

# ***Fruit Damaging Fixations: The Narrowing of the Church***

*Philip Amerson*

*January 2018*

---

---

*“They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”* Jeremiah 17:8

---

---

## **Introduction:**

Being “fruitful” has become a fixation for the North American church. It is understandable; it may also be counterproductive. Rather than the vision from Jeremiah of a tree planted by the water, of God’s people unafraid and enduring, anxious North America Christians have turned to questionable practices of spiritual husbandry. Membership and attendance numbers in mainline denominations have declined for at least four decades. Many United Methodist annual conferences have restructured themselves to make *congregational development, new church starts* and *revitalization* (numeric growth) their primary institutional goals.<sup>i</sup>

This article focuses on how, and why, well-meaning initiatives for fixing congregations may miss many of God’s gifts of delight and long-term witness. We begin with a look at this anxiety and its consequences. However, such a review is not sufficient. Even if one posits that these efforts to fix things are inadequate, even counter-productive, the question remains, “how might people of faith live in healthy, scripturally informed ways?” Thus, the task is to provide the reader with a framework to construct his or her own practical theology, an ecclesiology that is flexible and durable across time and differences in social/cultural settings.

## **I. Interrogating Fruitfulness-Fixations and their Consequences**

What has been the result of this fretting over numerical decline? The sickening self-concern over denominational welfare has proven to be a fertile field for consultants and “growth specialists.” Strategies and interventions have multiplied, but what of denominational membership? More importantly, what of evangelization? Rather than bringing renewal, the constant “pulse-taking” has diverted our attention, increased anxiety, and caused us to miss a plethora of extraordinary sacramental gifts already among us. An unintended consequence of all the initiatives and advice is that what was designed to be helpful eventually becomes additional stress, a fixation, for an already over-stressed and self-absorbed system.

Further, this fixation, misses the diversity of gifts already among and within the life and ministry of congregations. Distracted congregational leaders turn from their primary task of "calling out" (*ecclesia*)<sup>ii</sup> and nurturing communities of faith for holy, disciplined, accountable living. Some signs of renewal and hope cannot be packaged and replicated because they are uniquely sacramental expressions, provided by the Spirit at work in the lives of believers, broadly given and received within congregations and communities. These spiritual gifts emerge from the realities of local settings and not available as prepackaged commodities.

Dozens of books, conferences and programs are designed to make "being fruitful" the first and prime focus.<sup>iii</sup> New formulas, levers, practices, structural changes are well intentioned yet often wrong-headed. Might efforts at being fruitful be beginning at the wrong place? Might we first look to see how God is, and has been, faithful to God's people in many places and ways; and might we look to consider our own faithfulness to God – first? Let's begin by an interrogation of the assumptions behind this heavy focus on fruitfulness.

Any good farmer, or gardener, knows that fruitfulness depends on things that are beyond human efforts. The sun, rain, cycles of weather, quality of the soil all precede the work of the tiller of soil and planter of seed. The farmer or gardener considers the costs and goals of his or her labor. Which crops grow best in which soils? If tomatoes are planted should one expect to harvest corn? What is learned from past harvests? What care of the ecology is needed continue to bear fruit for future generations? Did "experiments" from recent growing seasons benefit the farm or garden? There is more than a bit of hubris required of a good farmer. S/he believes her/his efforts can bring abundance. A good gardener/farmer also acknowledges that more than a little humility is required. Too many of recent denominational strategies have been long on hubris and short on needed humility.

This paper is not a call to shrink the church. It is a prayer that we reconsider our history as Protestants (and United Methodists) in terms of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, that is a church that is always being reformed. This paper, therefore, should not be read as a call to abandon well-meaning interventions around "fruitfulness." Rather it is a plea to look carefully at the fixation. It is a prayer that other ways of evangelization be given space in denominational life and ecologies – much more space. One option for United Methodists is to build more substantively on the historic Methodist missional commitment to minister alongside the poor and to return to this urban mission legacy. Another group of theologians are suggesting it is a time for the church to find expressions that are "smaller and purer."<sup>iv</sup> Much of what is presented in the various fruitfulness initiatives are schemes to grow, based on accommodation with, or a mimicking of, contemporary popular culture.

There are questions to be asked of the heavy focus on the fruitfulness of congregations and the consequences of these efforts. Here are three:

1. What evidence is there that such initiatives and interventions make a difference?

2. What things explain the decline in membership and attendance?
3. Might the focus of fruitful congregations as it is understood and practiced be narrowing rather than expanding of the witness of the church?

#### **A. What evidence is there that such initiatives and interventions make a difference?**

The short answer to the question is, little or no research evidence is available. The proof offered as to benefits is typically anecdotal. For all of the resources invested, surprisingly, little evidence-based research exists.<sup>v</sup>

Can one point to congregations that have “become more fruitful?” Yes, of course. However, what is not answered is which of these congregations would have “blossomed” anyway? Might it be that there is a self-selection process going on and those congregations joining “fruitful journey” programs would have seen positive changes because of other factors? More importantly, did these interventions make a difference when those congregations (or annual conferences in United Methodism) are compared with others that did not engage in the initiatives?

Congregational fruitfulness initiatives and interventions are seldom, if ever, subjected to a strong research design. There are not test groups, control groups, clear hypotheses established or reports for follow-up research provided. Sadly, we have little, apart from anecdote, to confirm outcomes or reproduce them. When asked “do participating congregations show positive, measurable, enduring change that can be replicated?” the responses received by this writer range from “Well, yes, but they are still small,” to “Not yet,” to “It is too soon to tell.”

“Successes” might be due to a charismatic leader or a location in a rapidly growing setting. Every believer should be pleased by the witness of fruitful congregations. We should be even more thrilled by faithful congregations. Being fruitful and being faithful are not always the same. In point of fact, much of the “assistance” and “training” provided in the fruitfulness-fixation efforts is based on a “deficit model” of congregational assessment which typically starts with what is wrong with the congregation. It leaves the existing dynamic and complex matrix of resources found within the gathered Body of Christ “hidden” and/or under-appreciated.<sup>vi</sup>

Even a casual United Methodist observer would note that annual conferences in the past decade that have given heavy focus to such programs have not seen increases in overall membership or attendance from others in the same region, with similar social and religious ecologies that did not focus in this way. Well researched evidence of effective intervention is missing. One can only wonder what is gained and what is lost by investments of time, money, leadership and energy?

One notable exception to the inadequate research on fruitfulness initiatives is the *U.S. Congregational Life Survey*.<sup>vii</sup> This research carried out by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce is based on a carefully constructed sampling of worshippers in more than 5,000 congregations

across the United States. Over one-half-a-million worshippers were surveyed. All worshippers were included in the survey occurring on one weekend (not just a survey of clergy or lay leaders as has often been the practice in the past). To date, there have been two waves of survey work (2001 and 2008-2009). This research identifies strengths of congregations and changes occurring in the religious landscape. Congregational health and vitality is measured in multiple ways and not limited to numerical growth. Congregations that “go beyond the ordinary” are carefully studied and from this a list of the ten top strengths of these bodies is available along with valuable study resources.<sup>viii</sup>

Many of the simple strategies offered by “fruitfulness” experts, are not supported by this research; some other assumptions do find some support. For additional resources from Dr. Woolever see *The Parish Paper* at: [www.TheParishPaper.com](http://www.TheParishPaper.com). Other valuable research studies are found in the works of Nancy Ammerman, David Roozen, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley or Bill McKinney.<sup>ix</sup> One wonders why these resources are overlooked and undervalued by so many of the *fruitful congregations* “experts?”

## **B. What things explain decline in church membership and attendance?**

Declines in church membership and attendance are rooted in many causes. Much of the fruitfulness fixation seems to assert that there is some program that might reduce change or turn around the membership and attendance losses experienced over the years. Left out of such assumptions are several basic social/cultural/religious factors including the following:

1. Demographic changes: Perhaps the most overlooked contributors to numerical decline (or increases) in mainline denominations are demographic. Simply put, what is the birth rate among the congregants? Over several decades fewer children were born into the homes of mainline Protestant denominational families than most other religious bodies. Further, many of these children left the fold as adults. (This is a demographic reality that, in fact, may be amenable to fruitfulness programs. Will certain music styles or youth programs or preaching styles attract younger persons? Yes, perhaps, at least in the short run.) The *Religious Landscape Study* available through the Pew Research Center is a treasure trove for the trends in religiosity in the United States.<sup>x</sup> One sociologist friend, has jokingly said that the best way to assure church growth would be for our current church members to have more babies! (Now that is a fruitfulness measure that works!) The decline in number of children in all U.S. households, especially mainline Protestants and increasingly among Roman Catholic families has seen steady decline since the 1960s. These trends in terms of smaller family size continue among other groups as well.
2. Population losses in cities, towns and neighborhoods is a second critical factor.

- a. Many cities, towns and neighborhoods have seen population losses over recent decades. Such diminishment of towns and neighborhoods is particularly pronounced in the Midwest where were once prospering communities see population declines of 20% to 30% in a decade. The result is a weakening of the social/economic infrastructure and the closing of schools, health care facilities, shopping areas, employment opportunities and, yes, churches; although old-line churches are typically among the last institutions to close.
- b. New arrivals in communities or neighborhoods that are undergoing such changes are often immigrant persons, typically without mainline protestant backgrounds or sensibilities. This population shift and/or loss is accompanied by the phenomenon of other new church starts, primarily non-mainline ones, meaning that there are often “more shepherds for fewer sheep.”
- c. In cities, gentrification and outmigration of the poor to the suburb or exurban settings is underway. Congregations in such changing neighborhoods or regions (in the city and in the suburb) are often ill-prepared to welcome the newcomer... and to the point of this paper, the “fruitfulness initiatives” that are offered have little resonance in these places of rapid population shift and displacement.

### 3. Secularization and the End of Christendom:

- a. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is among the most important assessments of shifts in religiosity in North American culture written in this generation. Taylor argues that we are transitioning through an *axial revolution*, a season of dramatic shift in social/cultural/religious core understandings and behaviors. Such axial times occur only rarely in history (Constantine’s conversion, the Protestant Reformation, etc.) Taylor suggests that earlier religious forms and assumptions, or “archaic religion,” once embedded in the culture are quickly passing from the scene and we are now in a time of disequilibrium.<sup>xi</sup>
- b. Other social researches disagree as to the extent and causes of secularization; however, there is agreement to certain shifts in customs and mores. (For example, weekly church attendance is no longer normative in the U.S. Many pastors confirm that over the past decade the definition of a regular attender has changed from someone who is in church three or four Sundays a month to someone who makes it a couple of times a month.)
- c. This redefinition of the role of religion in culture is in a continual churn. Young people participate in congregational life at lower rates than past generations. One powerful and provocative resource for thinking about the “Future Shock” being

faced by the church is the small volume by Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*.<sup>xiii</sup> Hall writes of the decline of Christendom across Europe and North America and then makes the incredible claim that “the hand of God is in it!”<sup>xiii</sup> He suggests that the work of theology in this time is to “disestablish ourselves” and “intentionality disengage” from our favored place in society.<sup>xiv</sup> We will return to Hall’s analysis and proposed responses later in this paper.

#### 4. Other Perspectives on Church Growth and Decline:

- a. Not all social researchers agree that there is a rise in secularity or an inevitable decline of religiosity in the U.S. One helpful corrective perspective comes in Roger Finke and Rodney Stark’s *The Churching of America, 1776 – 2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*.<sup>xv</sup> They note it is widely assumed that religious affiliation has declined since the founding of the nation; however, their research suggests the opposite. In 1776, they note that about 20% of Americans were church participants compared to roughly 60% today. These writers argue not as many Americans are abandoning religion as is widely believed; rather they posit persons leave older, established mainline groups because these bodies have lost a sense of identity and vitality, while others thrive as they comfort souls and demand sacrifice. In the constant churn which is the religious marketplace of the United States, it is a commitment to organizational vigor, commitment to tradition and otherworldliness that results in growth.
- b. Even so, in recent days a splintering among so-called Evangelical Christians in the U.S. appears to be at hand. Finke and Stark’s apologetic suggesting the inevitable growth of more conservative Christianity is now being sorely tested. It is increasingly clear that the linking of Evangelicalism to xenophobia, white nationalism, and the implicit racism espoused by the current national presidential administration, and many leaders of conservative Christianity, is contributing to a decline in Evangelicalism and loss of younger members in the United States.<sup>xvi</sup> The election campaign of Judge Roy Moore for the U.S. Senate in Alabama has enduring spill-over effects in terms of the future perceptions of Evangelical Christians and its appeal to younger Americans.<sup>xvii</sup>
- c. A look at the history of United Methodism (and its antecedent denominational bodies) demonstrates that growth or decline is not a straight-line trend in our history. In fact, the highest levels of participation in Methodism was in the 1950s. This is when many congregations built new facilities (fellowship halls, education wings, gymnasiums) because of the belief that growth was inevitable based on the number of baby-boomer families attending church following World

War II. A decline in participation began in the mid-1960s and continues today. Looking at U.M. history, there are many swings in participation in Methodist congregations over the past two centuries. Often higher participation followed times of war.

- d. Might the fixation on fruitfulness be shaped more by myths or fear than is understood? Or, to ask the question theologically, “What does the activity of a caring God have to do with the shape of such interventions?” There are significant limits embedded in initiatives based on anxiety and fear. Brain science research is clear – decisions made out of anxiety and fear for the future are almost always less creative and directed more toward retrenchment rather than imagination. There is little doubt that much of what drives the search for fruitfulness is anxiety, and anxiety is, more often than not, counterproductive.<sup>xviii</sup> Brain imagining studies actually show that the fear center of the brain, the amygdala is larger in those who are less open to creative new options. In the face of fear, the natural impulse is to respond with “flight or fight.” United Methodism in the United States is exhibiting such anxiety. As one friend recently said, “I come away from many denominational meetings thinking we are a ‘church on the verge of a nervous breakdown.’” He went on “All of this anxiety is disorienting. We keep looking for someone or something to save us... and forget that we already have a Savior!”

### C. A Narrowing of the Witness of the Church

When one examines the rationale, goals, and materials recommended by “experts” in fruitful congregations, the anxiety is evident and the failure to consider deeper and wider realities of demographic and secular change is apparent. There appears to be an assumption in some of these initiatives that Christendom can be resuscitated if we just find the right formula. One is left wondering if initiatives might represent a narrowing, rather than an expanding, or extension of the witness of the church. Certain realities remain:

1. The Suburban Captivity Endures: Fruitfulness fixations typically continue the “suburban bias.” In 1962, Gibson Winter’s insightful work *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* was published.<sup>xix</sup> The careful analysis of this professor of ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School has been reviewed and tested by researchers and church leaders in the decades since. In the chapter titled *The Introversion of the Church* Winter speaks of a threefold transformation that occurred in the church in the century prior to this publication:<sup>xx</sup>
  - 1) An exodus to the suburbs;
  - 2) Identification of Protestantism with the new middle class;
  - and, 3) Adoption of a highly bureaucratic organizational style of religious bodies in place of the representative congregation.One does not need to look long at the assumptions of current “congregational development” programs to see these three patterns at work – at least

in the base assumptions behind the work. There is an implicit preference for suburban, middle class and social in-group structures and connections.

- a. Suburban captivity of fruitfulness programs (or perhaps it is now a megachurch-suburban-captivity) is easily identified. Here are some of the apparent assumptions found in the fruitfulness fixations: larger is better; being “hip” in dress and language and technologically cutting-edge is best; contemporary music is preferred, avoidance of too much liturgy or sacramental focus is valued, individualistic song lyrics focusing on the believer connecting with an accessible God (“Jesus and me”) are best; silence and meditation are in little use; sectarianism, or any clear identification with a denomination, should be avoided; controversial social or justice issues are avoided; and corporate operational styles are a goal. Missing is an appreciation for small, or neighborhood, or rural churches. Missing is an appreciation for what might be seen as cathedral congregations. Missing are resources for ethnic congregations, highly liturgical congregations or social activist congregations.
  - b. Winter concludes his chapter on the *Inversion of the Church* with these insights about a continuing racial divide that ring true fifty-five years later: “The scandal of metropolitan churches is a reversal of the gospel message. The churches now embody the brokenness of the metropolis rather than its promise of renewal... When the congregation participates in the brokenness of society, while imagining its promise of reconciliation and renewal, its institutional form will once again become a vehicle of mission and ministry.”<sup>xxi</sup> While suburbanization has changed in recent decades as the poor are being pushed to exurbia and gentrification is occurring in our cities, the assumption about middle-class norms and sensibilities driving the shape of ministry continues.
2. A Narrowing of Methodism: John Wesley and the “people called Methodists” sought to discover a *lost bequest* in Eighteenth Century England.
- a. Wesley spoke of looking to the model of “the primitive church,” and focused work on three questions: 1) What to teach? 2) How to teach? and, 3) What to do?<sup>xxii</sup> These questions were first asked at a conference in 1744 and have continued to be a compass point for Methodists. They seem to be missing from pre-scripted conferences today where performance is valued over participation. Top down programs are approved while dialogue or conversation around the core questions is devalued and avoided.
  - b. Methodists were known for the importance of Christian Experience (the assurance of salvation); ministry with the poor; and, small groups that meet regularly and watch over one another in love (class meetings). These questions and these emphases are not readily apparent in initiatives shaped by the fruitfulness fixation.

- c. A generation ago, British Methodist pastor John J. Vincent wrote a small volume *OK, Let's be Methodists*.<sup>xiii</sup> One can't help but wonder if an "*OK Let's be United Methodists*" isn't needed in our time and place. Vincent speaks of the church rediscovery its "lost bequest" or as he puts it our "get up and go."<sup>xiv</sup> Vincent speaks of this loss of identity as resulting from the affluence of the church, its failure to be in ministry alongside the poor and our inability to commit to a radical discipleship.<sup>xv</sup>

### 3. OK, Let's be United Methodists

- a. Forfeiting our Identity: What does it mean that one focus of the fruitfulness fixation is to suggest congregations do a name change? What does it mean when United Methodist congregations seem to desire to mask or hide their denominational identity? I both smile and am saddened when I drive by a United Methodist congregation and there is a clear avoidance of Methodist identity or an effort to be "contemporary" by a newly renamed congregation. (I have the same sadness in seeing these efforts at masking core identity by Lutheran, Baptist or Presbyterian congregations.) What does it mean that one can search in vain on large church websites to find whether they are United Methodist congregations or not? Or, that congregations, held up as models, are also ones that offer only minimal financial support for the support of denominational mission? Might these efforts be narrowing rather than expanding the witness of the Church? Some small advantage may be gained in reaching persons in a post-denominational society; however, one should also consider what is lost in moving away from clear identity.
- b. What of United Methodism, in terms of the denomination's polity and historic ecclesiology, if focus is exclusively around congregational health and identity? What does it mean that we have lost our commitment to circuits where several congregations share in witness together? The heavy focus on each congregation having its own pastor (or family chaplain) results in additional identity loss and in a failure to have quality control over what it means to be "United Methodist." We have seen in recent years, largely due to economic pressures, a growing move to part-time local pastors and a failure to support their work as a significant part of "connectional ministry"? What are the longer-term implications of this shift away from circuits, class meetings, charge conferences held separately for each congregation?
- c. When one examines the literature supplied to be helpful offered though the fixated fruitfulness programs one finds the materials lacking in attention to social and religious diversity. Clergy and congregational leaders held up as exemplars are typically men, the illustrations are devoid of narratives from small, rural or urban churches. Inclusion of GLBTQ persons or racial diversity is not usually apparent. What of university

settings or communities experiencing gentrification? What of communities where new immigrant populations are arriving or where red-lining and discrimination have resulted in white flight? United Methodism seeks to be a diverse church, why then are such materials absent illustrations that provide models or at least offer alternative approaches to the white, middle class, suburban congregation?

- d. Shall we be Wesleyan or Calvinist? Congregational or Connectional? One doesn't need to look very deeply into the "fruitfulness fixation" to begin to ask these questions. Indeed, the critical question from 1744 is of great significance today. What to teach? Materials chosen to be highlighted are often more Calvinist than Wesleyan and Congregational than Connectional.<sup>xxvi</sup> Again, the issue is one of balance and breadth. When only one resource is highlighted, or one set of guidelines used, or one initiative endorsed – and if there is an implicit bias toward Calvinism or Congregational perspectives – then, aren't the options offered really a narrowing rather than an opening for imagination for congregations?

One is left to wonder if what is attempted by a "fruitfulness fixations" might not be an avoiding of a more-costly discipleship and more challenging, more ennobling, and more faithful expressions of "being church"? Might it be an avoiding of the larger reality of an axial time when Christendom is ending and new patterns of discipleship are required? Might it be missing an overlooked abundance already active among the believers in many congregations that are "sorrowful yet always rejoicing, poor yet making many rich, having nothing yet possessing everything."<sup>xxvii</sup>

We have sought to review how well-meaning initiatives for fixing congregations may miss God's best gifts of delight, beauty and long-term health. Unhealthy anxiety over numerical decline has consequences. Does this mean one should give up? Stay the same? Try to return to the First Century or the Eighteenth? Of course not. A critique is not sufficient. Our purpose in the remainder of this paper is to provide an honest framework for constructing a practical theology, a theology that is flexible and durable across time and differences in social/cultural settings.

=====

***But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.***

Galatians 5: 22-25 NRSV

## **II. How then shall we live?**

How might we proceed in discovering ways to live out our faith as the church today? What are the overlooked gifts, the “*treasures in earthen vessels*”<sup>xxviii</sup> already among us? How might we live in terms of the fruits of the Spirit noted highlighted in Galatians 5?

If it is true, as we have suggested that, 1) there is a fixation on fruitfulness; 2) rooted in fear and anxiety about the future; and, 3) often this fixation is counter-productive directing resources and energies in ways that narrow rather than expand ministry, what alternative ways might we proceed? Certainly, God uses God’s people in various ways and locations – and can use efforts to fix the church, even when driven by anxiety about the future. The Spirit is always out ahead of the church in multiple ways alive and at work in the world.

What follows is not intended as another fix! Rather, than a formula or a prescribed program, what is offered are compass points. As Alan Jones, former Dean of San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, reminds us: "We are voyagers toward meaning, toward the double mystery of God and of ourselves, the mystery of Immanuel -- *God-with-us*. We are not, therefore, examining the mechanism of a clock, nor exploring the inner workings of a computer. These tasks require skill and knowledge which human beings can acquire in time. Rather we are examining everything, and if we insist on approaching this task in the same way we would a clock or a computer, we are doomed to fail."<sup>xxix</sup>

### A. Capacity, Community and Creativity

Ministry is the art of discernment, of finding connections, of exercising a discipline and great patience to discover the wholeness given to us by God in Christ. Ours is a call to discover what is already present in most congregations (and communities) and allow ministry to be shaped by those gifts. Rather than seeing scarcity, there is capacity (undiscovered or underemployed assets) in the congregation and neighborhood. Rather than thinking of a group of assorted individuals, congregations have the potential to be communities (and a community of communities). Rather than believing some outsider will bring the solutions, there is creativity waiting to be unleashed that is already present among the people.

1. Capacity, Community, Creativity: Several years back, I wrote that “*for most North American Christians emphasis on **capacity, community and creativity** are rather foreign notions. In places where numerical decline continues and focus is anxiously centered on finding some strategy for renewal, these emphases [capacity, community and creativity] clothed in "home-grown" stories of hope and renewal, offer an alternative way of proceeding.*”<sup>xxx</sup>
2. Discovering gifts already present: I continued in that paper with this: *It has become increasingly clear that a local parish finds confirmation of faith as it seeks patterns of disciplined living, accountable before God... The quick fix and the outside expert have replaced the daily disciplines of accountable relationship with other believers. I am*

*increasingly convinced that a way forward will mean understanding the genius of Wesley and his call for accountable, holy living. Meaningful, enduring strategies emerge from the life of the community and not the other way around (i.e., community is rarely the product of our strategies). Until we set about forming and renewing basic communities of accountability within our parishes, we will wander about from one quick fix to another.... I am reminded of the Zen image of a man "riding on an ox, looking for an ox."... We have been given abundance in our history, our congregations and our communities and yet we fail to see it -- instead we perceive only scarcity. We need renewed vision... a faith transplant.*

3. Positive Deviance: Missing from most of the literature on congregational life is a phenomenon known as “positive deviance.” It was perhaps most widely affirmed in Atul Gawande’s book *Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance*.<sup>xxxii</sup> Dr. Gawande reflects on a nutrition program in Vietnam by *Save the Children* to address starvation. Researchers *turned the tables* and instead of setting up top-down training on childhood nutrition, they asked, where are children the healthiest and why? What is already happening among the people? What can we learn from their *positive deviance*? One wonders what benefits there might be in turning the fruitfulness focus upside down and instead of offering expertise, asking where are there healthy congregations and what can they help us know.

#### B. *Bid Our Anxious Fears Subside*

Fruitfulness-fixation programs assume that there is outside expertise that is needed if genuine witness, health and renewal is to come. This appears to be an effort to resurrect Christendom – to return to the measurements and values applied in an earlier time (the 1950s?). It assumes that without some expert assistance, God’s people gathered in congregations, don’t have the resources or creativity among themselves to survive, give witness and speak out in ways that demonstrate the transforming love of Christ in the world. It wrongly assumes that what divides us is stronger than the witness among us for the future.<sup>xxxii</sup> What if in most congregations there is already sufficiency, if only the gifts of the people are recognized, celebrated and freed for service? I think of the words from the third verse from the hymn *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*, “*When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside.*” This 18<sup>th</sup> century poem by William Williams speaks of how one may view death and life beyond death (*Land me safe on Canaan’s side*) for an individual. It may also be good counsel for the church living in a time of *post-axial religion*.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

1. The Disengagement Alternative: The work of theology, in our time and circumstance, is more of a “letting go” of assumptions about how to fix the church and more an opportunity to consider anew the work of ministry and the nature of the church. The place of the church, especially the mainline church is changing. As some have suggested we are moving from the “mainline” to the “sidelines.” Douglas John Hall sees opportunity and not tragedy when he writes: *Given a modicum of grace and imagination, thinking Christians today can*

*prepare themselves to see precisely in our disestablishment, not an impersonal and inglorious destiny such as may be the fate of any institution, but the will and providence of God... The opportunity that comes to serious Christians at the very point where Christianity seems to be in decline is an opportunity that has seldom presented itself in Christian history; namely, the opportunity to become salt, yeast, and light that the newer Testament speaks of as the character of Christ's disciple community.* <sup>xxxiv</sup>

2. *Our Lost Bequest*: Alan Kreider closes his remarkable study ***The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*** with counsel to regain a *lost bequest* where: “We will not make facile generalizations or construct how-to formulas – those would be impatient responses! Instead, consciously seeking the reformation of our habitus by the work of the Holy Spirit and by catechesis rooted in the teaching and way of Jesus, we will begin to live in new ways in today’s saeculum. We will begin to discover we are in a good tradition. And we will say with Cyprian and other early Christians: “We do not speak great things but we live them.”<sup>xxxv</sup> In his summary article “***The Church that Grew Without Trying***,” Kreider notes the ways the early church grew without the “prerequisites for church growth.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

### **C. Life Abundant: Alternative Perspectives and Resources**

Ministry, especially parish ministry in contemporary settings in the United States, calls for baptized Christians to embrace a new honesty and openness; even more, it is a call to see with new eyes the abundance already present. As Douglas John Hall puts it, this is a time when, unlike other periods in history, Christians are free to be the salt, yeast and light in the world. At the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Methodism in America in 1984, the church chose the theme that we are “Forever Beginning.” Such is the nature of the times in which we live.

What follows is a listing of perspectives, metaphors and resources for the crafting of new ways of being the church and new ways to think theologically about our task, new ways of forever beginning.

1. *Asset Based Community Development* (ABCD): Few have better shown the importance of seeing assets rather than deficits in communities than John McKnight. Peter Block joins McKnight in *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* to provide concrete and accessible examples of the importance of building up neighborhoods and communities based on the gifts already present.<sup>xxxvii</sup> They argue that there is need for a conversion from *consumer to citizen*.
  - a. In this sense, capacity involves viewing the world with a belief that God's abundance rather than our own strategies and expertise is essential... whether this is expressed in the feeding of 5,000 on a Galilean hillside,<sup>xxxviii</sup> the experience of "power" in the early church as reported the book Acts,<sup>xxxix</sup> the shift from "client to citizen" in urban

neighborhood development strategies<sup>xi</sup> or an awareness of the "funds of knowledge" present in poor, immigrant communities in the United States.<sup>xii</sup>

- b. Capacity, then, has to do with the divine imprint within each person and the faithful actions of a gracious God. In terms of each human being and community, capacities can accrue. There is the possibility of building up the spiritual capacity accounts within a community.

**This is an inversion of typical ways of thinking** – it comes from awareness that the urge to solve problems with some immediate program, isn't usually helpful. First, we need theological clarity as to what our "work" involves and what is God's work. We are not God... we can't fix everything. As I Corinthians 3:9 puts it: "*For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.*" This is clear; we are *laborers with God and not God ourselves*. We do the planting and the watering but God gives the growth! As McKnight puts it, "***Most real progress in the sense of community competence is thwarted by a tragic commitment to the idea that we can fix every fallibility.***" In the process, we miss the gifts others might share with us and we miss the work of God all around us. These gifts, even if they come from broken and less than perfect people, can be gifts from God, for the community.

2. The Alternative: Mauricio Miller, recipient of a MacArthur Genius Fellowship, tells his personal story alongside the story of the *Family Independence Initiative* started in Oakland, California. His *Alternative* is to first consider the overlooked gifts present among all people (*The Alternative: Most of what you believe about poverty is wrong*).<sup>xiii</sup> He notes "A focus on weakness hides talent and potential. There are embedded solutions and leaders in the very communities these experts seek to help."<sup>xiii</sup> Yet another person who reports on the gifts of neighbor to neighbor is Luis Moll and his suggestion that in the Chicano (Mexican American) community there are so called "Funds of Knowledge," or a sharing of gifts.<sup>xiv</sup>
3. A Neighborhood Ethic: A familiar author and biblical scholar who now frequently appears with McKnight and Block is Walter Brueggemann. Walter Brueggemann offers theological and ethical insights emphasizing the value of *a neighborhood ethic* and *vibrant communities* in several of his recent works, including: *God, Neighbor, Empire; Journey to the Common Good; and, Celebrating Abundance*.
4. Other Significant Recent Congregation and Community Resources: The list of resources that provide a broader view of the role of the church seeking to discover the gifts already available as a first step is long. Three recent works come to mind: *The New Parish, A Nazareth Manifesto and Faithful Presence*.<sup>xlv</sup>
5. Emergent or Emerging Church: Another resource comes with the Emerging Church or Emergent Church Movement. Perhaps best known for his work is Brian McLaren for works like *Generous Orthodoxy* and *The Great Spiritual Migration*. Many other authors join McLaren in offering another vision for the church.

6. The New Monasticism and Intentional Christian Communities: Yet another emerging emphasis has been called the *New Monasticism*. Elaine Heath, dean of Duke Divinity School offers this path in *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*. This was an early example of this focus. Any online search today including the words “New Monasticism” will result in dozens of resources being noted.
7. Communities of Liberation: There is a rich resource of materials from womanist perspectives and from liberationist perspective from Asia, Africa and Latin America. The role of base communities is of particular value.
8. Sacramental living: Often forgotten or left aside is the essential place of sacraments and the ordinances of the church. Spiritual descendants of John Wesley look to the sermon "The Means of Grace." Wesley discusses the function of the ordinances and their relationship with the experience of assurance among believers. Whenever we act as the Body of Christ so that "Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving" we are joining in sacramental life.
  - a. Wesley speaks of *Inward Holiness* and *Outward Holiness* and identifies prayer, study of scripture, the Lord's Supper, preaching and good works as *means of grace*. He writes, "And thus one continues in God's way -- in hearing, reading, meditating, praying, and partaking of the Lord's Supper -- till God, in the manner that pleases him, speaks to his heart, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace."<sup>xlvi</sup>
  - b. There is also the sacrament of baptism. As one friend asked a conference of social workers, “Would we be needed if every Christian took his or her baptism seriously?” He then sat down and the room was full of silence.
  - c. Robert McAfee Brown writes: "In a sacrament, life is, for a single moment the way it is supposed to be in all moments."<sup>xlvii</sup>

### III. Conclusion

How will you consider the work you do in fresh, less anxious ways? There are many paths before you, not just one. As a pastor or church leader, you know your setting and people best. There are many resources, broadly available. If we are indeed in a season of axial transformation for society and the church what are we called, as leaders, to be and do? And as a follower? If Christendom is ending and new opportunities are appearing for the church to again be *salt, yeast and light* in the world how will you respond? What will you preach and teach? Might you help God's people reclaim a lost bequest?

Alan Jones in his volume *Sacrifice and Delight*, a generation ago, seemed to anticipate our situation: “*The skill of being a redeemed creature is a matter of learning 'to live as if our failures and betrayals could never extinguish the commitment of God to us and the capacity of God to make something of us.'* *The art of ministry is grounded in the belief that God calls us to be agents of the divine delight. God entrusts us with 'the job of witnessing to and diffusing the*

*generosity on which all things depend*”<sup>xlvi</sup>

Is there another paradigm to consider that may be a total inversion of the expert/client design offered by the fruitful fixation? In his work, *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterparts*, John McKnight challenges all the professions with the ways we can turn *citizens* into *clients*, the ways agency is stolen from those who may have the gifts most needed to move ahead. McKnight concludes the book with a challenge to the church. He writes, “I wonder whether the human reality is always to make *servanthood into lordship*.” Then, reflecting on John’s Gospel 15:15 where Jesus says to the disciples, “I no longer call you servants, but friends,” McKnight offers this haunting commentary: “Why friends rather than servants? Perhaps it is because He knew that servants could always become lords but that friends could not. Servants are people who *know the mysteries* that can control those to whom they give ‘help.’ Friends are people who *know each other*. They are free to give *and* receive help.”<sup>xlix</sup>

## ENDNOTES:

---

<sup>i</sup> In the Indiana Annual Conference, nearly half of the program staff and an even larger percentage of the budget is linked to “Congregational Development” work. This does not include funds expended by districts for related efforts. What does this signal in a denomination that is said to be connectional?

<sup>ii</sup> *Ecclesia* is the New Testament Greek word that means “church.” It was also used as a word for political gatherings or citizens councils in ancient Greece. Literally it is translated as “the called-out ones” or “those summoned to be gathered.”

<sup>iii</sup> One of the early books focusing of “fruitfulness” was by Bishop Robert Schnase entitled *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 2007. In the United Methodist Indiana Annual Conference the program is known as *Fruitful Congregation Journey* or *FCJ*. See more at <http://www.inumc.org/fcj>.

<sup>iv</sup> See George Weigel, “Re-Forming the Church,” *The Plough Quarterly*, Autumn 2017, p. 45ff.

<sup>v</sup> Strangely, these fruitful-fixation efforts and publications give modest attention, if any, to the substantive and valuable research work on congregations done by Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, Bill

---

McKinney or David Roozen. One would think, at the minimum, works like *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* or *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* or *Congregations in Transition* would be referenced.

<sup>vi</sup> The phenomena of "deficit analysis" of a social context or in institution has been presented by various authors including John McKnight and Luis Moll whose works are cited later in this paper.

<sup>vii</sup> Woolever, Cynthia and Deborah Bruce, USCLS, United States Congregational Life Survey, see: the wide array of resources available at <http://www.uscongregations.org/resources-for-congregations/beyond-the-ordinary-10-strengths-of-u-s-congregations/>.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> See footnote #v. Of particular value is the *Studying Congregations* handbooks, Ammerman, Nancy and Jackson Carroll, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press) 1998.

<sup>x</sup> Pew Research Center, *The Religious Landscape Study*: <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

<sup>xi</sup> Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press) 2007, pp. 146 ff.

<sup>xii</sup> Hall, Douglas John, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press) 1997.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41 ff.

<sup>xv</sup> Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776 – 2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, [Rutgers University Press, 2005].

<sup>xvi</sup> Bruinius, Harry, "Amid Evangelical Decline, Split Grows Between Young Adults and Church Leaders," *The Christian Century*, October 20, 2017.

<sup>xvii</sup> Smith, Samuel, *James Dobson, Franklin Graham Praise Roy Moore Ahead of Alabama's Senate Race*, *The Christian Post*, September 25, 2017.

<sup>xviii</sup> See, for example, John Bargh's "Inspired Life," *Washington Post*, November 22, 2017.

<sup>xix</sup> Winter, Gibson, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis*, (New York: Macmillan) 1962.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>xxii</sup> Vincent, John V., *OK, Let's be Methodists*, (London: Epworth Press) 1984, p. 45.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Op cit.*

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1 ff.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Op cit.*

<sup>xxvi</sup> See for example the materials currently promoted by the Indiana United Methodist Conference, especially books like: Minatrea, M., *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches*, (New York: Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series) 2004.

<sup>xxvii</sup> II Corinthians 6:10.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See II Corinthians 4:7.

<sup>xxix</sup> Jones, Alan, *Journey Into Christ*, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press) 1992, p. 12.

<sup>xxx</sup> Amerson, Philip, "Capacity, Community and Creativity: Marks of Spiritual Renewal," Tenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, August 1997.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Gawande, Atul, *Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co.), 2007.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See David N. Field's *Bid Our Jarring Conflicts Cease*, (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry) 2017.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Taylor, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 685f, 689f.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Hall, Douglas John, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 41-49.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Kreider, Alan, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker) 2017, p. 296.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Kreider, Alan, *The Church that Grew Without Trying*, *Plough Quarterly*, Autumn, 2017, p. 42-43.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> A podcast interview by Robert Ouimet with John McKnight and Peter Block on November 23, 2009 is found at: <http://robertouimet.com/2009/11/john-mcknight-and-peter-block-podcast/>. (PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship and Tyze.com.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> See for example, Parker Palmer's *The Active Life*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990) p. 121 ff. *Fruit Damaging Fixations: The Narrowing of the Church*; P. Amerson, #522 *Theol. Reflections on the Practice of Ministry*, p. 17

- 
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Acts 3: 1-10 is a great testimony to the capacity of God in the midst of daunting circumstance.
- <sup>xl</sup> McKnight, John, *The Future of Low Income Neighborhoods and the People Who Reside There*, (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University) 1988 or McKnight, "Regenerating Community," *Social Policy*, Winter 1987.
- <sup>xli</sup> Moll, Luis C. and James Greenberg, in *Vygotsky and Education*, Luis C. Moll, editor [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990] pp. 319-348.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Miller, Mauricio, *The Alternative: Most of what you believe about poverty is wrong*, (Oakland: Lulu Publishing Services) 2017.
- <sup>xliii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Moll, Luis, *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities and Classrooms*, 2005. There is more info on Moll at: <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr1luis.htm>.
- <sup>xlv</sup> Sparks, Paul, Tim Soerens and Dwight Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press) 2014; Wells, Samuel, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, (Oxford, John Wiley and Sons) 2015; and, Fitch, David, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press) 2016.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Brown, Robert McAfee, *Creative Dislocation - The Movement of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon) 1988, p.18.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Jones, Alan, *Sacrifice and Delight: Spirituality for Ministry*, (San Francisco: Harper) 1992, p. 188. Jones is quoting from a piece by Rowan Williams entitled "Affirming Tradition."
- <sup>xlix</sup> McKnight, John, *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits*, (New York: Basic Books) 1995, pp. 178-179.