ask ourselves: *What characterizes the mind of our congregation? Where must the congregational mind be celebrated? Where must it be renewed into the mind of Christ? How is my pastoral vocation seeking to participate in this work of renewing the congregational mind?*

And yet virtue comes not only through the renewal of the mind, but also through the *reordering of loves* (Lk. 18). Human beings were made for love — to both give it and to receive it. And yet because of sin, this extraordinary capacity has been deeply distorted and bent inward on the adulterous idols of the heart. But Jesus has come to forgive our broken love and to enable us once again to — as He says — love God and love our neighbors.

Because of this, the pastoral vocation must give sustained and skillful attention not only to the intellectual lives, but also to the interior lives of our people. We must seek — by the power of the Spirit and through all the means of our vocation — to retrain the affections of our people until they are once again rightly ordered toward God and neighbor. To this end, we must ask ourselves: *How do people come to love what they love? What does my congregation love? Where is this love rightly ordered towards God and neighbor? Where is this love wrongly ordered toward lesser objects? How might I help my congregation assess their loves rightly? How might I participate more fully in God's work of reordering the loves of my congregation?*

And yet there is one more aspect to the cultivation of congregational virtue — the *redirection of the life* (Matt. 16). For God's people to fully become themselves in Christ, they must be conformed not only to His mind and His heart, but also to His life. Because of this, pastors must be deeply aware of the concrete and practical realities of our people's lives and must labor self-consciously to see the life of Christ take shape there. To do this faithfully, we must ask the following questions: *Where are the lives of my congregation members directed? What are their practices of devotion? How do they use their bodies, their time, their gifts, and their money? What is the condition of their relationships? What is the shape of their vocation? What is the nature of their*

ambition in the world? How might I labor more fully to help my congregation members redirect their lives so that they may more fully embody the life of Christ?

For in the end, it is only as the gospel of Jesus takes shape in these ways that we know that our people are coming to maturity in Him. This work of cultivating congregational virtue is extremely important, for it is only as our congregations think with the mind of Christ, love with His heart, and walk in His way that they will be able to follow Him into His incarnational mission to the world.

- *Deepening Congregational Care*

The Scriptures teach us that God loves the world, and that He places His church into the world for the purpose of bearing active witness in their lives to that love. Because of this, one of the fundamental tasks of the pastoral vocation is to form the people of God into a community of care; a community in which the redemptive love of God takes shape in redemptive love for others.

This love first requires *care of the whole person* (Mk. 2). God's redemptive love is comprehensive in scope, extending to every aspect of human life. And the congregational expression of this love must be comprehensive as well. We must care for one another *intellectually* shouldering one another's doubts. We must care for one another *spiritually* bearing one another's sins. We must care for one another *emotionally* tending to one another's fears. We must care for one another *relationally* entering into one another's loneliness. We must care for one another *physically* tending one another's bodies. And we must also care for one another *materially* providing for one another's needs.

This means that the pastoral calling is to resist reductive visions of love and to lead the congregation forward into the endlessly creative work of caring for the whole person. This call leads us to constantly ask the following questions: *How does my congregation understand the call to love? Where is love happening among us? Where are we failing to love one another? How can I labor to deepen the love amidst the congregation?*

Secondly, it requires *care for the whole life* (1 Jn. 2). That is to say, the congregational responsibility to care for one another begins in the mystery of the womb and endures unto the sorrow of the grave. This is God's desire that in the vulnerability of our infancy, the wonder of our childhood, the mystery of our adolescence, the weight of our adulthood, and

the frailty of our old age we may look around us and see that the congregation is there. In this regard it may be useful to ask ourselves: *How does my congregation understand the call to care for the whole life? When do people tend to receive the most care from us? When does that care tend to fade? How might I labor to lead the congregation to extend care to the whole person for the whole of their lives?*

Finally, the call to congregational care means *care of the whole community* (James 2). God's care for His people is expansive extending not just to some, but to all and the congregation that follows Him must be marked by this same expansive care. Because of this, pastors must labor to build congregations in which *all* in their reach the lonely stranger, the broken sinner, the bereaved mourner, the gifted leader, the supportive encourager are alike the objects of loving care. In this respect we may ask ourselves: *Who in the community tends to receive care? Who tends—whether intentionally or unintentionally—to be overlooked? What is the source of this discrepancy? How might I labor more fully to ensure that all in our community are met with the redemptive care of Christ?*

This call to deepen congregational care until it extends to the whole person, for the whole of their lives, and to the whole congregation is extremely challenging. And yet we must devote ourselves to it in earnest. For it is only as we learn to incarnate God's love for one another that we can meaningfully incarnate that love into the world.

- *Expanding Congregational Mission*

The Scriptures teach that in Jesus Christ, God is restoring his sin-marred creation until at last He makes all things new. This is the redemptive mission of God to the world. And the congregation that participates in God's life participates in this mission, receiving it as its own. This means that an essential component of the pastoral vocation is to expand the missional life of the congregation until it reflects in microcosmic form the missional life of God Himself.

The first aspect of this task is to *summon all of God's people*. God desires every man, woman, and child in His church to participate in His mission and He has gifted each by the Spirit for that very purpose (1 Cor. 12). This means that one of the core tasks of the pastor is to ensure that all of God's people know that they have a place in the mission of God, and to equip them toward that end. In light of this, we must regularly ask ourselves: *Do my people understand that God's mission is also* their *mission? If so, how can I equip*

them for greater participation in that mission? If not, how can I summon every person more deeply into the mission of God?

The second aspect of expanding congregational mission is to *embrace all of God's work*. God's work of mission is comprehensive ambitious to bring His restoring love to every part of creation. Yet it is often the case that the missional aspirations of a given congregation embrace only part of God's broad intentions. Because of this, it is critical that pastors self-consciously lead their congregations to embrace the fullness of God's missional work in the world.

On the one hand, we need to lead our congregations to embrace *the missional pursuit of personal conversion* (Acts 2). The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners to deliver us from guilt and condemnation through His death, and to restore us to God. This salvation is the deep hope of our own lives and the great need of our neighbors. Because of this, pastors must lead their congregations to take seriously the call to move prayerfully into the lives of their neighbors, laboring to see God bring about the wonder of personal conversion.

On the other hand, we need to lead our congregations to embrace *the missional pursuit of the common good*. The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ came into the world to proclaim good news to the poor, give sight to the blind, and to bring liberty to the oppressed (Lk. 4). Because of this, pastors must lead their congregations through both their individual vocations and their corporate life to intentionally take up the work of alleviating the poverty, physical distress, and institutional oppression in their communities (Acts 3). This too is a necessary component of taking up the missional work of God.

Embracing this comprehensive view of the work of God will require us to ask ourselves the following questions: *How does my congregation understand the work of mission? Do they tend towards imbalance—favoring either personal conversion or the common good? If so, how might I take concrete steps to lead the congregation to embrace the fullness of God's missional work?*

The final aspect of expanding congregational mission is *to move into all of God's world* (Acts 1). The Scriptures teach that God's mission is to extend His kingdom to every part of His creation, and the church that bears this mission must move into every part of creation as well. This means that the missional movement of the congregation must be intentionally multi-dimensional.

This must first be an *intellectual* movement a sustained and rigorous labor to *understand* the structure, characteristics, needs, and challenges of our culture. This means that pastors must *must* begin to give sustained attention not only to the content of our theology, but also to the nature of our times. And must be diligent in helping our congregations understand these things as well. It must also be a *relational* movement a loving entrance into the lives of our neighbors. It must be a *geographical* movement committed to bearing God's mission both to particular places and to every place on earth. It must also be a *cultural* movement a deliberate missional engagement with the central ideas and institutions of our time.

This call to move into all of God's world requires us to ask the following questions: *Does my congregation understand the nature of the culture to which they are called? Does my congregation understand the intellectual, relational, geographical, and cultural demands of the Great Commission? Which of those horizons does my congregation tend to embrace? Which of those horizons do we neglect? For which are they most or least equipped? How can my pastoral ministry more effectively lead people missionally into every part of God's creation?*

As we attend to each of these realities summoning *all of God's people* to embrace *all of God's work* and bear it into *all of God's world* we will expand the incarnational mission of our congregation.

- *Shepherding Congregational Expectations*

When a congregation begins to grow in imagination, in virtue, in care, and in mission it also grows in expectation. Suddenly, in God's purposes, the world is opened to them and every place of their lives their bodies, their neighbors, their cultures seem full of redemptive promise. And yet it also remains the case that God's redemptive promises notwithstanding bodies die, neighbors walk away, and cultures dissolve into ruin. And so the congregation is left in the bewildering valley that lies between expectation and experience. Our pastoral work is carried out in this valley, and therefore one of its core tasks is to shepherd congregational expectations.

This is done first by reminding the congregation of the *brokenness of the present*. The world in which we live created for such glory is broken, shadowed by sin, and subjected to frustration. Because of this our labors like Adam's before us are subject to this same frustration, *even when we are laboring for God's purposes.* Part of the pastoral task is to remind our people

that many of the redemptive yearnings we have are, for the present, inevitably bound to frustration (Rm. 8).

In doing so, we will help our congregations guard against a form of naïve *triumphalism* the assumption of a straight line between our labors and the realized kingdom of heaven. This triumphalism is very tempting both for pastors and for congregations. It offers the promise of significance and the participation in something good. And yet for all of its initial energy, inevitably creates denial, disappointment, anxiety, anger, and even disillusionment in the congregation.

Instead, we must labor to grow a form of *wisdom* that understands the task of faith as not only to work, but also to wait. To this end, it is useful to ask ourselves: *Does my congregation have triumphalistic tendencies? Do they have a simplistic view of the brokenness of the world? If so, how is this affecting their lives? What steps might I take to remind them more faithfully of the brokenness of the present?*

And yet, the pastor must also remind the congregation of the *certainty of the future*. The promise of Christianity is that because of Jesus, sin will not have the last word. It will, one day because of His resurrection and by His enduring rule, be swallowed up by the joys of a renewed creation. This is the promise of God Himself and His promises can never disappoint. Because of this, part of the pastoral task is to remind our people that their redemptive hopes presently bound so painfully to frustration will one day be realized, raised from the dust of futility, to shine in the kingdom of light (Heb. 12). We must remind them that in the end, God's purposes will prevail and all who hope in Him will see it.

In doing so, we will help to guard against the peril of *cynicism* the assumption that in the end, God's redemptive work makes little difference in reality. Against this, we must labor to cultivate the virtue of *eschatological hope* that disposition of the heart that expects frustration and yet just as earnestly expects that one day that frustration will give way to joy. To aid in this, it will be useful to ask ourselves: *Is my congregation fundamentally characterized by cynicism or hope? If cynicism, where does it come from? How do I inadvertently reinforce that cynicism? And how might I take initiative to cultivate the ethos of hope into our congregation?*

- *In Sum*

  How then are pastors to take responsibility for the priority of nurturing congregations of faithful presence? By *understanding the congregational locale* taking seriously the cultural, theological, and missional setting of the church. By *converting the congregational imagination* proclaiming the comprehensive and restorational gospel of Jesus. By *cultivating congregational virtue* laboring to renew the minds, reorder the loves, and redirect the lives of our people. By *deepening congregational care* leading our people to care for the whole person, over the whole of life, and for the whole community. By *expanding congregational mission* summoning all of God's people, to take up all of God's work, and bear it into all of God's world. And finally, by *shepherding congregational expectations* reminding them of both the brokenness of the present, and the certainty of the future. As we labor to embed each of these in the individuals, the ideas, and the institutional structures of our churches, we will over time and by God's grace see our people becoming congregations of faithful presence.

ii. Forming Leaders for Faithful Presence

The renewal of the church towards faithful presence in the late modern world begins with the local congregation, but it does not end there. This is because faithful presence, by its very nature, requires God's people to move beyond the boundaries of congregational life into every area of cultural life. Such a movement will require *leadership* the presence of men, women, and children who take responsibility for faithful presence in their world. Because of this *the intentional work of forming the whole congregation into the work of leadership* must be recovered as a pastoral priority.

How can pastors form leaders for faithful presence? What must pastors do to equip their people to take responsibility for doing God's work in God's world?

The answer to this question will, of course, vary according to the gifts of the pastor, the gifts of the congregation, and the needs of the context. And yet any strategy for forming leaders for faithful presence must include the following:

- *Reframing the Meaning of Leadership*

  The language of leadership is ubiquitous in the contemporary church, but its meaning is not always clear. What does it mean to lead? Who can be a leader? Where does leadership happen? By what means and to what end?

The answers to these questions are not at all self-evident. And as we consider both various leaders and various reflections on leadership within the church, we find a great deal of confusion on these fundamental issues. Because of this, one of the first pastoral tasks in forming leaders is to reframe the meaning of leadership — to help people understand just what it is that we are calling them to be. What then, is the meaning of leadership? To lead is *to embrace the responsibility—within the parameters of one's own calling—to bear the redemptive mission of God into the world.* This is what we hope — by God's help — to form *all of our people* (and not just an elite subset) to be and to do within their given callings (Eph. 5 6). Framing the meaning of leadership in this way will help us to overcome three of the most persistent barriers to leadership found in our congregations.

The first of these is the *avoidance of leadership*. Leadership requires us to "embrace responsibility." It is, in other words, a fundamentally *active* endeavor. And yet many people in our churches tend, in the face of this call, to remain passive. Sometimes this passivity is a product of confusion — of uncertainty about what needs to be done. At other times it is born of a form of disgust — a desire not to be identified with destructive power structures, by the instinct to withdraw. At other times it is born of busyness — the margin-less quality of modern life. And at still other times this passivity is a product of mere selfishness — the very straightforward desire not to be inconvenienced by the burden of others. But no matter the cause, it remains the case that this passivity undermines the capacity of our churches to be faithfully present, and so it must be overcome.

The second barrier to leadership is the *spiritualization of leadership.* The call to lead is a call to work "within the parameters of one's own calling." It is, in other words, a call to labor in whatever sphere of culture or stage of life one finds oneself. And yet many people in our congregations — influenced by the pietist gospel in which the spiritual realm is the most important — live under the burden of a fundamental *dualism*. On the one hand, there is the spiritual realm — the realm of the soul — in which the real work of God is most fully located. On the other hand there is the secular realm in which we eat, work, play, make love, and rest. And for many Christians, this dualism is absolute: the spiritual realm is the most important, and the secular realm — to the extent that it may be valued at all — matters only insofar as it can support the spiritual. Because of this — and tragically — many people believe that their work is largely meaningless in God's larger purposes and see their most meaningful leadership as their spiritual service to the local church. But this dualism is false. It is a spiritualized misunderstanding of both the gospel of Jesus and of what it means to live — and lead — in light of it. Because of this,

pastors must labor to overcome this dualism, to enlarge their people's understanding of leadership by reminding them that God's call is not to set aside their vocations but to participate in those vocations more fully in light of His redemptive purposes.

The third barrier to faithful leadership in our congregations is the *exploitation of leadership.* The call to lead is a call to "bear the redemptive mission of God into the world." To lead then, is to labor within our own-God-given areas of responsibility and by the power of the Spirit to see the comprehensive and restorational purposes of God take shape. In this respect leadership is fundamentally about *others* about the glory of God and the good of neighbors. And yet it is all too familiar in our churches to see leadership not embraced as an act of love, but exploited as a tool for selfishness. It is lamentably commonplace to see both pastors and congregational leaders use their positions and their power not for the glory of God or the good of others but for the satisfaction of their own selfish aspirations. Pastors must lead the way in opposing such exploitative leadership both in themselves and in their congregations so that a leadership fully oriented towards others may be embraced anew. This task of reframing the meaning of leadership of teaching our people to embrace the responsibility, within the parameters of their callings, to bear the redemptive mission of God into the world is a critical first step in the work of nurturing leaders for faithful presence.

- *Embracing the Burden of Leadership*

Pastors must lead their churches to intentionally embrace the heavy responsibility of forming leaders. Without this intentionality, formation of this kind and of the necessary depth will rarely, if ever, take place. But what will it mean to embrace this burden of forming leaders?

First, it will mean embracing *the burden of learning*. It is possible for men and women in our churches to sit through an entire lifetime of sermons and never feel that their pastors truly understand the vocational realities of their lives. And in many cases this feeling is fully warranted pastors often *don't* understand the vocational realties of their people's lives. But if we are to nurture men and women as leaders, we must begin to shoulder the task of learning about the callings in which that leadership will ultimately take its shape. To this end we may ask ourselves: *What are the various callings represented in my congregation? Why have these people embraced these particular callings? What are the characteristic responsibilities, challenges, and beauties of these callings? How might God's redemptive mission take shape in these various*

callings? How might we as a church encourage one another in these callings? If we are to truly form our people into leaders we must learn — both with and for them — what this leadership will mean.

Second, we must embrace *the burden of strategy*. Faithful labor in the world must be fully reliant upon both the guidance and enabling of the Holy Spirit. Because of this, the language of strategy can, at times, sound unspiritual — like a self-reliant form of presumption upon both the purposes and the blessing of God. And it must be admitted that too often our strategies are exactly that — self-reliant and presumptuous. But at its core — if conceived in wisdom and carried out in humility — strategy may be rightly seen simply as a way of giving serious forethought to the work to which God has called us in His world. Because of this, pastors must reflect this seriousness — and help others to do so — by learning to think strategically about the leadership work before us. How?

First, by asking serious questions about the *critical needs of our time*. Leadership and calling are not timeless endeavors. They are bound inescapably and intentionally to time, space, and culture. Because of this, the critical questions of calling are not simply, "What do I desire? What gifts to I have? And what opportunities do I have?" But also, *"What needs to be done now? What work does love require in my time?"* Because of this, pastors must labor with other leaders to identify and understand the deep needs of their neighborhoods, their communities, and their larger culture. Only in doing this can leadership grow into its full redemptive stature.

Secondly, by asking questions about the *current deficiencies of our practice.* Cultural presence is an enormous responsibility. It embraces multiple vocational *spheres* — all of the various vocations to which men, women, and children have been called by God. It embraces varied *tasks* that inevitably emerge within those spheres: the intellectual work of theorization, the educational work of translation, and the practical work of application. It embraces the varied *institutions* in which those spheres and tasks are carried out from elite international institutions and local neighborhood institutions. And, especially in a globalized age, it embraces all of the various *cultures* of the world. And yet it is inevitably the case that some of these spheres, tasks, institutions, and cultures are more attended to than others. Because of this, it is important that pastors begin to ask — and to help their people ask — *where are we not faithfully present as God's people? Are there vocations that we neglect? Are there tasks—intellectual, educational, and practical—within those vocations that we neglect? Are there institutions—global or*

local—in which we fail to be fully engaged? Are there nations and cultures to which we have failed to go?

The final way in which pastors might bear the burden of strategy is by working to develop of *a coherent plan of response.* Having developed an attentive sense of the needs of our time, and a realist appraisal of the places where the church is absent from those needs, the pastor must in partnership with others labor to develop a wise and realistic plan through which these things might be addressed. To this end, the pastor should seek to answer the following questions: *How might our culture and its needs be most constructively engaged? What cultural needs might we immediately address within our various callings as a congregation? What cultural needs might we realistically aspire to address in the long term? What would we need to embrace in order to do this?* Of course we hold our answers loosely in our hands, but if we are to fully and effectively take on the burden of forming leaders for faithful presence, we must nonetheless embrace the burden of strategy and give deep consideration to what needs to be done, where we are struggling to do it, and how we might move forward in greater faithfulness.

The final burden we must embrace in forming leaders is the *burden of resources*. For our people to succeed in their callings in the world, they must enter into those callings with the necessary resources. Because of this, pastors and their churches ought to give serious attention to the question of what it might mean to appropriately support the leaders we nurture. What kind of resources might we offer?

First, the *resource of relationship*. In order for God's people to labor effectively in God's world, they must have companions along the way. Because of this, part of the pastoral task is to both to be present with our people in their callings, and to cultivate the sort of community in which they might be present with one another. Pastors, therefore, ought to ask: *Where are my people laboring? Who is around them to encourage them in their vocational leadership? How might I be effectively present with them? How might I nurture a community in which the members of the congregation take initiative to be present with one another?*

Second is the *resource of education*. Part of the work of the pastor is to teach God's Word to God's people so that they might, by the power of God's Spirit, go to live it out in God's world. Because of this, pastors ought to give sustained attention to the work of providing resources oriented to helping our people understand what it means to live the gospel out in the context their particular callings. *What might it mean for us to teach regularly—in both*

general and particular ways—about calling and vocation? What might it mean for us to provide curricula ordered around these questions? What might it mean for us to either write or acquire more substantial works on these topics? How might we provide structures of ongoing training so that our people might continue to be nurtured in the work of leadership in their various callings?

Third is the *resource of money*. Faithful labor in the world requires not only companions and knowledge, but also concrete material support. Because of this, pastor's ought to consider what it might mean to use some of our congregational resources to help people fulfill their callings in the world. It is not at all unusual for congregations to support missionaries in their work around the world. But we are much less inclined to support someone who is not in "full time vocational ministry." This sort of institutionalized dualism needs to be reconsidered. *What kinds of financial and material needs do our people have as they enter into their vocations—Do they need education? Do they need child-care? Do they need start-up funds? Which of these needs might the church be reasonably positioned to provide? What might it mean for our congregation to develop structures to enable this provision in an ongoing and reliable way?* These questions though unusual in much of the contemporary church must at the very least be reintroduced to our congregations if not fully answered there if we are to provide the care that our people need.

Finally, we must offer *the resource of leisure*. One of the most unfortunate aspects of contemporary congregational life is that it tends to exhaust the people in our congregations. Unlike pastors, most of our congregation members do not live and work on a daily basis in and among the formal ministries of the church. And yet so many of them are deeply involved: leading worship, teaching classes, leading youth trips, serving as officers, leading small groups, and providing pastoral care. And yet all of this happens *on top of* lives that are for many very demanding. In time this situation leads to overload in which our people either neglect their vocations, neglect their church leadership responsibilities, or neglect their own well-being. Because of this, pastors ought to take the lead in simplifying their institutional structures so as to free their congregation members as much as possible to simply live and labor faithfully in the lives to which God has called them. This will, of course, mean that we may have fewer people to support our ministries or manage our programs. But this is as it should be: the pastors' work is to support the congregation in their labors, not the other way around and as many of our programmatic initiatives as possible must be oriented towards that end. As we do this, we will enable our people to have leisure to nurture the enriched prayer,

creative thought, personal health, and intimate community that faithful leadership requires.

- *Addressing the Needs of Leadership*

  Once we have understood the meaning of leadership and have embraced the burden of forming leaders, we have to identify the concrete needs of these leaders, and begin as much as we are able to address them. And while these needs will vary widely according to the context and the situation, there are seven needs that every pastor ought to have in mind as they labor to nurture leaders of faithful presence.

  First is the need for *vocational affirmation*. The spiritual/secular dualism is deeply imbedded in contemporary Christianity and with it a deep ambivalence in our people about the ultimate meaning of their vocations. Because of this, pastors must be very intentional to avoid any hint of this dualism and to clearly and repeatedly affirm the dignity of our people's vocations.

  Second, these leaders will need *spiritual formation*. Faithful leadership requires more than competency. It also requires virtue. And while power and influence whether in the nation-state or the neighborhood are God given and good when used for love, the idolatrous allure of these things is extremely dangerous. Because of this, pastors must be intentional in developing structures of spiritual formation and in prayerfully seeking the Spirit to use them to form our people.

  Third, our leaders will need *theological instruction*. While our work as pastors is to proclaim God's renewal of all things in Jesus, and to affirm our people's vocations as participation in that renewal, it is our desire that they approach those vocations theologically. That is, we long for our people to enter into their vocations not simply on the terms provided for them by the culture, but with a larger biblical and theological framework for understanding the nature and purpose of their work in the world. Because of this, pastors must labor to ensure that the leaders under their care are ever deepening in biblical and theological knowledge.

  Fourth, our leaders will need *cultural understanding*. Vocations do not and cannot take place in a cultural vacuum. To the contrary, they take place in the enormously varied texture of cultural life with both its beauty and its suffering. Because of this, pastors must labor to help people situate their callings in light of the larger movements and characteristics of culture; to

help them see where they fit, where they may struggle, and where they must labor on in faith.

The fifth need that leaders will have is that of *sphere-specific formation*. Our people will experience their lives not in terms of abstractions like *vocation* and *leadership* but in terms of the very specific vocational spheres that they inhabit. And if we are to form people to think and live Christianly in these various spheres, we must give some sustained attention to the nature of those spheres. Because of this, pastors should give attention to providing resources for people within given vocational spheres. For example, pastors might either produce or procure a study on the implications of faithful presence for medicine, law, education, pastoral ministry, parenting, academics, politics, or the financial industry. Or perhaps pastors could host a class in which people in different vocational spheres come and talk about their own pursuit of faithful presence. No matter what the form, our people will need for us to labor to take the specifics of their vocational spheres seriously.

The sixth need of our leaders will be *person-specific formation*. Every person has a call from God to live faithfully for His purposes in the midst of the world, and has been gifted by the Holy Spirit toward that end. And yet not every person understands what their gifts are, what their calling is, or how exactly they might labor within that calling for the purposes of God. Because of this, pastors must make some effort to help people understand, embrace, and appropriate the *gifts* that they have been given. From this, pastors must labor to help people understand the *calling* or callings that they have been given in the world. Pastors must labor to help people embrace the *role* that they have been given within those respective callings. Some people have been given roles of great prominence in their vocations and they need to learn to both see and steward this reality. Others most others have been given more hidden roles laboring in the complicated beauty of the ordinary. Because of the frequent confusion that this brings, pastors need to faithfully remind their people that *God's redemptive purposes are fully scalable* taking *equally* important shape in both the celebrated work of expansive institutions and the oft-ignored work of mothering or laboring in the fields. God's redemptive purposes take shape in every place, and faithfully reminding our people of these things will help to guard against an ugly and unbiblical elitism that proudly assumes that God is interested only in those who are most culturally prominent, and a tragic and equally unbiblical despair in all that is obscure.

The seventh need of leaders in our midst is that of *sustaining community*. Because of sin, our lives and vocations are subject to frustration. In light of this, one of the greatest needs that our people have is for a community of similarly minded and similarly called people that can sustain them in the midst of this frustration. One of the tasks of pastors, therefore, is to labor to create little communities within the congregation in which the life of faith in the world might be sustained. To this end pastors might consider starting a small-group ministry in which men, women, and children can gather to talk, study, and pray about one another's work in the world. Another possibility is to create vocation-based guilds of teachers, mothers, plumbers, artists, etc. that gather monthly to consider the implications of the gospel for their particular callings. Yet another possibility is to create a full-fledged "Fellows" program in which people might over a certain period of time come together in intentional community to give sustained attention to the questions of vocation, and to what it might mean to take up those questions together. These kinds of congregation-based communities will give life and endurance to our people as they embrace the burden of leadership in their own lives.

- *In Sum*

How then are pastors to take responsibility for the priority of forming leaders for faithful presence? By *reframing the meaning of leadership* helping our people understand that to lead is simply to embrace the responsibility within the parameters of one's own calling to bear the redemptive mission of God into the world. By *embracing the burden of leadership* ordering our churches in such a way as to embrace the burden of learning about various vocations; of strategy, considering how these vocations might be more faithfully embodied; and of resources in which all that we have at our disposal is committed to the nurture of our people. And finally, by *addressing the many needs of the leaders in our midst*. As we labor to embed each of these in our people, in our teaching, and the very order of our churches, we will over time and by God's grace see the emergence of men, women, and children who will take responsibility for their roles in God's work in His world.

iii. Building Partnerships for Faithful Presence

The work of being a church of faithful presence in our time is a task that extends beyond the scope of any one pastor, congregation, or leader. It is a work that involves the *whole* of God's people moving into the *whole* of God's

world as bearers of God's love. It is a movement that, while it necessarily begins locally, expands to embrace all that God is doing around the globe. A movement of such scale and complexity will, of necessity, involve the strategic cooperation of individuals, local churches, and other institutions who are committed to the paradigm of faithful presence. Because of this, pastors must embrace the priority, not only of nurturing congregations and forming leaders, but also of building creative partnerships (Philipp. 1) *both within and from their congregations* for faithful presence.

How can pastors build partnerships for faithful presence? As before, the answer to this question will, of course, vary according to the gifts of the pastor, the callings of the congregation, and the opportunities of the context. Because of this, the nature and scope of our partnership initiatives will range broadly from church to church. And yet any strategy for building the kinds of partnerships that can enable faithful presence must attend to the following:

- *Removing Barriers to Partnership*

  In spite of their necessity for the mission of the church, the work of forming partnerships in and with the church is often quite difficult. Because of this, and as a matter of first order, pastors must labor to remove congregational barriers to partnership and to open up institutional space in which creative collaboration can be pursued. This will require us to intentionally engage two obstacles to partnership frequently found among us.

  The first of these is *vanity*. It is a sad and broadly understood reality that one of the greatest obstacles to creative partnership in and with the Christian church is pride. In both individual persons and individual institutions there is an overwhelming temptation to believe that the most useful ideas, initiatives, and institutional configurations originate within our selves. As a result of this, individual pastors, individual congregations, and larger denominational entities tend to prioritize not fruitful participation in the mission of God but active preservation of our own personal or institutional identities and practices. This leads us either to avoid collaborative partnerships altogether or to conceive of them only as other people joining the work that we have begun, and on the terms in which we have begun it. This is pride. And because of this pride, many creative partnerships that might have been fruitful for the mission of God lie unexplored. True partnerships can only emerge when this pride is set aside and we for the larger good take the initiative to listen to one another's ideas, prioritize one another's flourishing, and give ourselves to one another's aspirations.

Because of this, pastors must take on the responsibility to cultivate a form of personal and institutional *humility*; a posture that sees itself as simply one part of the larger work of God's people in the world and that sees pride for what it is an enemy of God's mission. To help in this work, pastors may need to ask: *Where do I manifest self-sufficient pride? Where does my congregation do so? Where do we fail to see our need of other people? What shape might repentance take among us in this regard?*

The second obstacle to creative missional partnerships is *sectarianism*. The identities of many parts of the Christian church have been formed in the crucible of internecine controversy. And while the subjects of those disputes are meaningful, and the identity boundaries that resulted from them are an important part of what it means to be a community, it is also the case that these boundaries can at times inappropriately function as obstacles to missional partnership. This is because in some instances these boundaries harden into a form of sectarianism. Simply put, sectarianism is the tendency to identify one's own tradition as the *true* church of Jesus and correspondingly to keep other parts of the church at a distance.

At this point special care is needed. There have been and remain certain critical junctures in history in which the very meaning of the church of Jesus is at stake. At these points, this sort of absolute boundary drawing is an essential and inescapable act of faithfulness. And indeed many of our most deeply held creedal and confessional convictions have emerged from these moments of travail. And yet at other times our disputes are *not* about the nature of the church and its first-order creedal convictions, but about the second-order convictions of one particular sub-tradition of the church. And while it is often necessary for these second-order disputes to take place, it is not appropriate for them to harden into barriers to creative collaboration in the mission of God. And yet they do harden. As a result, creative missional partnerships across Christian traditions are, tragically, not the rule but the exception.

Because of this, pastors must labor to resist sectarianism in their own hearts, in their congregations, and in their larger denominational structures and to prioritize (even while holding true to the distinctives of their sub-traditions) the more "merely Christian" identity of the *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church*. This work is incredibly difficult. The difference between first and second-order disputes is not always self-evident, and discerning them rightly will require the very humility, patience, and wisdom of heaven. But the work of removing this obstacle must be done. For it is undeniably the case that there are many places in which churches across

traditions might more effectively partner together to bear the redemptive mission of God into the world. To help in this difficult work, we must ask ourselves: *What disputes have shaped our tradition? What boundaries have we developed? How do these boundaries regard the Nicene call to be "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church"? What might it mean for us to more carefully distinguish between first- and second-order commitments? What sorts of faithful partnerships should we pursue as a result?* If we are to build creative partnerships for faithful presence, we must begin with removing the strong and debilitating barriers to it.

- *Creating a Longing for Partnerships*

  Having begun the deconstructive work of removing barriers to partnership, pastors must also begin the constructive work of creating a congregational longing for partnership. That is, we must labor to form our congregation members into people who *long* to work alongside others. To do this we must continually attend to the following:

  First, we must attend to the *limitations of the self*. In one of His earliest declarations to humanity, God said that it is "not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2). This solitariness was, in fact, the very first "not good" thing in creation. In this we learn something fundamental about ourselves: we are limited and somehow incomplete apart from the co-laboring companionship of others. Understanding this basic anthropological fact especially in a culture of such rank self-sufficiency is a necessary pre-requisite to longing for the presence of others. Because of this, pastors must both in their lives and in their churches resist any pretensions to self-sufficiency and self-consciously embrace our own limitations. Only in doing this will we begin to desire the partnership of others. To this end, we must learn to honestly assess: *Where does my ministry presume to omni-competence? Where do I deny my own need? Where does my congregation do the same? How might we more faithfully labor to remember our limitations?*

  Second, we must remember the *gifts of the other* (1 Cor. 12). The Scriptures teach us that God has, by the power of the Holy Spirit, given various gifts to His people and that we need to be built up by these varied gifts in order to fully become ourselves. This means that others in the church come to us not first as instruments of our ambition or threats to our desires, but as gifts bearing the very goodness of heaven. Understanding this helps us to reframe our perspective on potential collaborators, seeing them neither as helps nor hindrances to our plans seeing them, in fact, without reference to our plans at all but as those who bring us wisdom and goodness that we

do not have in and of ourselves. Because of this, pastors must both model and proclaim the wisdom of the communal body, and the goodness of each other. In light of this, we may ask ourselves: *Do I see—and model seeing—the gifts of others? Does my congregation see the gifts of others? How might we—in both word and deed—collectively embrace and celebrate the gifts of other people?* As we do this, we will find our people growing in their longing to labor together.

Third, we must remember the *promise of collaboration*. Collaboration is not merely a product of necessity; it is also a gift of grace. This is because in God's generous economy, the possibilities available to us as we come together for the purposes of love are endlessly fruitful. As individuals and as individual institutions we necessarily operate within the constraints of our own intellectual, institutional, and financial gifts. Thus to operate in isolation as so many do is to operate within a fixed horizon of creative possibilities. However, as we self-consciously move into partnerships with others, these constraints expand, our effectiveness broadens, and we become in one another something more beautiful than before. This is the joyful promise of collaboration. To this end, we must ask: *Do I believe that collaboration is a gift? Does my congregation believe this? How might we enlarge our imaginations enough to desire the presence of others? What kinds of things would we like to see happen that can only happen in partnership? How might we actively pursue these collaborative possibilities?*

As we embrace these things *the limitations of the self, the gifts of the other, and the promise of collaboration* we will find within ourselves a growing and necessary longing for partnership.

- *Constructing a Framework for Partnerships*

Having addressed barriers to partnership within our people and created a longing for partnership that inclines our people to one another, pastors must now construct a framework for partnership that their people can realistically and effectively embrace. Such a framework should take shape first within the congregation itself and then extend from the congregation to others. While the exact texture of a given framework will and should vary according to context, any effective framework must account for the following.

First is the *centrality of networks*. The work of bringing the kingdom of God to bear within the parameters of our callings is not a solitary endeavor. It is inherently collaborative. The wisdom of history and the practice of our own

lives suggest that this collaboration is most energizing to our selves and effective in the world when carried out in the midst of a like-minded community. At times these communities — or networks — in which we find ourselves take the form of small, localized, gatherings of like-minded friends. At other times these networks take shape as a web of geographically diffuse but like-minded colleagues. But no matter the form of the network, this quality of like-mindedness — of a shared vision for the world — worked out in the context of shared relationship, is a source of unbounded creativity and encouragement for all who experience it. Because of this, such networks are — and must be understood to be — at the core of any framework for effective partnership. This means that pastors, when seeking to establish such a framework, must make it a priority to create a context in which their people can move naturally into networks of like-minded people — first inside the congregation, and then without — with whom they can labor. This task — which may require both the appropriation of existing networks and the creation of new networks — is fundamental to any sustainable and enriching framework for partnership. To this end pastors must ask: *Where are my people in life-giving networks? Where are the alone? What kinds of existing networks could I tap into in order to enable the partnerships of my people? What kinds of networks might need to be created?*

The second aspect of a framework for partnerships is the *priority of calling-specific networks*. Because in our twenty-first century lives so much of faithful presence takes place within the parameters of our callings, the networks in which people learn faithful presence ought — at some point — to take on a calling specific focus. That is to say, in order to equip people to labor faithfully in their vocations in the world — whether student, mother, teacher, pastor, or physician — we ought to try to create a context in which they can interact in a meaningful way with other people who labor in that same calling. This means that pastors should take the initiative to see the formation of entities such as a congregational teacher's group, a citywide network of pastors, or a regional gathering of artists. Contexts such as these would enable our people to gather with others who are similar in calling and address — in a way that pastors can never do for them — some of the most important questions of their vocations: *What is the purpose of our particular calling? What are the challenges and opportunities inherent in it? What are the most important needs that our calling might uniquely address? How might we constructively address these needs together? Where might we partner together more fully to see God's mission brought to bear?* Such calling specific cooperation could profoundly deepen effective participation in the mission of God in our time.

The third aspect of constructing a framework for partnerships is the *fruitfulness of overlapping networks*. Because the mission of God is not limited to just one vocational calling, but is in fact to take its shape in and through each of the many callings that God has given, it is important for people to learn to labor together across vocational spheres. This is not easy; in an age of high disciplinary specialization each discipline with its own language and methodology the skill of laboring together cooperatively across these disciplinary divides is often elusive. But, it is also critical for it is only as God's people, together, and as a whole move faithfully into the culture that God's renewing mission finds its full expression. It is here that we should take heart. We already have a beautiful context in which to first realize overlapping networks and from which to move into the culture. This is, of course, the church. It is crucial for us to begin to see our local congregations not as institutions that require us to leave our various callings at the door, but as the place where we bring all of our self, with all of our gifts and callings, with each other, before God. From this local identity and out of this intimate set of overlapping networks, any callings that we have beyond our local communities take form and find support. Because of these things, pastors ought to help initiate networks beginning inside local congregations and eventually extending beyond them that are not only calling specific but also overlapping. That is, we must learn to help our people from various vocations mother, teacher, lawyer, builder come together and ask one another: *What are the respective responsibilities of our callings? What different gifts do we bring to the world? What kinds of needs might we conceivably address together? What sort of strategy might we develop for ongoing redemptive collaboration?* This conversation, as it takes shape, is extremely exciting. For in it, our people begin to see that for which they were made but so often fail to see: many parts of the body working towards one lovely end.

The final aspect of a framework for partnership is the *necessity of local and global networks*. God's redemptive mission in Jesus is a mission that is at once particular enough to attend to the realities of our own hearts and capacious enough to embrace the structures of the whole world. And God's people are called to faithful presence in each of these ways. Because of this, pastors ought to conceive of these collaborative networks in both local and global terms. With respect to the local, pastors might think of developing networks within the congregation or within a given city under their care, and might prayerfully lead these local networks to give their attention to the local manifestation of God's mission: reconciling people to God, restoring people to themselves, rebuilding communities, restoring the creation itself. In this way, we will see the reality of God's redeeming mission take shape in

our midst. With respect to the global and all the more in light of the realities of globalization pastors must prayerfully consider what it might mean to lead our people to participate in networks of redemptive mission that span the globe. This might mean partnering with churches in other parts of the world for the work of the gospel. It might mean participating in a global fellowship of academics, who labor within their sphere for God's purposes. It might mean supporting an international medical network in which the needs of the world's poor are addressed. The possibilities are virtually inexhaustible, but the goal is to lead our people to take the world seriously and to do it together. And so if pastors are to effectively construct a framework for enacting and sustaining redemptive partnership, it must be rooted in networks that are both calling specific and overlapping, and local and global in their interests.

- *In Sum*

  How might pastors to effectively prioritize the incredibly important work of rooting their congregations and leaders in fruitful partnerships of faithful presence? First, by *removing the barriers to partnership* vanity and sectarianism. Second, by *creating a longing for partnership* continually affirming the needs of the self, the wisdom of the other, and the joy of collaboration. And third, by *constructing a framework for partnership* that is rooted in networks that are calling specific, overlapping, local, and global. As we do this, we will, by God's mercy, build the kinds of partnership that will sustain the work of faithful presence across vocations, across continents, and across time.

THREE

BEING THE CHURCH IN OUR TIME:

THE CRITICAL NEED AND THE JOYFUL CALL

The church of Jesus Christ is a miracle. It was conceived in the very heart of God and called into being by His creative power. It is the recipient of His love — the delight of His heart and the heir of His glory. It is the witness to His salvation — the living embodiment of His intention for the world. And it is the herald of His grace — the bearer of His redemptive purposes into every time and culture, and unto the ends of the earth. Because of these things, the church of Jesus Christ — in both its local and global expressions — is endowed with profound dignity and enduring beauty.

And yet in spite of the glory of this identity and the nobility of this calling, the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century labors under profound challenges. On the one hand, there are the unique *cultural* challenges of late-modernity — its oscillations of promise and peril, and its potential for both profound beauty and unrivaled idolatry. This unique and extraordinarily powerful confluence of ideas, institutions, and individuals — still so little understood — is the inescapable, and yet extraordinarily difficult context in which the church is called to carry out its mission. And yet on the other hand, there are the internal challenges of the church itself. Beset by ill-considered paradigms for understanding its calling, neglected theological foundations for grounding its calling, and unfocused pastoral priorities for sustaining its calling, the church seems to have little broadly-held clarity as to the nature of its identity, the power of its confession, and the character of its calling. It is therefore critical that the church give serious attention to the work of its own renewal. Indeed there is no greater need in our time.

And yet this call to renewal is not simply an anxious or spasmodic response to a critical need. It is a joyful call to become our selves, to grow into the beauty that God intends.

How are we to take up this joyful call? First, by self-consciously embracing the incarnation as the paradigm for our life in the world — committing our selves to bearing the fullness of the gospel into the fullness of the world for the purposes of love. Second, by recovering the foundational theological convictions that give this incarnational paradigm its redemptive grounding. Finally, by refocusing our pastoral priorities so that this incarnational life can be nurtured and sustained — in both our local congregations and around the world.

There is more to be said, of course, and more to be done. And all that is said and done will, in the end, find its only hope in the renewing power of the living God. But we do hope in Him. And because of this hope, we give ourselves to these things — trusting that through these labors and by His grace, He will renew the church in our time.