

**The Household of God:  
Living as God's New People**

A community not anxiously grasping to hold fast to a quickly disappearing past, but joyfully reaching out to what is coming – that community is, I have argued, the church. It is a community whose members have died and been resurrected with Jesus Christ, whose members have, in their baptism, received a new identity, a new life – a life rooted in the coming Kingdom of God. The church is a community of people who have been pulled out from under the authority of the powers that be, who have been gathered by Christ into a new household of God, who have seen and tasted the goodness of God's coming reign.

What do these realities mean for the concrete, daily life of mainline congregations in the United States? In the previous chapter I started to answering this question by describing the Christian church as an eschatological community. In this chapter I conceive of the church as a missional community, a political community, a sacramental community, and a divided community. The last two decades have seen extensive conversations about the relationship between church and mission, the political role of the church, a Protestant rediscovery of sacramental life, and a faltering ecumenical movement. Here I make connections with these conversations: If one accepts my understanding of the church as an eschatological community, if one buys into a *medical way* ecclesiology, what does doing so mean for one's take on these ongoing conversations?

*Missional Community*

More and more mainline congregations are looking for ways to be "missional." Partly motivated by an honest desire to be more outwardly focused, partly forced to do so by shrinking

memberships, congregations are again looking at outreach and evangelism. If we say that the church is an eschatological community, what does that identity imply about the missional character of the church's life? In short, that the church is missional by its very nature, and that the mission of the church is intrinsically ecclesial. Let me first unpack what I mean here, and then explore its practical implications for the missional activity of local congregations.

On the one hand, if the church's existence is embedded in the eschatological activity of Christ, the church is by its very nature missional. After all, this eschatological work of Christ is itself missional: Christ is at work to gather and knit together the scattered fragments of humanity by drawing them out from under the authority of the powers that have governed them so far, and then knitting them together into a new people, a new community, the new household of God. The church is the visible result of this gathering activity. In other words: the church is a *witness* thereof.

"You will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Ac 1:8), says Jesus to his disciples just before he ascends to heaven. It will be helpful to realize here that "witnessing" is not only a verbal activity. Artifacts, for example, can also give witness. The battlefield of Gettysburg gives witness to the Civil War. A rundown neighborhood bears witness to poverty and demise. These tangible, visible, observable things give witness by their very existence. Likewise, the church bears witness for Christ not only in its speaking about him but also in its very existence as a visible, new community of people with a different set of relationships and allegiances, a community not rooted in the past but in the future. By virtue of its existence, the church witnesses to the fact that Christ is alive and active.

On the other hand, while the church is thus intrinsically missional, the mission of the church is also intrinsically ecclesial. The church bears witness to the salvation that is in Christ. But the church is not extrinsic to this salvation. Rather, one's salvation means that one is

gathered to this new community, that in one's baptism in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ one has now become a member of God's eschatological people. When the church bears witness to what we receive in Jesus Christ, it does so not invite others to "a personal relationship with Jesus" or "to accept Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior" while suggesting that a Christian's relationship to the church is a secondary, accidental addition to the salvation received in Christ. Rather, the salvation received in Christ comes exactly the form of the church.<sup>1</sup> Or, to put it differently, the church is a missional movement *because* the church is intrinsic to salvation. The church because it believes that its God is gathering and reuniting humanity into a new household, with the church itself being the first fruits of this household. This missional activity is what made the early Christian church stand out from both Jews and Greeks: neither Jews nor pagans tried to persuade others to adopt their deities because they didn't believe in deities who were involved in eschatological, gathering activities.<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean for the activity of a local congregation that the church is intrinsically missional, and that this missional nature is intrinsically ecclesial? To answer this question I will

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<sup>1</sup> *Contra* the popular book by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003). For Frost and Hirsch, the church has here become completely instrumental, a means to evangelism. In fact, on a close reading of this book, for Frost and Hirsch the "church," as the agent of mission, can be as much an individual or a group of friends as it can a body united sacramentally and with its own meaning as the place where salvation is found.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Veyne, *When Our World Became Christian 312–394*, translated by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2010), 37; with reference to M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

formulate and illustrate six theological theses, which together form a framework that I hope congregations will ponder and discuss when they engage in mission.

First, every aspect of the church is missional. I argued above that the very existence of the church is missional by virtue of its being a new body of people, rooted in the future rather than the present, that gives visible witness to Christ's eschatological activity. This missional character, therefore, affects every aspect of the church's life. As a result, a congregation should not organize "mission" as though it were one ministry in addition to others – outreach, worship, Sunday school, the use of church property, etc. A congregation should instead consider how each of these facets of the church's ministry can enact the church's missional nature, that is, can bear witness to the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. Take "property ministry," for example. How can a congregation make its property more than a set of buildings used for its relatively sporadic meetings – make it a lively place that speaks to its neighborhood of the new life of healing and transformation offered in the inaugurated Kingdom of God? One church building I know – a large but deadly-silent complex in a dreary neighborhood – has on its walls little signs that read, "No Playing." The simple signs speak volumes. It speaks of children who, having come home to an empty house, were looking for a place to hang out and play and finally found the large church's parking grounds; the signs speak of a congregation which, more concerned to preserve its property, failed to see the needs of the children and, irritated, turned them away. What a wonderful opportunity that church missed, an opportunity to open its grounds and buildings, to offer attention and love and fellowship, to offer to children life and hope in a neighborhood bereft of both! We all know churches that organize feeding programs and soup kitchens. I know of churches that make the Kingdom life visible by inviting nurses and doctors to set up clinics within their walls; of churches that host local artists to bring beauty to depressed areas. I know a church located in an area where economic distress left the school system without any financial

resources for music education, so the church, enthused about its own amateur church music program, opened its doors and joyously offered a beauty that the world around them could not provide. I know a church that meets in a building far off from the center of town, where few people would go on any day other than Sunday in the morning. So the church's property team spends half its time working for Habitat for Humanity. They decided that if they couldn't bring people to their building, they could bring their gifts of building and restoration to the people. In each of these examples, dead stones became living witnesses to the grace of God's Kingdom.

Second, the church witnesses to the resurrection. Our missional practices should reflect this reality. In his book *When Our World Became Christian*, historian Paul Veyne discusses whether the missional success of the early church was a result of Christianity's fulfilling a preexistent need and expectation, or whether it was successful because "it offered something different and new." Veyne argues for the latter explanation:

The success of Christianity may be compared to that of a "best-seller" (and, in the eyes of an unbeliever like myself, as a worldwide masterpiece). It gripped its readers "by the guts".... I certainly do not claim that Christianity was immanent in the human soul or that society was positively waiting for it. There is another explanation for its success: a "best-seller" (such as Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* or Goethe's *Werther*) reveals to some readers a thitherto unsuspected sensibility. And this new sensibility that it brings into being ... then sustains the success that it has itself produced.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian proclamation is not a prop for an otherwise well established life; it does not add a layer of piety, or morality, or meaning and community. Instead, the Christian proclamation is like a best-seller, a master narrative, a story that pulls us in, that engrosses us, a story that

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Veyne, *When Our World Became Christian* 312–394, 24.

makes us see and hear things we have never seen before – a story that redefines who we are and what the world in which we live is really like. In Veyne’s words, for the Christian convert

life suddenly acquired an eternal significance within a cosmic plan, something that no philosophy or paganism could confer. Paganism left human life just as it was, an ephemeral amalgam of details. Thanks to the Christian god, that life received the unity of a magnetic field in which every action and every internal response took on a meaning, either good or bad.... [The convert] discovered a vast divine project designed for human beings.... Thanks to the historic-metaphysical epic of Creation and Redemption, with all its effects of light and darkness, one now knew where one came from and for what one was destined.<sup>4</sup>

And at the heart of this master narrative, this cosmic plan, is the resurrection, the moment in which the future has entered the present, has with morning light illuminated both who we are and where we are going. It is for this reason that the Book of Acts, the story of the first Christian community, usually pairs the term “witness” with “resurrection.” The eleven apostles who must choose a replacement Judas after his suicide say that “one of these [other followers of Jesus] must become a witness with us to [Jesus’] resurrection” (Ac 1:22). When they address their fellow Jews to proclaim Jesus, they call themselves “witnesses of his resurrection” (Ac 2:32; cf. 3:15; 5:32; 10:41; 13:32; 22:15). We are witnesses to the fact that in our baptism in Christ’s death and resurrection we were inaugurated into a new people under a new eschatological reign, wherein the poor receive good news, the blind gain sight, the oppressed go free.

If this story is true, many current forms of evangelism and outreach fall short. A church in my neighborhood sends regular postcards offering free breakfasts on Sunday morning. The card has an appetizing picture on it: bacon, eggs, and potatoes. Another church promises to hold

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 19, 29.

a raffle for new members. A third church recently advertized the talent show that will accompany its Advent dinner. Many other churches use more traditional means to raise their visibility, means such as setting up a baked-goods stand at the local country fair. All these activities are meant to get the name of the church out and draw people in. But they do so in ways that say absolutely nothing about resurrection life or what it means to belong to a new eschatological community. They suggest that the church is a good alternative to McDonald's or Starbuck's, or that a church knows how to throw a good party. But they don't reveal anything about the particular nature of the inaugurated Kingdom. They communicate that the proclamation of the gospel is an add-on to an already well established life rather than a master narrative that radically reinterprets who we are and where history is heading.

I know the answer to this objection may be that these methods are meant only to "hook" people, to pique their interest, so that we can then introduce them to the gospel. But this response suggests another problem. At the center of the gospel are interpersonal relationships. As a new people we are invited to relate differently – to each other, to outsiders, and, at the center, to God. The missional methods described above offer not relationships but gimmicks. In other context, how do we think about people who try to hook us with gimmicks while what they are really after is a personal relationship? We feel manipulated. How do we view the suitor who doesn't trust that he can win the heart of his beloved through the strength of his personality and so resorts to giving expensive gifts? We see him not as loving but manipulative. More sympathetically, we may believe the suitor's behavior betrays a lack of self-confidence: he does not trust that his own love, that he *himself*, is able to win the heart of his beloved, so he hides behind material things. I suspect a congregation that resorts to gimmick-driven evangelism suffers from the same lack of self-confidence. If so, it might be better for that church to observe a missional pause – a pause to recover, as a congregation, what resurrection

life means, so that once it has become reacquainted with what it is to be an eschatological community, that congregation can bear effective witness to the living Christ.

Third, the mark of faithful witness is not growth in numbers, but growth in making visible the salvific work of Christ. When Jesus sent out the seventy to bear witness of the gospel, he told them in advance that though the harvest is plentiful, not everyone will want to be harvested. He told them there would be people “who do not welcome you” (Lk 10:10). Nonetheless, to both those who received them and those who refused, them the seventy were to proclaim the same message: “The Kingdom of God has come near to you” (Lk 10:9, 11). All that the Christian community has to do is to faithfully make visible that the Kingdom truly has been inaugurated. It can leave the actual gathering to Christ.

Realizing that the goal of mission is not to raise numbers but to make the Kingdom visible can take huge pressure off congregations that faithfully engage in witnessing but do not see growth. At the same time, this realization does not offer a way out for congregations that prefer staying focused on themselves and leave “mission” to a committee of a few interested volunteers. An inward-focused congregation does not live up to the commission to make Christ’s eschatological work visible. A mark of faithful witness is not necessarily that you see new members added, but that the people in your neighborhood see and realize that your community lives differently, holds to different standards, is engaged in different and life-giving practices. Finally, a practical consequence of what I am saying is that congregations had better disconnect their missional activities from their need to balance their budgets. Especially in shrinking congregations, the danger is great that the desire for new pledging units shapes the form that mission takes and the kind of people it targets. The financial needs of our congregations should



be shouldered by members who are in them, not by members we hope will be there in the future.<sup>5</sup>

Fourthly, sometimes faithful missional ministry means being willing to die. If we are honest, a good number of mainline congregations have no chance of continued independent existence. For many of these churches, it is no fault of their own. The United States is still a transient society, and while at one time a neighborhood may have needed four, five, even six churches, it now needs only one or two. The larger metropolitan area of Pittsburgh, where I live, has lost almost half a million people over the last fifty years. The simultaneous decline of many mainline churches is no surprise. In these circumstances, the faithful thing to do is to close – to free up people’s time, money, and gifts to be used elsewhere in the body of Christ.

The notion of a congregation’s faithfulness in dying is ignored in many books on church revitalization, redevelopment, and growth. However, it is exactly in such faithful dying that a congregation can be missional. Christian individuals no longer fear death because they have already died and received resurrection life in Christ. A Christian community’s faithful closing, therefore, makes once more visible to its local environment what it means to *be* a Christian community, namely, on that does not hang on to a fading past but joyfully lives toward an eschatological future even in the midst of earthly demise.

Fifth, even as a divided church a congregation can be missional. In an earlier chapter I made the same point, but it is worth repeating in the current context. One often hears that the divisions in the church prevent it from being missional – after all, which understanding of Christ and salvation will a divided church proclaim? I say this one: that even in our deep and serious theological disputes we cannot let go of each other, for we know that our communion is not

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2007).

built on our own human agreements but on God's graciously reaching out to us in our common baptism. Exactly in our divisions, we witness to the fact that our salvation does not lie in our choices but in Christ's gathering and reuniting work. Exactly in our powerlessness, we proclaim that our hope does not lie in our actions but in the living Christ alone.

Sixth, faithful missional ministry is political. In chapter two I highlighted certain remarks in Ephesians: the church, as the result of Christ's gathering, reuniting work, is the visible sign to the powers of this world that their time is up (Eph 3:10). As one united church, one people gathered from all different races and nationalities and socio-economic backgrounds, the church is the visible sign that the powers which formerly pitted one group against the other have now been conquered by Christ.

But *is* the church that united, visible sign? It is a well-known saying that American society is never as segregated as it is on Sunday morning. Congregations and denominations are quite often characterized not just by theological stance or liturgical flavor, but also by socio-economic or ethnic background and heritage.<sup>6</sup> I will never forget my first experience of "heritage Sunday." I had just joined a PC(USA) congregation and noticed in the church newsletter an announcement of that celebration on a Sunday close to October 31 – Reformation Day, the day that Protestants remember an important moment in Luther's struggle for reform of the church. So I expected a church service celebrating the Protestant heritage, perhaps with the singing of Luther's famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and a sermon on the central tenets of Protestant theology. Who could anticipate my surprise when on that particular Sunday the celebration consisted in close to half the men in the congregation showing up in Scottish kilts

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<sup>6</sup> To see how denominations line up with race and socio-economic class, see the 2008 *US Religious Landscape Survey* by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, available at <http://religions.pewforum.org>.

and the procession being opened by a piper? The “heritage” we had gathered to celebrate turned out to be not Protestantism but Scottish culture. I am Dutch, not Scottish. We don’t do kilts or pipers. There I was, a congregational member with full rights and at the same time completely alienated by its celebration. At least I’m European, and I do have some understanding of why Scottish men would find it fun now and then to don their traditional garb. But what must this celebration of the church’s “heritage” have communicated to other members, such as the young Indian woman and her son, or the male visitor from Africa? What message was that congregation sending about its mission? Certainly not that Christ was the One who has overcome all divisions of nationality.

Certainly, every congregation has a certain “flavor.” That “flavor” is seasoned economically, racially, and ethnically by its history and location. But a congregation that is serious about being an eschatological community will work very consciously on not allowing the character of worship and community life to be shaped by its past but instead by God’s eschatological future. And it will do so not only for the sake of being a “welcoming congregation,” but also because its own salvation is at stake. If it is true that salvation means that Christ is gathering and reuniting the fragments of a divided humanity, then for a community to be shaped by the forces of race, nationality, and socio-economic background is not only to continue serving powers whose time is up, but also *not* to taste for itself the fullness of salvation; for being shaped by those forces prevents a church community from being gathered and reunited by Christ with all.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This problem faces such missional proposals as forming a “non-geographical community centered on a particular form of witness ... to the homeless, to young people, to the elderly, to prisoners, to the terminally ill, or to an immigrant community” (as proposed by, among many others, Darrell L. Gruder, “Missional Structures: The Particular Community,” in Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A*

### *A Political Community*

That the church is a missional community has now been embraced by many congregations. That the church is also a political community runs into more resistance. In fact, many a congregational search committee signals exactly the opposite. Several of my students have told me that interviewing congregations inquired anxiously whether “they would bring politics into the pulpit.” The desired answer was of course, “No. Never.” In the background is the fear of divisions within the community. Congregations will often count among their members people of different political persuasions, and to avoid conflict and polarization the pastor is asked to ban politics from her gospel proclamation. Politics are personal, they declare.

The problem is that the central terms of the gospel are not only religious but also political: Kingdom, Lord, and even the notion of “gospel” itself. The Greek word that Scripture uses for “gospel,” *euangelion*, is, on the one hand, a religious term harking back to the Greek translation of a well-known passage from the prophet Isaiah:

Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings (*ho euangelizomenos Sion*);\*

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings (*ho euangelizomenos Ierousalem*),\*

lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,

”Here is your God!” [Isa 40:9]

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*Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998], 239 [221–47]).

The gospel is the inauguration of the good tidings foreseen by the prophets. But at the same time, the word *euangelion* is a political term. In the Roman Empire it referred to announcements made by heralds of Caesar in making official proclamations of imperial victories. When the writers of the New Testament use the word *euangelion* for what they proclaim about Jesus, they consciously use a term rooted not only in Jewish theology but also in Roman political practice. After all, as we have seen in chapter two, the Kingdom of God proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus has a political dimension: it is the announcement that God has conquered the powers that be, that God is reclaiming and reordering creation, with real political and economic consequences: captives are released, the oppressed go free, the year of the Lord's favor is inaugurated. And in a world ruled by the military fist of the Roman Emperor, the Christian community confesses a different Lord's ascension to the throne: the Lord (*kurios*) Christ's. Caesar is history, a representative of a power that has had its time; the future is Jesus'.

If congregations do not want their pastors touting a political party line from the pulpit, they are right in their thinking – but not for the reasons they usually put forward. Pastors should not refrain from party politics because the gospel is not political – in fact it is! – but rather because party politics presuppose power structures the gospel declares already outdated. Political parties propose changes within the context of the status quo. The gospel declares the status quo is yesterday's news.

To illustrate the implications of my point I will discuss two texts. First, I will focus on a passage from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Here we will see how supposedly benign texts carry within them a deeply subversive political meaning. Politics turn out to be more widely present in biblical texts than we may think. In Philippians Paul exhorts the congregation of Christians to repudiate their national loyalties for the sake of Christ. Second, I will turn to several passages from the Book of Acts. It is interesting that, while the early Christian community

proclaimed that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord (*kurios*), this proclamation did not lead the church to engage in revolt or military resistance. How then is the Christian community to give expression to its newly found political convictions? Acts answers: by constructing an alternative way of life that runs counter to Greco-Roman cultural patterns.

### The Letter to the Philippians

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. [Phil 3:20–21]

As said, a seemingly benign text; in fact, it is one of those texts that seem to suggest we should not expect salvation in the earthly realm but instead focus upward by concentrating on the spiritual rather than the material. Until we look closer.

Philippi was located in Greece. The city was old, with a proud history as founded by the father of the famous Greek ruler Alexander the Great. However, by the time Paul writes his letter Greece was no longer an independent nation but an occupied territory – part of the Roman Empire. And Philippi was no longer a city inhabited by Greeks. Having been destroyed in a war, it was afterwards rebuilt by a Roman emperor and was now inhabited by veterans of the Roman army. These veterans, often coming from all over the Empire, now lived in Greece but had, on their retirement, obtained Roman citizenship.

Life in this city was, however, not without dangers. Living in Philippi meant living in occupied territory surrounded by hostile natives. What if at some point the Greeks would no longer suffer the occupation, would take up weapons and turn against the Romans living in what the Greeks considered *their* city? The future of these Roman veterans in Philippi was thus always insecure. So the Roman emperor had made a treaty with the city of Philippi: if the Greeks were to turn against Philippi, if things got too heated for the Romans veterans, the emperor would gather his army and come to save them. That is why in Philippi the Roman emperor was not only known as *kurios* (lord), as his official title was elsewhere, but also as *soter* (savior).<sup>8</sup>

If we read our passage again with this background in mind, we see what Paul is doing. He is applying to the Philippian Christians a political image they well knew: you too, while you live in Philippi, have your citizenship elsewhere – in the place where the resurrected and ascended Christ is, heaven; and if things get too heated for you, Christ, like the Roman emperor for his military veterans, will come to save you. He will bring about the transformation of all things; he will transform your bodies of humiliation to be like his glorious resurrection body; and he will subject to himself all things on earth.

Note what Paul is and isn't saying, though! He is not saying that when things get too heated, there is always heaven to which you can escape. No! Just as the endangered Roman

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the role of the heavenly dimension in Paul's thought with special reference to his eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 100; Richard A. Horsley in the "Introduction" to part III of Richard E. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity International, 1997), 141 (140–47); N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in Richard E. Horsley, *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity International, 2000), 173/4 (160–83).

veterans in Philippi would not flee to Rome, rather, the emperor would come to them, so the Christian community's future lies not in going to heaven but in Christ's returning to them to give them what he already has: resurrection life.

Why does Paul write these words to the Philippian Christians? Because they are, just like their fellow citizens, anxious. The Philippian veterans are anxious because they are surrounded by Greek natives; the Philippian Christians are anxious because they are surrounded by Philippian veterans. Think about it: here is a community confessing that not Caesar but Jesus is the true Lord of this world – a Jesus who died by crucifixion, a form of execution reserved only for those who undermined the power of the state. The founder of their community, Paul, is currently in a Roman prison (Phil 1:13). And all the while they live in a city of Roman veterans – people who, by the nature of things, can be quite nationalistic. Veterans put their lives on the line for their nation, so they will look distrustfully at everyone who speaks ill of the nation and the ruler they have served. The Philippian Christians feel intimidated (Phil 1:28). They are concerned about what the city will say about the content of their faith; and they are also anxious about what this faith means for how they must think about themselves. It is conceivable that some of them were also veterans who had put their lives on the line for the Empire and the emperor, and that they were proud of their service as something that had “made them who they were,” had formed their identity. But confessing Jesus as their Lord required them to think differently about themselves, their lives, their true identity.

It is therefore that Paul writes to encourage them: I know that you feel intimidated and anxious; but who is really in charge of the future? Jesus Christ is! Yes, I know that once you served Caesar. But realize that his power is the past, not the future. His reign will end. In reality, he is only a caricature of a lord: the real Lord and *soter* (savior) is Jesus!



While encouraging the Philippian Christians, Paul also challenges them, for they are correct: if they cast their lot with Jesus, they'll have to rethink who they really are and what determines the way they live. In illustration, Paul uses himself as an example.<sup>9</sup> "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me," he says. This admonition comes after an autobiographical passage in which Paul recalls how he himself rethought his identity after meeting Christ. Beforehand he reveled in his ancestry, his identity as a Jew: "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the Law, blameless" (3:4–6). However, once he met Christ, Paul saw himself in another light: "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (3:7–8). Paul now suggests that the Philippians do the same – that is, that they, proud Roman citizens, give up their reliance on their ancestry and heritage, their "confidence in the flesh," in the same way as he, the Jew Paul, had given up his reliance on his ancestry and heritage. They should not be like the one "whose God is the belly, and whose glory is in shame, whose mind is set on earthly things," as goes the translation I quoted above. While that is a literal translation, Paul's meaning is a bit different. The Greek word that is here translated "belly" (*kolia*) can also refer to sexual organs, and so can the word translated "shame" (*aischune*, literally "nakedness," meaning "those parts of the body that are unpresentable").<sup>10</sup> Read in this way, Paul uses some crude language to point out that

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. the interesting suggestion in N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," 173–81.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, revised and expanded by Ralph P. Martin, Word Biblical Commentary (Fort Worth, Tex.: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 224.

whether you share in this rather than that cultural or national heritage is in reality the result of nothing more than who had sexual intercourse with whom. Truly not something to base your identity on! To follow Christ means that who your parents were and what culture you grew up in no longer determines who you are. You are no longer first a Philippian, a citizen of Rome; you are no longer first a Greek. Or a Dutchman. Or an American. Now the most important identifying factor about you is that you are marked by the cross of Christ forever.

### The Acts of the Apostles

But what does it mean to live as one who is first of all a Christian rather than a Philippian or a Greek or a Dutchman or an American? What does it mean to confess that Jesus, and not Caesar, is Lord? What does it mean, not in the church, not in the privacy of one's own home, but in the public arena? To start a conversation on these questions, I will give some extensive quotations from the Acts of the Apostles,<sup>11</sup> for if we want to know how Jesus' first followers gave visible shape to their belief that lord Caesar was a man of the past and the ascended Lord Jesus embodies the future, Acts is a must read. It tells about small congregations of people – and we should not think them as larger than twenty or thirty – who have made a major turnaround (*metanoia*, a “conversion”) in their thinking and are now trying to figure out what it means for their daily living. But further, Acts also records others' reactions to them: surprise, shock, upset at the appearance of a new community that doesn't want to conform to expected cultural norms. Read with me three stories from the Book of Acts. I will highlight a couple of sentences in each text and comment at the end on the particular patterns of Christian living that these stories reveal. The first story is a first-person account told by the writer of the book, Luke, when

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. the recent, helpful book by C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Paul, Silas, and Luke visit the town of Philippi, “which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony” (Ac 16:12):

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “*These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.*” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. [Ac 16:16–23]

The second passage comes a bit farther on in the book when Paul and his companions have left Philippi and traveled to another Greek city, Thessalonica:

After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, *explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead*, and saying, “This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am

proclaiming to you." Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the market-places they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities, shouting, "*These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.*" The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go. [Ac 17:1–9]

Finally, a third pertinent passage comes at the end of Paul's stay in a third Greek city, Ephesus:

Now after these things had been accomplished, Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, "After I have gone there, I must also see Rome." So he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia. About that time *no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way*. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger

not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her.” When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s traveling-companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theatre. Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” [Ac 19:21–34]

What do we glean from these three stories? Starting with the second one, Paul and Silas are being accused of nothing less than “turning the world upside down.” This accusation is not made up by their accusers on the spot – Paul and his companions have a reputation for doing so: “these people who have been turning the world upside down [elsewhere] have come here also” (17:6). Why this accusation? Because of Paul’s teaching. Paul had preached that “it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead” (17:3); he is accused as well of “saying that there is another king named Jesus” (17:7). In other words, what Paul’s accusers take as turning the world upside down consists in the preaching of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

Why are resurrection and ascension taken to be so disturbing? Exactly because of what I have argued throughout this book: that Jesus' resurrection and ascension entail the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. If it is true that Jesus is resurrected, it means no more business as usual. It means that history no longer involves in a long, predictable chain of cause-and-effect. It means that history is decisively interrupted. In political terms, it means revolution.

The powers that be are not served by the idea that history can be interrupted. What they need is predictable history. What is predictable can be controlled and manipulated. If history is predictable, challenges can be foreseen and stayed ahead of. In other words, the powers can stay in power. If history is *unpredictable*, the grip of the powerful on their power is always shaky. If there is no telling what will happen tomorrow, tomorrow may well bring one's end. Resurrection and the Kingdom of God are the ultimate interruption of history. If it is true that the Kingdom of God is about to be consummated, the time of the powers that be is up. And if you know that the time of Caesar and his military power is ending tomorrow, why should you obey them today? So for Paul's accusers the proclamation of Christ's resurrection is "turning the world upside down."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In this context it is telling that the one Jewish party in Jesus' time that did not believe in resurrection was the party of the Sadducees. The Sadducees were found among the ruling class of Israel and were known for their collaboration with the Roman occupier. They believed that, given the circumstances, it would be unrealistic to expect Israel ever to receive its independence again; one should accept the situation as it is and make the best of it. What is the relationship between the Sadducees' political point of view and their denial of the resurrection? N. T. Wright suggests the former shaped the latter: people who collaborate with the Empire do not want to see the world turned upside down and God taking on the powers that be (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 213–14). Of course, it could also be the other way around: if

Nonetheless, even while the Christians were understood as preaching revolution, they were innocent of common political or armed struggle against the ruling powers, for the Christian community not only believed in the resurrection, but also in the ascension. Christ's resurrection is not a call to arms, because Christ himself is in charge. Caesar does not need to be pushed off his throne, because Christ's ascension has already shown that Caesar's throne is irrelevant. Thus the way the Christian community behaves. This community is political not by claiming its own place within the existing power structures, but by presupposing a different power structure altogether. As the first and third stories suggest, the Christian community began acting like a different political, economic, and social community within the Roman Empire. The first story about Paul in Philippi tells how Paul and company deliver an enslaved woman from a spirit that allowed her owners to make a great deal of money on her. The owners seize the healers and bring them before the magistrates. What is interesting, though, is their accusation: "they are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." They do not so much object to the Christians' "preaching" or "teaching," but to their different way of life, their "customs." They realize that Paul and his friends are teaching their followers to *live differently*; and this different living undermines their fellow citizens' way of life. Similarly, in the third story the disturbance that breaks out concerns "the Way" (Ac 19:23). That is, the concern is not solely about Paul or his companions, but about an alternative community that is costing their opponents economically.

The Christian community was not seeking economic influence, but it was enacting a different politics – a politics shaped by the knowledge that the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated and Christ is the ascended Lord. The question for contemporary congregations is, 

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there is no resurrection, if no turning of the world upside down is to be expected, you might as well collaborate with the powers that are in charge.

therefore, how to embody the salvation that is in Christ so that, from an economic point of view, we are clearly identifiable as living differently from the world around us. How do we live so that the practices we engage in, the ways we spend our money, the politics we stand for are no longer guided by the needs of “the economy,” or “our national interest” (remember Paul to the Philippians!) but instead testify to the generosity, the abundance, the grace of God’s permanent year of Jubilee?

### *Sacramental Community*

I mentioned in the chapter two that I open my Christology course with the three ways in which God relates to what is not God – in calling it into being (creation), in leading it to its final goal (eschatological consummation), and in bringing it back to God when it wanders away (reconciliation). Having laid out this framework, I ask my students, “In this threefold way of divine relating to what is not God, where do you situate Jesus?” And most of my students place Jesus primarily or exclusively within the third way of divine relating – reconciliation.

The very same question can be asked about the communion table: In God’s threefold relating to creation, where do you place the Lord’s Supper (communion)? If liturgical practices are anything to go by, for many mainline churches – certainly, for many Presbyterian congregations – the answer is again, within God’s relating in reconciliation. The communion service is often quiet, contemplative, and somber; the tone is one of remembrance, if not *in memoriam*. For many, communion is primarily a recollection of the Lord’s death. There is good scriptural reason for such an interpretation of the sacrament. After all, Jesus himself in the words of institution refers to his sacrificial death on the cross. Taking a loaf of bread, he says to his disciples, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Likewise,



taking the cup after the supper, he says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:19–20).

However, the very same words of institution not only refer to God’s act of reconciliation, but also to the eschatological consummation. The “new covenant” to which Jesus refers is the covenant of the eschatological transformation, when God will recreate humanity and write sin and resistance out of our system (Jer 31:31–34). Moreover, when taking his place at the table, Jesus says to his disciples, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:16). And later, while taking a cup and offering it to his disciples, he says, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (Lk 22:18). In other words, the celebration of the Lord’s table will continue in the world to come. Here Jesus refers to the Jewish tradition of the Messianic feast, the notion that God’s coming Kingdom will be fully consummated when the Messiah presides over a gloriously festive meal, the tables laden with food and fine wines as expressions of the eschatological abundance. As the prophet Isaiah describes it:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.  
And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death for ever.  
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,

for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the LORD for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain. [Isa 25:6–10]

Given this expectation, it is no wonder that the Kingdom-inaugurating ministry of Christ is centered on breaking bread: from the wedding at Cana (John 2) to the feeding of thousands (Mk 6:30-45), from his eating with sinners (Mk 2:13–17) to this final meal before his death and resurrection. Seen in this light, celebrating the Lord's Supper is not so much a recollection as an anticipation. It is a meal in which the eschatological community called "church," the new household of God, already celebrates what will be at the heart of the Kingdom's consummation: the tables are laden, the Messiah presides, the feast is ready to begin. Just as Jesus does much more than reconcile us to God, but also and primarily inaugurates the Kingdom of God, so also the Lord's Supper is much more than a remembrance of the past, but also and primarily a looking forward to the future, an anticipation the world to come, and a celebration, joyful and exuberant, that this future world has already broken into our history in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> As an ecumenical aside, while all mainline churches in some way profess the *real presence* of Christ at the Eucharistic table, they differ about *how* Christ is present. Is Christ present because the Eucharistic elements have been transubstantiated (Roman Catholic)? Is Christ present "in, with, and under" the elements (Lutheran)? Or is the Spirit uniting us with Christ so that believers, while outwardly partaking of the elements, inwardly partake of Christ (Reformed)? Note that in this debate the Lord's table is interpreted in the context of God's relating to what is not God in reconciliation. The elements are

What would it mean practically if our celebrations of the Lord's Table were not so much a memorial of things past as a celebration of things to come? I like to suggest three implications.

First, it would once again move us from fear and anxiety to joy and hope. With every celebration of the Eucharist our attention would be redirected from the past and the present to God's glorious future – that future in which we are rooted and have our being. Moreover, it would underscore that this future is embodied. The gospel does not come to us just as good for the spirit and the soul, but as tangible bread and wine, the anticipation of a festive meal in which the goodness of the Lord will be seen and tasted.

Second, it would help us determine what is important in the here and now. In his *Christianity Rediscovered*, the American missionary Vincent Donovan writes about a Eucharistic celebration among the African tribe called the Sonjo. The Sonjo were known as very experienced dancers. Vincent noticed,

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understood as referring back to Christ's body given and blood poured out on the cross, and the question is what role the elements play in the communion between the reconciling Christ and the partaker of the meal. However, the question disappears once the Lord's Table is interpreted in the context of God's relating to what is not God in eschatological consummation. In the Messianic meal, Christ is not the one who is eaten and drunk; rather, he is the presider. Thus, if the Lord's table is interpreted as an anticipatory celebration of the Messianic meal, Christ can still be said to *be really present*, but his presence is no longer to be sought in connection with the elements, rather, in the act of celebration. Christ is the one who truly presides over, invites to, and shares in the meal. In fact, if one presumes Christ's is present in something like the more-dimensional space we explored earlier, one can even imagine how Christ, while being located in a particular place in heaven, could truly be present at the table during the Eucharistic celebration.

They brought their music directly to the place where the bread and wine were later to be blessed, and performed it there deliberately and carefully. Some of the music was decidedly secular. The elders in that community pointed out to me that the purpose of such procedure was to make an actual judgment on a very important area of their lives. The time of the eucharist was the time for judgment. They were not ashamed of that particular dance in their own lives, so they wanted that part of their lives to be offered with the eucharist. There were some dances they were ashamed to bring into the eucharist. By that very fact, a judgment had been made on them. Such dances should no longer be part of their lives at all. Eucharist serves as a judgment on them.<sup>14</sup>

What cannot be brought to the table will not be brought into the Kingdom. And what cannot be brought into the Kingdom is not worth being carried around at all.

Third, celebrating the Lord's table as an anticipation of the Messianic meal will help us steer our imagination when it comes to the questions of alternative politics and economics as discussed in the previous section. In a book called *Jesus Freak* the writer Sarah Miles narrates a vivid illustration.<sup>15</sup> Miles is a member of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Her book tells the story of how a group of people in Miles's church decided to start a feeding ministry, a food bank, for people in their neighborhood. The idea of a food bank in a church is, of course, nothing new. But what was new about St. Gregory's ministry was that they tried to make their food bank look as much as possible like Holy Communion. The food bank was not located in a side office of the church, as is so often the case, but right in the middle of the sanctuary. At

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<sup>14</sup> Vincent. J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, twenty-fifth anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978, 2003), 94.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding – Healing – Raising the Dead* (New York, NY: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

the same place where the Lord's Supper was celebrated every Sunday, through the week you found boxes of cabbages and beans and potatoes. And unlike the case at so many other food banks that require I.D. and documentation and proof of income, there at St. Gregory everybody who came and asked for food received it, just as at the Eucharist. No I.D. needed – just an outstretched hand.

Of course, some people protested. You can't let crowds of poor people into your sanctuary – what about the hymnals? Will the pews stay clean? And you can't just give food away – what if you run out? What if the wrong people get it? What if someone works the system? But the people of St. Gregory persisted. They persisted, because they knew that in this world things are no longer the same. It is no longer business as usual. The Kingdom of God has come near! And so, before too long, they fed a hundred, then two hundred, by now eight hundred a week. And they have never run out of food.

### *A Divided Community*

Being saved means being joined to the church; it means that the fragment-gathering, reuniting work of the resurrected Christ has now reached you. This reality is why schism and dissent are so serious, for to leave the church, to dissent from it, is to go against the grain of Christ's eschatological activity. Schism and dissent therefore jeopardize salvation. But all of us live in a fragmented church; all of us live in a community whose denominational nature prevents it from fully enjoying the visible unity that is characteristic of the new household of God, of which "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:21). What can we do to repent from this situation? How could our institutional church structures once again confess and make visible the unity that is in Christ rather than distort and suppress it?

How can we once again “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1, 3)?

The recent *Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* contains a number of helpful suggestions about how denominations could move beyond paying lip service to a conceived but invisible unity of all Christians.<sup>16</sup> Missional strategies should be developed across denominational lines, so that church growth is not accomplished by sheep stealing but by evangelizing the unbaptized.<sup>17</sup> Lay members should be encouraged to worship and serve in congregations of partner denominations. Seminaries should train clergy for service in partner churches.<sup>18</sup> The ecumenical vocation of married couples from separated communions should be acknowledged and supported by the churches.<sup>19</sup> Local churches should see themselves as agents of unity. They should support one another in mission. Members of different churches should be encouraged to visit one another’s services.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than elaborating all these suggestions, I will here make one specific proposal that could help growth toward visible unity exactly at a place where local congregations find themselves weak and struggling. American mainline churches are bodies consisting of small congregations. Research from the end of the last century indicates that more than half of all mainline Protestant congregations have one hundred or fewer members. This statistic corresponds with the situation in my own church, the Presbyterian Church (USA). In 2009, fifty

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<sup>16</sup> Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *In One Body Through The Cross: The Princeton Proposal For Christian Unity* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

percent of all its congregations had a membership under one hundred. One finds these congregations in many semirural parts of the country, but also in inner cities and older suburbs. Not even half of these congregations have an installed pastor, and a bit less than a third have no pastoral leadership whatsoever.<sup>21</sup> Small churches simply do not have the resources to support a pastor's salary, health insurance, and other costs, especially when they come on top of the costs of building maintenance, some sort of ministry and outreach, etc.

What possibilities are there for these congregations? Mainline denominations encourage their small churches to do one of three things: call a part-time pastor, yoke with neighboring congregations within the denomination, or make use of the services of a trained lay person. Each of these three "solutions" has significant drawbacks.

The first solution, calling a part-time pastor, puts a significant financial burden on the *pastor*. Even if a part-time salary would be enough for the most basic costs of living, most pastors carry significant educational debt. In order to meet their financial obligations, pastors will therefore either have to rely on spousal income or take another part-time job to generate a full-time income by themselves. The problem with the former is that many of the small congregations we are discussing are located in areas where finding suitable employment for spouses is difficult. The problem with the latter is that even if a pastor could find a part-time job that could be combined with pastoral duties, a second job always puts a significant drain on one's attentions.

The second solution, yoking with another congregation and calling a full-time person to pastor both churches, is the solution of choice in many rural areas. Here the issue is that it

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<sup>21</sup> PC(USA) Comparative Statistics 2009, prepared by Research Services PC(USA), available at [http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/research/pdfs/2009\\_table\\_15.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/research/pdfs/2009_table_15.pdf).

significantly compromises the minister's pastoral presence. Not only will the pastor spend significant time on the road moving between the points of her parish – which, especially in the rural areas of the Midwest, can be quite widespread – but also the pastor can reside in only one of the communities in which her churches are located. Everyone who has pastored in a small, closely knit community will understand this situation as a significant drawback. Pastoral work in general, but certainly in these types of communities, involves not only meeting people in worship and church meetings, but also seeing them in the grocery store and at the local fair, getting to know their extended families and circle of friends, churched or unchurched, and becoming familiar with the ins-and-outs of the political, social, and economic life of the community. The traveling pastor just doesn't have adequate time or opportunity for these activities.

The third solution, making use of the services of a trained lay person (called a Commissioned Lay Pastor [CLP] in the Presbyterian Church [USA]), has significant challenges of its own. Assuming that other mainline churches have similarly trained lay leaders, let me use the figure of the Presbyterian CLP as an example. Without doubt, many CLPs are well-meaning people with a heart for the church and pastoral ministry. However, they are hardly equipped to be pastors. A recent report showed that the average CLP training program, run by seminaries and Presbyteries, requires the equivalent of less than one semester of introductory-level college education.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, a PC(USA) pastor is required to have a college degree followed by three years of graduate-school training at a seminary. CLPs, however, are largely given the same responsibilities that fully trained pastors would normally fulfil. To boot, the struggling congregations in which CLPs work present at least as challenging a task in terms of

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara G. Wheeler, *Preparation of Commissioned Lay Pastors: A Study of Representative Features* (Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, 2008), 7.



congregational, pastoral, and missional leadership as the larger and more flourishing congregations pastored by fully trained ministers.<sup>23</sup>

So if none of the three standard solutions is desirable, what should the church do? It is here that we must return to the topic of ecumenism. As one will realize readily, given the nature of the American religious landscape most of these small, struggling mainline congregations are located in towns that also house similarly small, struggling mainline churches of different denominational affiliations. What if these congregations, rather than choosing one of the solutions mentioned above, would call a pastor together? In terms of church polity, doing so is possible. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the Reformed Church in America.<sup>24</sup> “Full communion” means, among other things, that a local congregation affiliated with one of these denominations can call an ordained minister affiliated with one of the other partner denominations. There is precedent for cooperation between Presbyterian and United Methodist (UMC) churches. The ELCA, in turn, is in full communion with the Episcopal Church

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<sup>23</sup> It should also be pointed out here that the challenge for the small congregations we are talking about is not the absence of seminarians certified to receive a call. According to the September 2010 numbers, the PC(USA) had a total of 2,200 ministers or candidates seeking a call by way of the official denomination-wide database, while the database had registered a total of 530 job openings. About 375 of the job seekers were candidates seeking a first call; but only 140 of the registered job openings were open to a first-call candidate. Additionally, no fewer than about 2,300 people are currently “under care” of the church in preparation for ordained ministry. Anecdotal evidence suggests there is a similar surplus of candidates in other mainline denominations.

<sup>24</sup> See “A Formula of Agreement Between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ,” acted upon in 1997 (available at: <http://oga.pcusa.org/ecumenicalrelations/resources/formula.pdf>).

(TEC) and the United Methodist Church (UMC).<sup>25</sup> These relationships mean that a wide variety of denominational combinations is possible. The Protestant churches that are in full communion could together call one pastor from any of the partner denominations. In a town with a Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopal church, the three congregations could call an ELCA pastor who would serve all three congregations because, while Presbyterians and Episcopalians are not in full communion with each other, Lutherans are in partnership with both. I am not suggesting that these congregations would merge, or even that they would worship together – though doing so would be valuable. They would not even have to give up their separate church buildings – though, given the pressure that real estate puts on church budgets, doing so would be worth serious consideration. They could all keep their own church plant and church services, but one pastor could serve them all. They could certainly combine church programs: adult education, as well as confirmation classes, Bible studies, and missional and outreach work. The advantages are numerous, starting with the fact that under this model congregations would have once again a fully trained minister of Word and Sacrament living in their own town – a minister who now has ample opportunity to get to know the local community in which she serves, including the many personal relationships that will tie these different church communities together, and a pastor who doesn't waste time in traveling from one town to another. Churches would save significant amounts of money, certainly, if they would go beyond sharing a pastor to sharing ministries and buildings. But maybe most importantly, far from

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<sup>25</sup> For the former, see "Called to Common Mission," acted upon in 1999 (available at: <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Full-Communion-Partners/The-Episcopal-Church/Called-to-Common-Mission.aspx>); for the latter, see "Confessing Our Faith Together," acted upon in 2009 (available at: [http://www.gccuic-umc.org/dmdocuments/Confessing\\_Our\\_Faith\\_Together.pdf](http://www.gccuic-umc.org/dmdocuments/Confessing_Our_Faith_Together.pdf)).

feeling locked into the downward spiral of dwindling financial resources, lack of leadership, and anxiety about the future, churches may find themselves once again living as vibrant communities whose cooperation is a visible witness to the gathering and reuniting work of Jesus Christ. For (future) pastors, this model would first of all create full-time jobs where once were none (not a small feat in a time when candidates for ordination have a hard time finding a job) and also create calls to much more attractive church communities than small, struggling, and competing congregations could ever be.<sup>26</sup>

What would need to happen for this proposal to be implemented? As for church polity, all the requirements are in place. What I am advocating is already legally possible. Some practical measures would help, though. First, most if not all mainline denominations allow their local churches enough congregational autonomy to prevent the denomination's forcing local congregations to work together. But ecclesial authorities could certainly stimulate trans-denominational congregational cooperation. Regional authorities – presbyteries, synods, bishops – could identify congregations that would profit from these proposals and initiate conversations. They could also propose arrangements for clergy called to these “cooperatives.” For example, no clergy person serving congregations from two or three denominations should be forced annually to attend the regional meetings of two or three denominational structures. Seminaries could prepare candidates for multid denominational service by teaching theology and worship from more than one denominational perspective. They could, preferably in cooperation with regional ecclesial authorities, offer special continued education training for clergy serving in these multid denominational calls. But most importantly, both local congregations and

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<sup>26</sup> For a very similar suggestion, based on the experience of cooperation between a PC(USA) and a UMC congregation, see Barbara Wheeler, “Ready to Lead? The Problem with Lay Pastors,” in *The Christian Century* June 13, 2010.

denominations will first have to give up their denominational idolatry by forsaking the idea that proper ministry can only take place in a one denominational context. And for that to happen, awareness of the eschatological nature of the church, awareness of its calling to be a visible witness of the gathering work of Jesus Christ, could be a great help.