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### Old Faith New: Risking It All For The Kingdom of God

Bridget Thornton  
bthornton19@georgefox.edu

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

OLD FAITH NEW: RISKING IT ALL FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

BRIDGET THORNTON

PROJECT FACULTY:

DR. PHIL NEWELL

PORTLAND, OREGON

APRIL 2022



## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

Bridget Thornton

has been approved by  
the Evaluation Committee on March 10, 2022  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

### Evaluation Committee:

Primary Project Faculty: Phil Newell, DMin

Second Project Faculty: Dan Lioy, PhD

Lead Mentor: Leonard I. Sweet, PhD

Evaluation Committee Referee: Clifford Berger, DMin

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None of this would be possible without my loving husband, Kevin, and our children Lincoln and Campbell, who never cease to inspire. And to our extended village of friends, covenant group members, and family who have helped to make this possible. Included in that village are the congregations of Christ United Methodist Church and Key West United Methodist Church, where I served while at Portland Seminary. For all of these people, for the education, and the experience, I give thanks to God who called me to this place and sustained me throughout.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FAC	Florida Annual Conference (of The United Methodist Church)
FxC	Fresh Expressions of Church
KWUMC	Key West United Methodist Church
SBNR	Spiritual But Not Religious
UMC	The United Methodist Church

## GLOSSARY

**Annual Conference.** A regional division within The United Methodist Church. Annual Conferences are presided over by a Bishop. The term can refer to a regional body, the organization that oversees the region, or the yearly gathering of clergy and lay delegates.

**Christendom.** A culture wherein Christianity is the predominant religion, and Christian ideals and morals are the presumed norm.

**Grotto at St. Mary's.** An artificial stone cave on the grounds of the Basilica of Saint. Mary Star of the Sea. Since the grotto was constructed and dedicated, a major hurricane has not hit the island. It is a local tradition to go to the Grotto, light a candle, and say a prayer when hurricanes may impact the Florida Keys.

**Henry Flagler.** Developer of the Overseas Railroad, the first connection of the Florida Keys to the mainland portion of Florida.

**Liminality.** An anthropological term coined by Arnold Van Gannep: a transitional or in-between space or time. This comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold.

**Methodist Episcopal Church South.** One of the Methodist denominations that resulted from the nineteenth century split over slavery. The Methodist Episcopal Church South supported slavery.

**New Methodists.** One of the working terms for the post-split United Methodist Church that is forthcoming. The other major group that will exist after the split (and is forming now) is the Global Methodist Church.

**Old Stone Church.** The former name of Key West United Methodist Church. The community and church members use the two names interchangeably.

**Overseas Highway.** The colloquial term for U.S. 1, the only road from the Florida mainland to and through the Florida Keys. It ends in Key West. This highway enables power and freshwater to flow from the mainland through the keys.

**Overseas Railroad.** The railroad built by Henry Flagler connected the Florida mainland to the Florida Keys. It was built before the Overseas Highway.

**Quadrilateral.** A phrase coined by Albert Outler to describe the method of doing theology in Methodism. It reflects the four areas used: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

**Seven-Mile Bridge.** The longest bridge in Florida and the longest bridge that connects the keys. It connects Knight's Key to Little Duck Key.

**Staff Parish Relations Committee.** The Committee within a Methodist Church (per the Book of Discipline) is charged with pastoral and staff transitions and general personnel matters.

**The United Methodist Book of Discipline.** The book contains United Methodist doctrine, history, theology, and polity. This book is typically published every four years after a General Conference (global gathering and formal voice of United Methodists).

**Wesleyan.** The theology developed from John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This Project utilized a blended methodology that draws upon bibliographic resources, data derived from stakeholder collaboration, and human-centered design and iteration processes to create a heuristic-based, application-oriented Project.

## ABSTRACT

The opportunity existed to develop a curriculum on a theology of risk for Key West United Methodist Church. This will enable us to begin to risk substantially for the Kingdom of God. This NPO was developed over the three years of the DMIN program; each milestone provided clarity to get to this final NPO. I began searching for tools used by United Methodists in previous times of liminality and discovered the need for a theology of risk. A hero who risked for God's kingdom emerged in this search, Robert Strawbridge. Strawbridge was a layperson who exceeded his authority to reach others with the life-changing message of grace. As Americans exit Christendom, there will be a need for others to bear the mantle of Strawbridge; laity who are willing to risk, to exceed their authority, and who are ready to, by all means available, share the grace of God.

I serve as the senior pastor of Key West United Methodist Church, the oldest continual worshipping congregation on the island. It has a mixture of locals, seasonal residents, and guests. Together, we represent what Key West calls our "One Human Family." The project is a curriculum on a theology of risk. It was explicitly created for this one congregation. This six-to-eight-week study will help congregants discover how God risks and how God is calling the congregation to risk together and individually for the Kingdom of God.



## INTRODUCTION

In early 2019 I applied to the Semiotics, Church, and Culture program at Portland Seminary. This is the only program I applied to because I wanted to study with Dr. Leonard Sweet. I had met Dr. Sweet through the Fresh Expressions of Church movement in the Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.<sup>1</sup> In the interview for the program in speaking with Dr. Loren Kerns, I learned that only 40 percent of the students at Portland Seminary are women and only 20 percent in the Semiotics program. Through the process, I have now developed a Wesleyan Theology of Risk. Not only am I part of the 20 percent that represent women in the program, but I am the first female United Methodist to write on risk. I have been able to do this because of this program and the process of research and development.

## DISCOVER

Our first phase was to discover the need, problem, or opportunity (NPO) and look at what could address this NPO. When I set out, I wanted to find a way to reach people who need Jesus while simultaneously ministering to a church filled with people who were discipled in a Christendom model. Thanks to my friend Rev. Dr. Michael Beck, I was introduced to the Fresh

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<sup>1</sup> Fresh Expressions of Church is a movement first developed in England and now spread to America. It is the desire to create worshiping congregations outside of the traditional church model. It includes churches in tattoo parlors, bars, parks, and more. For more information on Fresh Expressions of church visit: <https://freshexpressionsus.org>.

Expressions of Church movement and the mixed ecology of new expressions for worship alongside traditional church settings.<sup>2</sup> I wanted to build on this work.

In 2019 I conducted a Discovery Session with five stakeholders. These stakeholders were all practitioners of Fresh Expressions of Church. Together we developed a Discovery Statement, “Considering the growing number of “Nones,” “Dones,” and “Unchurched,” we’ve discovered the opportunity to re-mission the church to reach these groups by retraining the church, which is caused by a lowered Christology and Ecclesiology. If solved, it would mean the church would actually ‘be’ the church.”<sup>3</sup> This Discovery Statement was discussed in one-on-one interviews with key leaders in the institutional church, an expert in Fresh Expressions of Church, and a local church pastor without experience with Fresh Expressions. It became early on there were various definitions and ideas of what Fresh Expressions are. Through the interview process, it also became apparent that something else (or many other things) could cause the decline in The United Methodist Church.

After the discovery session, research began; the overall topic researched was the liminal status of the UMC and its need for missional theology and tools appropriate for its current context. Its new tools needed to include those that would help the church move beyond Christendom models in which many churches still function. At the outset of the research, the working NPO was, “Poor ecclesiology has caused the decline in the UMC, this provides an opportunity to re-mission, re-tradition, and retool [through the theology of FxC]; if solved, the

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Adam Beck, *Deep Roots Wild Branches: Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2019), Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Bridget Thornton Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report.

church can obtain its purpose.” My research question was, “What tools have the Methodist Church and people used or developed in previous times of liminality that might have become part of our DNA.”

That question changed the project tremendously! In researching previous times of liminality in Methodism, I focused on the shift from the Methodist Movement in England to the development of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the colonies of the Americas through the post-Revolutionary period. I also looked at the westward expansion of Methodism in America. Within those pages, I discovered a new hero: Robert Strawbridge. Erased from some records of early Methodism, he is now remembered as the first to bring Methodism to America. An Irish lay member, he was so moved by Wesley’s messages of grace that he began Methodist Societies in Maryland. Without access to the local church, he administered the sacraments, even after being chastised by Wesley and later by the first Bishops of the Americas. The focus shifted to: how do we get more laity like Robert Strawbridge?

## **DESIGN**

In 2020 a design session was conducted. The world entered a new liminal state that year with the pandemic. This became a new reality that had to be addressed in the project’s design. At this point, the scope for the project design was the Florida Annual Conference. I had support from FAC leadership to offer something that could be used throughout Florida. The project would be enacted first in my local church, then within the district, and then spread to the Conference.

With the new interest in developing laity, I invited key laity from the Florida Annual Conference to participate in the Design Session. It included the Conference Co-Lay Leaders,

laity who work in the Conference Office, and their local churches. Some of them have the Robert Strawbridge spirit. Together we discovered a more true root cause of decline is fear. This fear is present at the institutional/Conference level, within the clergy and the laity. Much of it is based on a need for preservation and security. Among leadership and clergy, the fear can also be rooted in a desire for control and power developed through Christendom. The laity needs to embrace the priesthood of all believers to live out baptismal and membership vows. This bore out through one-on-one interviews, including the bishop, key laity, and clergy.

From the Design Session, three big ideas developed: 1) A multi-vehicle teaching on the theology of risk with the book, workbook, leader's guide, and videos; 2) A replicable lab that encourages embracing risk; and 3) Rebuilding existing platforms used to train laity and clergy by including a theology of risk and an environment that supports risk-taking. In the end, I opted to prototype storylines towards the first big idea of a book on a theology of risk and the second big idea of a sort of lab. The extending reality of the pandemic led to the reality that option three, rebuilding existing platforms, would be much more difficult as each of those platforms was in the process of closing or shifting to online. In testing options 1 (a book) and 2 (a lab), it was clear that a book garnered the most interest. The subject matter overall tested well with participants. Three storylines were tested around an idea of a book and, in the end, the one entitled *Old Faith New*. The summation of the storyline is for readers to rediscover heroes of old, like Robert Strawbridge, and learn to overcome fear and learn to live out their faith in a new liminal, post-Christendom, pandemic world.

In 2020 I also learned that I would be moving churches and towns. My family and I relocated from Jacksonville, FL, to Key West, FL, in 2021. The move made an impact on my NPO, I also read the book *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking The Ancient Secret To Mission on*

*the Front Lines*.<sup>4</sup> In consultation with my Project Faculty Advisor, I made one last change to the NPO to be more contextual. The final NPO became, “The opportunity exists to develop a curriculum on a theology of risk for Key West United Methodist Church. If seized, this will enable them to risk substantially for the Kingdom of God.”

## **DELIVER**

With the shifting NPO throughout this program, it became necessary in the Fall of 2021 to add new research on the subject of risks and fear. I also spent time learning my new context of Key West. With further contextualization, the audience narrowed from the Florida Annual Conference to Key West UMC. It was always intended to begin with my local church, but it became the only audience for the scope of the project. There are plans, reflected in the Launch Plan, to begin to share this work at the district level this year. A six-to-eight-week study on a theology of risk and overcoming inertia was created and will be found within. It reflects a desire to introduce participants to a God who has risked on our behalf and calls us to continue the work of God, risking to do all the good we can. It is also a reflection of the MVP from the Design process. In the end, it combines a workbook and a book, giving space for participants to reflect within the work itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Leonard Sweet and Michael Beck, *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking The Ancient Secret to Mission on the Front Lines* (Oviedo, FL: HigherLife Development Services, 2020).

## PROJECT

### INTRODUCTION

A need was discovered for Key West United Methodist Church (KWUMC). KWUMC is in multiple liminal states, which I call hyper-liminality. Liminality is an anthropological term for in-between, or threshold spaces. These liminal states include: exiting from Christendom, living through a global pandemic, and a denominational split. There are solutions available; however, these are not quickly enacted as there tends to be an unwillingness to risk and an inability to overcome inertia. Therefore, risk and inertia are addressed here.

Humanity gets to the universal through the particular. Therefore, this curriculum is created explicitly for Key West United Methodist Church (KWUMC), where I am the senior pastor. KWUMC is the oldest continual congregation on the island. Today's KWUMC is a merger of churches previously birthed from the church. KWUMC is filled with locals, snowbirds, and guests; it accurately represents what we call our "One Human Family" (the island motto). KWUMC is well established and tends towards nostalgia. This church has taken significant risks in her history. However, the church has been stalled since 2014. To make needed changes for its current context, it must be willing to take risks.

### NPO STATEMENT

The opportunity exists to develop a curriculum on a theology of risk for Key West United Methodist Church. This will enable us to risk substantially for the Kingdom of God.

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

A curriculum that integrates a theological understanding of risk and references to researched work on risk. The curriculum includes space for self-reflection and ritualization.

## **PROJECT SCOPE**

A six-to-eight-week study for the congregation of Key West UMC. The study will coincide with a sermon series based on the second chapter. The study will be taught by myself and other teachers within the church. It is set to be once a week.

## **BENCHMARKS**

The ultimate benchmark will be seen when the congregation moves out of nostalgia, overcomes inertia, and begins to take risks for the Kingdom. For the scope of this project, the benchmarks for success are:

1. Is the curriculum understandable for the laity of Key West UMC? Most are college-educated. Therefore, it can be written above high-school level but not above undergraduate level.
2. Is there a clear theology of risk?
3. Is the curriculum in a format that is appropriate? Is the style engaging? Are the materials visually attractive?

## **ORIENTATION FOR READERS**

The presented project is the full curriculum created for developing a theology of risk. It is set to be a six-to-eight-week study with each week being covered in a week's study. Participants will read the materials ahead of time, using the spaces for reflection and ritualization to process what they have read, and then engage in dialogue together. It will be printed for participants. There are six chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. The bibliography enclosed represents works that were influential in creating this project and does not represent a full breadth of materials used throughout the entire program. This project is designed for the specific audience of the laity of KWUMC. It reflects the local terroir, and some terms may not be familiar to readers outside of this context.

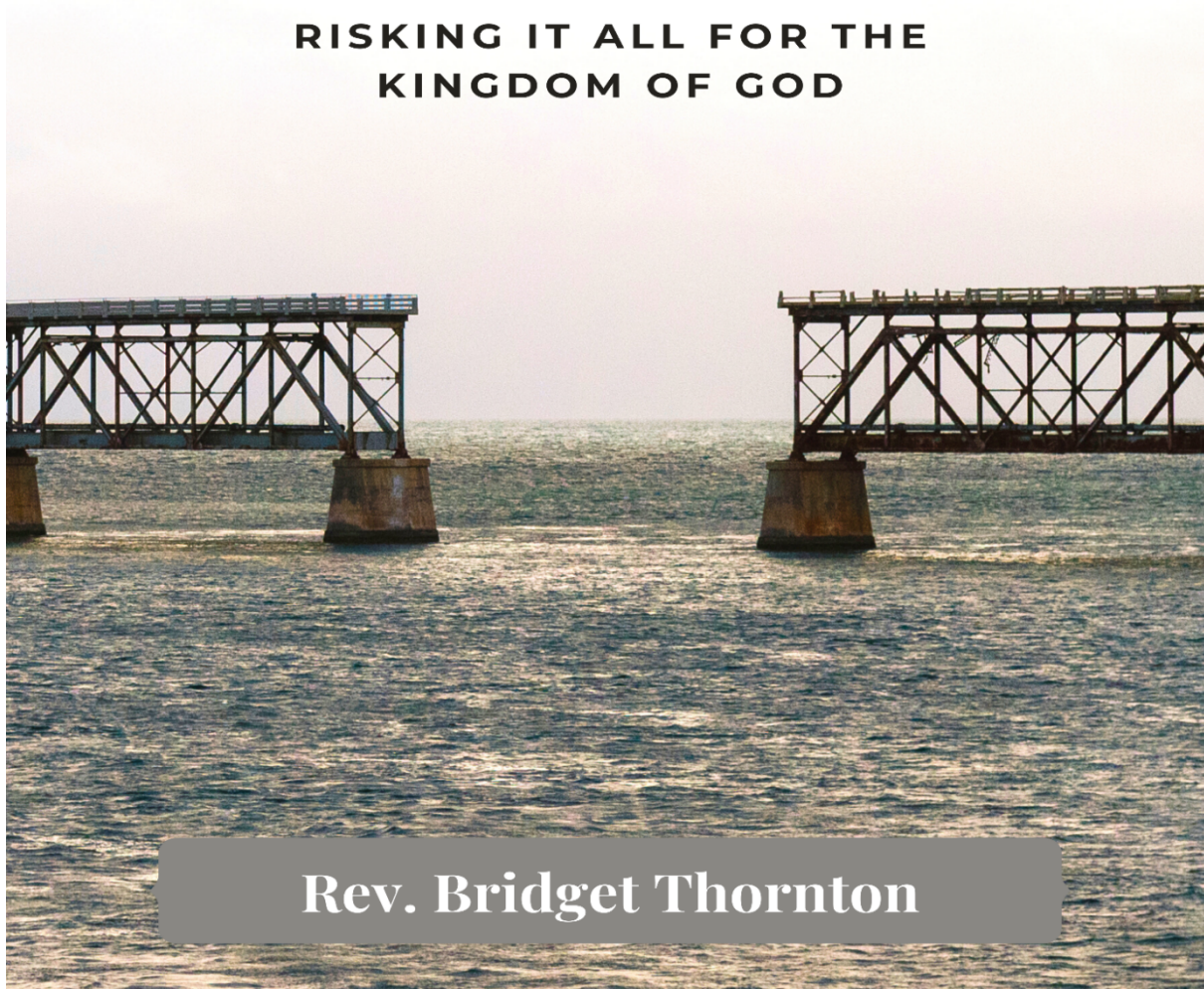


PRESENTATION/DOCUMENTATION OF PROJECT

TAKE RISKS IN YOUR FAITH

# Old Faith New

RISKING IT ALL FOR THE  
KINGDOM OF GOD



Rev. Bridget Thornton

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## INTRODUCTION

It's the end of the world, as we know it. And I feel fine. —R.E.M.

When R.E.M released the song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” in 1987, there was no way of knowing what they would witness in 2020. No one saw it coming.<sup>1</sup> All over the United States, everything came to a screeching halt in March 2020. At that moment, the country left the shores of what was and entered a pandemic world. The pandemic, still present, has ebbs and flows of hope of it coming to an end, though the death toll keeps rising. The Coronavirus shoved the world into a time of liminality. Liminality is an in-between time, a transitional space.<sup>2</sup>

Lim-in-al:  
A transitional space,  
from the Latin *limen*,  
for threshold.

A common refrain heard throughout the pandemic (in church and outside of it) is the desire to “go back to the way things used to be.” However, this is not possible. There is no “back.” No time machines exist (but please share if you have one or create one!). God created humanity to move forward. As the world and the church move forward, God can use this in-between time to birth new things in us. This time provides the opportunity and space to live

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<sup>1</sup>Although, Dr. Leonard Sweet did predict a pandemic his book written in 2019 and released January 2020. See Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>Liminality will be discussed in detail in chapter 6. It is a term developed by Arnold Van Gennep, a French anthropologist. See Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

ancient truths in new forms. This pandemic came when there were already other liminal times, including the end of Christendom and the looming split of The United Methodist Church. All mainline denominations are in decline, and the UMC is no exception.<sup>3</sup> Christianity is in decline in our country as well. Ironically, the prominent “religious identity” is being Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR).<sup>4</sup> Those classified as SBNR may also be

Chris-ten-dom:  
A culture in which the majority is Christian and the presumed norms of society are based on Christian values.

“dones,” who had tried or were a part of a church and are now done with it.<sup>5</sup> Add to all of this the looming split in the United Methodist Church. It becomes clear that this is a time of hyper-liminality.<sup>6</sup> There is not just one liminal status, but multiple ones. There is no way of seeing what the future holds. If the church is willing, these chaotic waters in which the church now swims can carry her to new shores, shores that the church has needed to find for some time. The time

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<sup>3</sup>Christendom and the decline in Christianity are noted in many places, including Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Introduction, Kindle. The decline in United Methodism has been recorded through United Methodist Local Church Statistics found at: <https://www.gcfa.org/services/data-services/statistical-resources/>.

<sup>4</sup>Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 28.

<sup>5</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2019), 180.

<sup>6</sup>The United Methodist Church has been in global discussions about splitting the denomination since 2019. It has been postponed multiple times due to the pandemic. The major dividing issue is LGBTQIA marriage and ordination of LGBTQIA members. This split cannot occur until we have a worldwide gathering, so we sit in this liminal space of knowing a split is inevitable, but not yet able to split.

for a timid church akin to “private clubs for those whose leisure interest is religion” is over. Now is the time to go on the adventure to which God calls.<sup>7</sup>

The Florida Annual Conference has brave leaders who model well what is needed, calling the clergy to “canoe mountains” and be “courageous leaders.”<sup>8</sup> But these metaphors, no matter how well documented in books, have not rescued the conference or KWUMC from tribulation. Why? Because those charged with taking the steps towards change (the clergy at large) were trained for a different world. They were prepared for Christendom, which is dying a slow death. Meanwhile, churches continue to invest what little resources available into Christendom-based systems that do not work, all the while clinging desperately to the past. The adaptive skills offered by leaders like Bolsinger and Rendle are valuable, but there is a step missing. They ask for complex math, but most are still learning to add. No one knows how to take the first steps. There is an unwillingness to risk because there is not a clear theology of risk. As Richard Foster wrote, “being risk-averse is problematic for a meaningful life in the world for any person, but especially so for Christians,” as we “collaborate with the One who says, ‘Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall wear ... But seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.’ (Matt. 6:25, 33).”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Alison Morgan, *The Wild Gospel: Bringing Truth to Life* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2004), 189.

<sup>8</sup>Bishop Ken Carter asked clergy to read these two books and had several workshops and conferences on these topics. Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015) and Gilbert R. Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>9</sup>Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 171.

The focus of this study is to help develop a theology of risk. How does one talk about change? How does one speak about adaptations? Both require courage, a positive synonym for risk. Risk usually carries a negative connotation. Hopefully, this study will help shift the meaning of risk for participants. Within is an introduction to a God who risks with and for us, and ultimately through us. The most challenging thing is to move from 0 to 1, from inertia to movement. Within this study is the challenge to make that move. There are also shared lessons from those who have risked before and encouragement to risk it all. This work should occur in a community—the small group community and the church community.

### Why Risk?

There are few published works on a theology of risk. Adam Hamilton addressed fear in his book *Unafraid: Living With Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times*, and Tom Berlin introduces us to the ways that Jesus risked in his book *Courage: Jesus and the Call to Brave Faith*.<sup>10</sup> Both are United Methodist, yet neither develops a complete theology of risk. John Piper, Tim Keller, and Tod Bolsinger have all published works that address risk.<sup>11</sup> However, all three come from a Reformed, not Wesleyan, background.<sup>12</sup> Also, note that these are all men. Female

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<sup>10</sup>Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid: Living With Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018). Tom Berlin, *Courage: Jesus and the Call to Brave Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021).

<sup>11</sup>John Piper, *Risk is Right: Better to Lose Your Life Than to Waste It* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013). Tim Keller, *Hope in Times of Fear: The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter* (New York: Viking, 2021). Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015).

<sup>12</sup>United Methodists are not in the reformed theological camp. We are Arminians—more information on this in chapter 1.

voices on risk within a theological framework are exceedingly rare, though there is a footing for a theology of risk within Feminist Theology.<sup>13</sup> And there is no shortage of “secular” works on risk from Brené Brown to the long-heralded Heifetz.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately the goal of this study is to get the people of Old Stone Church to be willing to risk. God has risked for us and longs to use us within the lower keys to risk for the Kingdom of God. Let us adventure together and see where God might take us. There is an adage that people would rather die than change. The history of KWUMC shows she is up to the challenge. KWUMC has gone from being part of the Methodist Episcopal South to being part of an island that accepts “One Human Family.” Change is not impossible. Risk is not either. Every day there are risks for the whole island of Key West (and all of the Keys). At the same time, the island gains from the lineage of brave people like Henry Flagler, who risked so that the island could be connected to the mainland by train. Perhaps we are brought together for such a time as this. It is our time to live “ancient truth in a new form.”<sup>15</sup>



Adventure on in this work... but be warned. Participating in this study may lead to taking more and more risks. It is not easy, and it can be scary, but risking, after all, is exercising faith. Throughout this study, there are reflection questions. Reflection is essential to learning. Stop at these points and spend time with

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<sup>13</sup>See Jeanne Cortiel, “Risk and Feminist Utopia: Radicalizing the Future,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 77, no. 5 (2018): 1353-376 <https://doi-org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/ajes.12252>.

<sup>14</sup>Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Random House, 2012) and other works by Brené Brown. Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup>Gilbert R. Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 221.

God. Also included are rituals to implement. Why? The key to liminality is to have rituals.

Rituals help those in liminality let go of what was and embrace what will be. One day there will be an exit from this hyper-liminal time, and the ritualized practices suggested help along the way.

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1. What is one thing you miss about pre-pandemic life? Do you think that component will return?

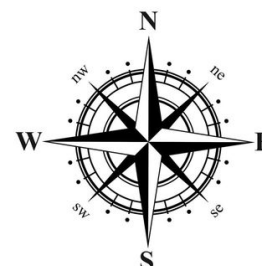
2. What emotions come up when you think about taking risks?



## CHAPTER 1: START WHERE YOU ARE

[We] must begin by telling the honest story of the current reality.—Gilbert Rendle

Imagine for a moment life on the island before 1912, before any connection to the mainland. To get to Key West, one had to know the coordinates. The numbers 24.5554° N, 81.7842° W were a lifeline. To go anywhere, it is essential to know the starting point, the directions, and plot a course. When someone goes out on a boat, they better understand where they started and how to get back before embarking on the journey. No one sets out for the reef without having the correct coordinates and the coordinates are of no help without knowing where the starting point is. Otherwise, they would become yet another boat calling for the Coast Guard because they thought they could handle the calm waters around the Keys. So too, we will start by setting our bearings. Where are we now? Where would we like to go? What tools might help us get there?



### *BEARING #1 What is Risk?*

Risk tends to carry with it a negative connotation because of its etymology. The word risk came into vernacular in the fifteenth century in the Mediterranean. It described the chances that merchant ships took as they navigated dangerous waters and the chance that bankers and the merchants would incur in cases of loss.<sup>16</sup> When gambling became popular, the meaning of risk

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<sup>16</sup>Niels Henrik Gregersen, "Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk" *Zygon* vol. 38, no. 2 (2003), 357.

**Risk:** \ˈrisk\ a noun or a verb.

*Noun:* 1) possibility of loss or injury. 2) someone who causes the possibility of loss or injury. 3) chance of loss or peril for insurance purposes. 4) A chance that an investment will lose value.

*Verb:* 1) to expose to hazard or danger. 2) To incur the risk or danger of.

continued to take shape, building on the potential for loss. The famous philosopher and Christian apologetic Blaise Pascal built on this idea of risking through gambling, calling for people to believe in God. He said if one risks not believing in God and is wrong, the cost is too high. While a logical wager, many find this a

“profoundly unsatisfactory defense of faith, since a calculated belief seems like no kind of belief at all.”<sup>17</sup> These sources have forever shaped the understanding of risk, primarily used by risk managers in actuarial tables. However, risk is only negative *IF* it goes wrong. The truth is it does not, and cannot, *always* go wrong.

As with any word, it has no inherent value in and of itself.<sup>18</sup> For there to be a risk, something must be of worth, and that something must then faces potential danger.<sup>19</sup> As an example, some are wary of technology in their home. In our house, many things are automated and connected through technology. We turn lights on, unlock doors, organize our calendars, and manage shopping lists, all with voice commands. For some, we are taking a risk by allowing these devices to be constantly listening in. From that vantage point, there is a risk that someone

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<sup>17</sup>Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventure in the Margin of Error* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 340.

<sup>18</sup>Charles Sanders Pierce asserted that signs (and words as signs) have no value in and of themselves. See: Crystal Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), chap. 3 sec. 15, Kindle.

<sup>19</sup>Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk Taking.” *Zygon* 38, no. 2 (2003): 356.

is collecting data from our family. However, it is not a risk to me. Why? Because I do not value the data, they may be mining from our lives. I do not think my grocery list is that interesting. I am willing to risk it!

### Semiotics of Risk

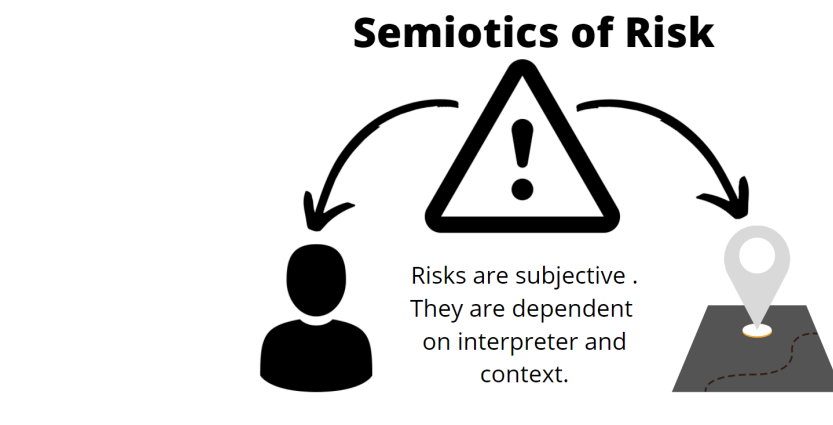
Despite the dictionary's best attempt, there is not only one way to understand and define risk. It is always contextual. The concept of risk is a matter of semiotics (the study of signs and symbols). All signs, symbols, and words live in a three-way relationship. There is the content of meaning (something) for someone (the interpreter) in a given context. So, each sign has a signifier, someone who creates it, which is then interpreted by someone in a given context. A great example of how one image can mean different things to different people depending on context is the logo from my beloved undergrad school, The Florida State University (FSU). Chief Osceola is pictured. Some view this image and are excited about Florida State football, baseball, or other great teams or schools at FSU. It evokes a different response for others (namely our rivals, the Florida Gators of the University of Florida). Still, others see it and may recall the recent discussions over indigenous people's names and likenesses used in sports. For example, the change of the "Redskins" to the "Washington Football Team" and now to the "Washington Commanders."



Without context, there is only pretext. Most, outside of alums from FSU and the Seminole Tribe of Florida, may not know that FSU has explicit permission from the Seminole Nation to use the name and likeness. Members of the Seminole Tribe hold prominent positions

within the university.<sup>20</sup> With other signs and symbols, the context is just as important. So, this one symbol (words work the same way) requires a dictionary definition, an interpreter, and a context. All signs and words then have two extra parts—the intended meaning and the interpreted meaning.

Applying this three-pronged attack to the word risk, we see that risk has: 1) content – what is there, 2) an interpreter (the someone who is considering taking the risk), and both are a part of 3) context. Another example is the lowly mosquito. Mosquito: a flying insect that survives by the consumption of blood. These insects can carry diseases such as the Zika virus, West Nile Virus, dengue, and malaria – all seen right here in our back yard. We interpret them as a nuisance that poses a serious risk. So severe that some created additional risk by introducing genetically modified mosquitos into the keys to eradicate disease-carrying mosquitos.<sup>21</sup> Yet, mosquitos do not pose a risk to everything always. Only female mosquitos bite and infect. To the frog, they are not a risk; they are a meal! Every risk requires definition, interpretation, and context.



<sup>20</sup>“Relationship with the Seminole Tribe of Florida,” Florida State University, University Communications, last modified 2022, <https://unicomm.fsu.edu/messages/relationship-seminole-tribe-florida/>.

<sup>21</sup>Karen Weintraub, “The First Genetically Modified Mosquitoes Released in the U.S. to Buzz in the Florida Keys” *USA Today*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/health/2021/04/29/genetically-modified-mosquitoes-released-florida-keys-first-us/4876624001/>.

The temporal nature of risk makes it more complicated to define. We worry in the present about something that *may* happen in the future which does not yet exist. “Risks belong to the fuzzy world of potentialities, which are there and not there.”<sup>22</sup> This is why there is no one true definition of risk; it always will depend on an interpreter and the context. Risk is genuinely a “relational concept.”<sup>23</sup> It is always subjective.

Despite this reality, risk is taught as something to be avoided. It is implied that we are to operate out of caution. Take, for example, risk mitigation within the Florida Annual Conference. When I began working for churches 20 years ago, the department within the Conference was called “Risk Management,” but it has shifted to “Ministry Protection.” Rather than manage risks, we are now encouraged to operate out of a protective stance. As Mary Douglas points out, the logic of risk is that “there is no single correct conception of risk, there is no way to get everyone to accept it.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, we still have this innate reaction to risk to protect ourselves from it. Since it is so nebulous, this may be why so many churches outright ignore policies created by Ministry Protection; they do not interpret “it” (whatever it may be) as a risk. Risk is not universal, yet we attempt to set policy as if it were.

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<sup>22</sup>Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk Taking,” *Zygon* 38, no. 2 (2003): 359.

<sup>23</sup>Fabienne T. Cadet and Ryall Carroll, “Nonprofit Organization Communication: Risky Business,” *Review of Business* 39, no. 1 (2019), 1.

<sup>24</sup>Mary Douglas and Aaron B. Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture an Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1982), 4.

1. Can you think of something that is a risk for some but not for others? (Like mosquitos are a risk for humans but not for frogs?)
2. How does seeing that risk is also a risk FOR someone IN context affect how you understood risk before you began this study?
3. When was the last time you risked? What keeps you from risking?

*BEARING #2: What do you value?*

What is keeping you personally from risking for the kingdom?—Leonard Sweet

Risk requires us to know what we value. What are the things we are willing to risk, and what are we not willing to risk? Imagine receiving a warning of a category five hurricane barreling right for Key West. After you light a candle and say a prayer at the Grotto at St. Mary's, you come home and prepare your home for the storm. You close your storm shutters,

pick up the soon-to-be-projectiles, get gas in your car, cash from the bank, and all the water you can load in your vehicle. You have your medicines, first aid kit, flashlights, and food as well. Then the mandatory evacuation order is placed, they're closing the overseas highway. Jim Cantore has taken up a spot on Smathers Beach. As you evacuate, what, aside from the essentials, would you take with you? Your family, your pets, and then what else makes the cut? What you would take helps show you what your values are.

We need to know what we value before learning to take risks. We need to know the non-negotiables. What are we willing to risk, and what are we not willing to risk? What are you ready to potentially lose? What might you be hoping to gain? In a hurricane evacuation, we might take some treasures like photographs we cannot replace or something of sentimental value. As we go, we gain security for our lives, the ability to face the other side of the storm.

What are you willing to lose for God? Your finances? Your collections of stuff? Your pride? Your life? We must consider the things that we are willing to lose, and we have to be able to draw a line in the sand declaring, "Thus far and no more." Knowing what you are willing to lose is a vital bearing because the reality is that we are more averse to loss than we are to risk.<sup>25</sup> We avoid risk. After all, we do not want to chance losing something precious to us. "Courage

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<sup>25</sup>Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 32.

sounds great, but we need to talk about how it requires us to let go of what other people think, and for most of us, that's scary."<sup>26</sup>

We don't like to take risks because we don't want to lose something. But we cannot stay the same. To do so is to die. Our bodies change every second as cells multiply and divide. If they were to stop that process, we would cease to be. Knowing what we value gives us an understanding of what we're willing to lose, change, or risk and what we are not. Are you willing to lose some control? How about some of your identity? How about your reputation? The default answer is probably no unless it was done to gain something. Leonard Sweet often says, "With every augmentation, there is an amputation." To gain, we lose something.<sup>27</sup> What do you hope to gain, and what are you willing to lose to get it?

Courage sounds great, but we need to talk about how it requires us to let go of what other people think, and for most of us, that's scary.

Brené Brown

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<sup>26</sup>Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (New York: Random House, 2015), 5.

<sup>27</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019), 150.



1. What are the things that you are not willing to lose or risk losing in your life? Make a list of the things you value most, that you would take with you in an evacuation.
2. What are you hoping to gain through risking? What would you like to see the church gain?

### *BEARING #3: Destination*

You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.—Vincent Donovan

Here is the stark reality: no one makes it out of this life alive. What will be said of you when your time comes? Will your friends and loved ones tell stories of how you loved well? Will they say that you lived your life to the fullest? As a pastor, I have heard many eulogies. Most of the time, sadly, they are remarkably similar. So and so was a good person. So and so was a good parent/sibling/friend/grandparent. So and so did XYZ for work. But then there are the few who made the most of their dash. Dash? The time between the birthdate and the death date. These people stand out. They were someone's hero. They had adventures. They left a legacy.

Bearing three is a morbid one but important nevertheless. In the liturgy for funerals, I pray, “Help us to live as those prepared to die. ... so that living or dying, our life may be in you....”<sup>28</sup> A big part of why the church is failing is because we are not living adventures in our dash. We are surviving. We are getting through. We are maintaining. I do not know about you, but I hope that when I die, people say that I loved well and that I lived life to the fullest; that I took risks for God and the people I love. What will they say of you?

Before our time comes, we should figure out what we want out of this life. After all:

Every day God invites us on the same kind of adventure. It’s not a trip where He sends us a rigid itinerary. He simply invites us. God asks what it is He’s made us to love, what is that captures our attention, what feeds that deep indescribable need of our souls to experience the richness of the world He made. And then, leaning over us, He whispers, ‘Let’s do that together.’<sup>29</sup>

What is it you want to do together with God? Each of us is called to be a part of bringing in God’s kingdom. Each of us has a role to play as the body of Christ. What will your role be? We all want to be a part of something big. The worst is to be home, wishing you were out having adventures, and 2020 handed us that lesson first hand. How often while in quarantine did you think if only I could....? And since you’ve been out of quarantine, have you done those things? Are you living an adventure?

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<sup>28</sup>The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 142.

<sup>29</sup>Bob Goff, *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 129.

So, church, now that we've triangulated our location and set our course, let us shake off the dust, set our eyes to the horizon, and let the wind fill our sails as we adventure on with God. Hopefully, our new bearings allow us to see new possibilities ahead!

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1. Write out your obituary. What do you want to be said of you when you go to be with Jesus?
2. What adventures do you want to go on with God?

## RITUALIZE

Finding our bearings is a way to start our day. Begin each day by setting an intention for that day. It doesn't have to be something extraordinary. It can be simple. But living with a set intention each day gets you on track for living with purpose. Then, as the opportunity to risk comes, you can discern if you should risk or not based on the intention you set for the day. For example, if your intention for the day is "Love Well," and the opportunity comes for you to risk in love that day, you know that it aligns with your purpose. To set your intention can ask yourself:

- ❖ Who do I want to be?
- ❖ What do I want to learn today?



## Chapter 2: MEET THE GOD OF RISK

When love is a theory, it's safe, it's free of risk. —Bob Goff

The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. —1 John 4:8

There are tons of books on risk if we widen our gaze beyond the theological horizon. There are books on risk management from a business perspective. There are also books like those of Brené Brown, who writes of the courage it takes to live a life of love. However, if we narrow the scope to Christian books, there are far fewer, and if you scan those, you will find many perspectives. Some say that God does not risk.<sup>30</sup> Others say that Jesus risks. However, it is difficult to find any that point to a trinitarian God of risk. Does the triune God take risks? If so, does that mean that God gambles? What does that mean for the incarnation? For the church? For each one of us?

I believe that our Triune God does risk, and I want to introduce you to this God of Risk. God's risk is motivated by God's nature: love. In this chapter, we will look at the risk-taking of God the Divine Parent (Father, Abba, Mother). We will look at the risks that Jesus took. And we will look at how God continues to risk via the Holy Spirit in the world. One more thing:

The Trinity is a mystery: God is three-in-one. We say that God is of one substance in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

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<sup>30</sup>Most notably in John Piper, *Risk is Right: Better to Lose Your Life Than Waste It* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 18.

if we are going to begin to accept that God risks, we have to address the problem of evil. Otherwise, talking of God risking could be construed as God causing evil. So, come along, and let me weave the scriptures together to show you how love has motivated God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer into relationships with each of us and into the very world around us.

### *How We Talk About God*

God cannot be observed any more than truth or beauty can be observed.  
—Michael Polyani

When we talk or think about God, we are doing theology. Whenever we talk or think about God, we do so in ways shaped by those who taught us, by the communities of faith that we have been a part of, our reasoning, and our experiences. The model we were taught assumed that there were separations between laity and clergy. In this model, clergy would have the education and understanding of theology and use this to teach the laity. We were born and baptized into a Christendom culture. Christendom is the notion that Christianity is the prevalent religion of a particular society. Christendom has been the norm in the West since the time of St. Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It presumed Christianity; everyone you meet in a Christendom culture knows about Jesus. They may not “be in relationship with Jesus,” but they attend church, practice Christian holidays, have Christian morals, and follow Christian norms. In the United States, it led to blue laws, national prohibition, stores being closed on Sundays, and schools and sports not having programs on Wednesdays. But, Christendom has been slowly dying. It is already dead in

Europe and the North-Eastern and West Coast of the United States.<sup>31</sup> Here in the blessed south, it is dying a painfully slow death. There are large sections of the South that still functions (or have a majority fighting for it to function) under Christendom. And, as we say in the South, bless our hearts! As always, Key West beats to its own drum and has an eclectic mixture of people, some of whom function under Christendom while most do not.

In the Christendom model, where the clergy is the expert, the priesthood of all believers was neglected. What is that? By virtue of our baptism, we are all members together of the body of Christ with no one better than the other, all joined under the head, Jesus.<sup>32</sup> In Christendom, professional staff and clergy “handled” our spiritual needs for us. But that led to many not having been discipled for this new world. The clergy have not shared the “secrets” taught in seminary with the laity. I want to start with a bit of a crash course in theology because before we can grasp a theology of risk, we have to begin with a general understanding of theology. Do not fear! This is not one of those dusty theology books that you pick up trying to understand more of God but end up falling asleep. (Hopefully!)

First, in the words of C.S. Lewis, “Everyone reads, everyone hears things discussed.




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<sup>31</sup>Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 12. Bolsinger addresses the end of Christendom and in conversations with clergy around the nation this bears out in experience.

<sup>32</sup> The phrase priesthood of all believers is formed under 1 Pt 2:9. The language of the body of Christ is from 1 Cor 12:12.

Consequently, if you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones – bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas.”<sup>33</sup> You have already done theology since theology means the words or thoughts about God. So, if you have any ideas about God, the divine, or the Universe, you have done theology! Congratulations! But how do we know if the beliefs we hold about God are “correct”? As an aside, let me assure you, anyone who says they completely understand God and speak for God should be avoided. If they ask you to join in their fun little compound, convince you to give them all you have, and force you to disconnect from everyone in your life, run! Those folks are called manipulative cult leaders and have names like David Koresh and Jim Jones. (Those names sounded quite common until they became infamous!)

God is too big for us to comprehend fully! Isaiah 55:8 says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, our faith seeks understanding. So we press ahead, but with humility, knowing that our ideas about God may very well be wrong. Theology is a HUGE topic with hefty tomes written, sitting dusty on shelves. If you love this section and want to learn more about theology, there is a resource section with suggested readings at the back of this book. Nevertheless, we must cover some essential topics before we proceed.

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<sup>33</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Collection* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 86.

<sup>34</sup>Even the Bible cannot capture the fullness of God!



### RITUALIZE:

Sit comfortably with your feet on the ground. Place your hands in your lap. Take a deep breath in and let it out slowly. Now look down at your hands. Are you resting them palms up or palms down? If they are down, flip them over and as you do, ask God to help you hold ideas about God seriously, yet lightly. Like you would hold an egg. We do not hold so tightly that they break. We hold these thoughts and ideas gently acknowledging our power to destroy (our own faith and others) with ideas about God. So before we press on ask God to help you hold your ideas of God lightly and to approach God with humility.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE UNITED METHODIST?

All United Methodists are summoned and sent by Christ to live and work together in mutual interdependence and to be guided by the Spirit into the truth that frees and the love that reconciles.—United Methodist Book of Discipline

“What does it mean to be United Methodist?” is a formidable question in 2022, as our denomination prepares to split. We each need to examine what it means to be a United Methodist and how that understanding will shape our choices as new denominations are birthed. First, to be a Methodist is to be a part of a denomination. This denomination was started reluctantly by two brothers: John and Charles Wesley. They were seeking only to reform the Anglican Church in England. Yet a new denomination resulted (with a healthy shove from the American Revolution). By the time of the Revolutionary War, there were people called Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic. When America won, and her citizens were no longer subjects of the British monarch, it created a theological issue since the monarch was the head of the Anglican Church

(also called the Church of England). So, American Methodists were not willing to be a part of the Anglican Church anymore – thus was born the Methodist Episcopal Church and its various siblings that have developed since that time through different splits, births, and mergers. In 1968, we became The United Methodist Church when the Methodist Episcopal Church merged with The Evangelical United Brethren (EUB).

How about you? If you were “Methodist” in 1968 were you Methodist Episcopal or EUB? What do you feel was lost in the merger? What was gained? If you weren’t a part—ask someone about their

There are key essentials to our United Methodist theology. First, there is only one official voice for The United Methodist Church—the General Conference—which until the pandemic typically met every four years. Our Book of Discipline is published from this gathering, which contains our doctrinal standards and our polity (rules for the church). One of the central tenets of our faith is that God is a God of love, and this love is displayed in Christ and revealed by the Holy Spirit. We are built upon ancient Christian teachings (often called orthodox—or right—beliefs). These can be found in the creeds you hear recited in worship, creeds like the Apostolic Creed and the Nicene Creed (and others). These include things like the mystery of the Trinity

Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that will  
pardon and cleanse within, Grace, grace  
God’s grace, grace that is greater than all  
our sin.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Julia H. Johnston

(God is three-in-one), the divine-human nature of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and the call for the Church to continue the work of Jesus.

One of the quintessential pieces of our theology is our understanding of grace. Grace is God's action in our life. We believe God's grace is present in our lives before we know it and is always wooing humanity to God (called prevenient grace). We believe we are saved by grace through faith (called justifying grace). And we believe the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives, helping us grow in our love of God and love of neighbor (called sanctifying grace). Essentially, "By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit."<sup>35</sup>

Because grace is distinctive, Methodists fall into the Arminian theological camp. What on earth is that? We believe that we have free will because of God's grace. Free will is essential to understanding a God who takes risks. We believe that God self-limits God's abilities to provide this free will because of God's love for humanity. This is contrary to Reformed Theology which has various understandings of God's control over humanity from strict Calvinists who believe everything is God's will (predestined) to the various other thoughts that range towards more free will. John Wesley preached, "The

#### What's so amazing about Grace?

Grace is the basis of our faith as United Methodists. We believe it is God's gift in our life and God's action in our life. You may hear us talk about Grace as prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying...these are just ways we describe grace in various forms in our life. We also talk about means of grace (those things that give us grace – like communion or prayer). All of it is God's work in our lives. It's all grace!

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<sup>35</sup>United Methodist Church. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House), part 3, par. 103, Kindle Edition.

doctrine of predestination, as maintained by the rigid Calvinists, is very shocking, and ought utterly to be abhorred; because it directly charges the most holy God with being the author of sin.”<sup>36</sup> Methodists believe this faith should manifest itself in good works. Are they good works if we do not freely do them? And, how can we do those good works if we are not willing to risk for

good?

Methodists practice theology with what is known as the quadrilateral. The quadrilateral is a term coined by Albert Outler in the 1960s. It reflects how John Wesley instructed others to practice theology. The bedrock of our theological exploration is scripture. But a close reading of scripture reveals that there are contradictory parts. For example, there are two creation stories in Genesis one and two with different orders of creation. Another example is the different lineages of Jesus in Matthew one and Luke three. Yet another is the differing accounts of the resurrection in the gospels. Does this mean Scripture isn't true? No. Not at all. While we take the Bible

Outler's term Quadrilateral tends to lead us to think of four evenly important components. However, it is better to understand the quadrilateral as a three-legged-stool. What we rest on, the seat, is scripture. And our understanding of scripture is supported by tradition, reason, and experience.



<sup>36</sup>Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 32.

seriously and believe it contains everything necessary for salvation, we do not take it literally.<sup>37</sup>

And when the answers or understanding we seek are not apparent in scripture, we continue to the other parts of the quadrilateral. These are tradition, reason, and experience. We are not recreating Christianity with every new generation, and so we look to those who have come before us and how they have understood God. But we do not rely only on these traditions. We live out our traditions; we are not trapped by them. Methodists apply reason, and thankfully, we do not have to check our brains at the door. There is no “this way or the highway.” Instead, there is, “though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?”<sup>38</sup> So we reason and reason together for faith is to be practiced in the community. And the fourth part of the quadrilateral is that we own and appreciate our experiences and the reality that God is continually active in the world.

The last part of theology that must be addressed before we begin a theology of risk is an understanding of theodicy, a twelve-dollar word for God’s relationship to the problem of evil. Another way to look at this is to ask, “If God is good why is there so much evil in the world?” First, we must understand that though “God reveals himself in history ... not all history reveals God.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, not everything is God’s doing. As Arminians, we do not believe that God

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<sup>37</sup>It is especially important to understand in the shadow of the looming split to point out that The United Methodist Church has described itself as a wide theological tent. There may be United Methodists who are literalists. And at the heart of the split is the various understandings of Scripture.

<sup>38</sup>John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit” in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 301.

<sup>39</sup>Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 71.

causes all things, including evil things. Because of our free will and our ability to make choices, there are consequences to our actions.

In our baptismal vows, we “accept the freedom and power God gives (us) to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”<sup>40</sup> When we make this vow, we assert that by God’s power we can resist evil (which implies, we don’t always accept that freedom and power; thus, there is evil, injustice, and oppression). We have met the enemy, and it is us, not God.<sup>41</sup> In my own time of suffering as a child, a pastor gave me an unhelpful belief that God had caused my pain and the circumstances that caused it. I used to imagine God as a bully with a magnifying glass, and we were the ants bearing God’s wrath. (Unfortunately, I was not alone in this viewpoint.) I have since (thanks to counseling and learning new theology) come to see that God does not cause our suffering. Rather, Jesus is the suffering servant who bears our pain and works to heal us. God is with us always. There is always



love and hope, and no evil can erase it. As John’s gospel says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn’t extinguish the light.”<sup>42</sup> So, when we say that God takes risks, God is also willing to bear the responsibility of those risks. God does not risk and then impose on us the consequences, as this is outside of God’s nature of love and is immoral.

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<sup>40</sup>The United Methodist Church, *United Methodist Book of Worship*. “The Baptismal Covenant IV” (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 111.

<sup>41</sup>A lose borrowing from Walt Kelly’s “Pogo” comic from 1912.

<sup>42</sup>Jn 1:5.

There are many other topics within theology, but these give a brief overview. Identifying that we are approaching this look at theology, this seeking to understand God through these lenses is essential. The lenses through which we view God are called *hermeneutics*. We all have lenses through which we view God, and since God is so vast and ultimately higher than our thoughts, we allow for multiple understandings and interpretations. Our theology and our hermeneutics affect how we understand God and the world. And so, as we adventure on with hearts and minds open to new thoughts of God, let us begin our exploration of a theology of risk.

### *The Divine Parent as Risk Taker*

God's presence is creative and redemptive.—Kenneth Carder

Why do I not call God “Father” and use “Divine Parent” instead? It’s partially to begin to risk with you, to help you start to see God in new ways. In my addresses to God, I may refer to God as Father, Mother, or Parent. God is all of these and none of these. Our hetero-normative binary understandings fall short of God, who is much larger than our labels. Some who had a complicated relationship with their biological father (or father figures or males in general) have difficulty accepting God as a male or father. Scripture gives us images for addressing God in both masculine and feminine ways. Feel free to substitute my pronouns and words for God for

What are the words you use when you address God? List them here:

those you feel most comfortable with. And, if you want to begin to stretch, try some different pronouns or names for God.

Does God risk? For our Reformed siblings, there is an easy answer. In his book *Risk Is Right*, John Piper says no, God does not.<sup>43</sup> Piper explains this is because God knows all, and nothing is a surprise; therefore, nothing can be a risk. This is based on strong Calvinist ideas of predestination. To be fair, for most of Christian history, this was the orthodox stance. However, there are other schools of theology that allow for God to self-limit God's knowledge and power (this is Arminian), others who believe in an open-theology (that God allows for an open future—like a choose your own adventure book),<sup>44</sup> and still others in process theology (God experiences time with us, can change, and is affected by the world). Piper stands on one end of a spectrum of theologians who vary in opinion on the ability of God to take risks. Our understanding of a risking God depends on our

**Free Will:** The belief that human behavior is self-caused. The idea of free will assumes that there are no external causes sufficient to explain why a person acts as he or she does. Actions, according to free-will theory, are ultimately chosen, even if the person choosing knows that the chosen action may ring about undesirable consequences.

Grenz, et.al

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<sup>43</sup>John Piper, *Risk is Right: Better to Lose Your Life Than to Waste It* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2013), 18.

<sup>44</sup>I am a child of the 1980s and these were a huge it. You would read so far and the author would give you a choice to make for the story. Each choice correlates to a different part of the book. The story could be read differently depending on one's choices. This, however, is not truly a fair representation of Open theology, unless God is not seen as the author, but as reading along with us.



understanding of whether we have autonomy and free will or whether God predestines outcomes.<sup>45</sup>

In agreement with Niels Henrik Gregersen, I contend that “the interesting question is not whether God knows all or less than all. The real issue is the nature of all about which divine omniscience is asserted. On the risk view, this all must be all-that-can-be-known, given the limitations that God has chosen by creating a world that includes relatively autonomous agents.”<sup>46</sup> Let me translate: while I hold that God is omniscient (all-knowing), when God chose to create us with free will, God chose to place limits on God’s omniscience. To be autonomous (able to choose for ourselves), God holds back God’s power and knowledge. So, my fellow autonomous agents, I invite you to join me in looking at ways the Creator has risked.

## CREATION AS RISK

The first risk we see God take is in creation. God could have maintained whatever status-quo God existed in before God created.<sup>47</sup> “Whenever you create anything, you take a risk.”<sup>48</sup> In the Jewish Talmud, the rabbis reflect that “God the Creator practiced on twenty-six unsuccessful

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<sup>45</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 54.

<sup>46</sup>Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk” *Zygon* 38, no. 2 (2003), 370.

<sup>47</sup>If you want to really take your brain for a spin – can we speak of “before” or “after” with God who is infinite? Infinite implies no time. But, for the sake of our brains, I will operate inside our time construct.

<sup>48</sup>Rob Bell, *How to Be Here* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 117.

universes before finding exactly the right combination on the 27<sup>th</sup> try.”<sup>49</sup> This depicts God risking again and again in creation.

Take a few moments and read Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Do you notice two creation stories? Why do you think we have two? Do you see either one as God taking a risk in creating all things?

The second facet of risk seen in creation is that God created us with free will. When God limits God’s self, allowing creation to make the choice not to love and not accept God in return, God accepts the risk of heartbreak.<sup>50</sup> From the first time I cracked Genesis open, I wondered, “Why?! Why put the tree of knowing of good and evil there in the first place? If it weren’t there, then there wouldn’t have been a fall!” But, it IS there, and the gift is that Adam and Eve COULD choose. This is a result of God’s decision to give us free will. For how could God know if they truly loved God and would obey God if there were no choice but to love and obey? Instead, they could choose obedience to God *or* disobedience; and they chose disobedience. If

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<sup>49</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Summoned to Lead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 82.

<sup>50</sup>1Jn 4:8: God is love. If God is love, then the opposite of love of God breaks God’s heart. While this is an anthropological assessment of God, it does fit with the character of God revealed in Jesus.

they did not have free will, why command not to eat? There's no shortage of conjectures on this topic, but I add my own. This story shows us that God took the risk. We know they disobeyed, but they could have obeyed. And they did obey for some time. In the story of the garden, we are not privy to how long they lived in harmony in the garden. If God risks this way, then did God send the serpent as the tempter? I do not believe so because Jesus both demonstrated and told us that God is a good parent who gives her children good gifts. Jesus says, "Who among you will give your children a stone when they ask for bread? Or give them a snake when they ask for fish? If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him."<sup>51</sup> God, the parent, does not give the snake to Adam and Eve either—just the choice to obey or disobey.

Adam and Eve used their freedom to choose to do the one thing they were asked not to do. As a result of their choice, sin enters the world. The word and concept of evil are not in Genesis 1-3. God created a world that God repeatedly called good. But in God's goodness and love, God created us with the ability to create. We can create vast goodness, and we can create evil. This is the risk God chose when creating humanity. The risk of us rejecting God and the risk of allowing us to choose to do evil. In Methodism this is why we have the three general rules, to guide us to use our free will responsibly. The true goodness of God, though, is that while God risks, God is willing to take responsibility for creation's risks, as we will see when we look to Jesus.

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<sup>51</sup>Mt 7:9-11.

“With great power comes great responsibility.” -Uncle Ben in Spiderman. Because we have the great power of free will, John Wesley gave the people called Methodist the Three General Rules:

1. Do no harm
2. Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, as ever you can.
3. Stay in love with God.

What are you doing with your superpower of free will?

## RE-CREATION AS RISK

The first created order falls in Genesis 3, and God sets out anew with humanity outside the garden. All seems well. Adam and Eve multiply, humans and “divine beings multiply,”<sup>52</sup> and life goes on. That is until you reach Genesis 6:5, “The Lord saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil.” The next verse should give those in the Calvinist and Reformed theological camps pause. Verse six says that God regretted creating humans. If God did not risk in creation, then God would not be regretting it. God risked, and the risk resulted in humanity becoming downright evil, and so God regretted God’s actions. The Hebrew word there is *v’inchm* which means to be

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<sup>52</sup>Gen 5:1-4.

sorry, repent, and regret. The Hebrew grammar is unambiguous that it is God who is repenting or regretting. When God regrets what God had done in creation, it implies that God did not see Genesis 6 when Genesis chapters 1 and 2 were happening. For if God knew that God would be so heartbroken, could God not have spared it all from happening? In Genesis 6, we see God so angry and hurt that God is willing to wipe out everything. So, here we are: God created humanity with free will, that free will ran amuck, and God was sorry and heartbroken.

YET, God still chooses to risk again. God begins again by saving one family—the family of Noah. And through him, creation is restored after the flood, an image of a new earth, which will ultimately be fulfilled one day.<sup>53</sup> Through Noah, all humanity is invited into covenant with God. In Genesis 8:20-22, God promises never again to destroy every living thing. God comes to terms with the wickedness within

According to Jewish tradition, Noah didn't just start building the ark. He planted trees first. After they were fully grown, he cut down the trees, sawed them into planks, and build the boat.

- Mark Batterson

humanity. Verse 21 says, “I will not curse the fertile land anymore because of human beings since the ideas of the human mind are evil from their youth. I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done.” This is God’s part of the covenant. Our part is not to kill another person and not eat meat with blood still in it. (Don’t worry about the cheeseburger you had for lunch that wasn’t kosher – God eventually takes care of that in the book of Acts.)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Is 65:17 & Rev 21:1.

<sup>54</sup>In Acts 10, God reveals to Peter that nothing is unclean, though in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem council still requires Gentiles not to eat meat with blood in it, most likely to ease fellowship between Jews and Gentile

## EXODUS AS RISK

God—the risk-taker—did not stop with creation or rebuilding after the flood. God risks through what will become the Hebrew People. It begins with Abram, who becomes Abraham. If Abram and Sara have agency (we already agreed that they have free will and can choose for themselves to obey or disobey), then the call of Abram, which begins the Hebrew People’s story, is God risking. Abram could have said, “No thanks, I’ll stay in Ur.” Of course, he doesn’t – but he could have, and so when God calls us to do something, God is risking our rejection. In the story of Abraham in Genesis 18, we read of God’s plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their lack of justice, general ethical laxity, and disregard for the needy.<sup>55</sup> But Abraham pleads with God when he hears of God’s plan that if ten good people could be found in these cities that perhaps God would spare them. However, God does not find ten good people; he only finds Lot and his family. God is willing to change God’s mind, again, in order to display mercy.

This action also appears in the Exodus story when God’s people create an idol while Moses speaks with God. First, the Hebrew people reject God when God wants to speak with all. Instead, they ask for a mediator.<sup>56</sup> So Moses heads up the mountain and talks to God face-to-face, which changes his physical appearance. While Moses and God are having a conversation, God grows angry and regrets freeing the Israelites because they cast an idol, breaking a commandment they had already received. Moses talks God down and reminds God that

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Christians.

<sup>55</sup>Is 1:10, 3:19; Jer 23:14, Ezk 23:49.

<sup>56</sup>Ex 20:21.

humanity is worth the risk of loving. God changes God's mind! Then Moses goes down the mountain and, in anger, smashes the tablets. It's not the first or only time Moses would have to negotiate with God to spare the Hebrew people. Abraham before him did it, and others after him would do so. Abraham and Moses both risk with God, and in both instances, God changes and repents. Though God risked in creating humanity with free will, and God's heart was broken by humanity, God was willing to continue to risk.

Noah, Abraham, and Moses all changed God's mind. In each of their stories, God is angry and ready to smite many. BUT God changes God's mind because of Noah's righteousness, because Abraham reasons with God, and because Moses prays. Do you pray with the conviction that you just might change the mind of God? Your prayers just may do more than you ever realize! Pray with conviction.

## DIVINE LOVE AS RISK

What's love got to do with it?—Tina Turner

Love is the very image of God; it is the brightness of his glory. By love man is not only made like God, but in some sense one with him. ... Love is perfect freedom.—John Wesley

One of the primary ways the Creator risks is through engaging and continuing to engage with humanity. As Methodists, one of the critical parts of our beliefs is in grace, including prevenient grace. In this belief, we hold that God is always calling and wooing humanity to God's self. Prevenient grace surrounds us, goes before us, and prompts our first desire to know and please God. But it is not irresistible. We can say no to God. This is part of the freedom with which we are created. Yet, God is love.<sup>57</sup> And, since God IS love, this is how God works in the world. For love to be true love, it cannot be forced. And for that reason, God risks with each of us, offering us a love that is incomparable to any other source of love yet acknowledging the possibility of rejection. And time and again, from Adam and Eve to today, we turn our backs on God. Yet, still, God is love, and still, God risks that we will accept this incredible love rather than reject God.

God so loved the world that he  
gave his only Son, so that  
everyone who believes in him  
won't perish but will have  
eternal life.

John 3:16

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<sup>57</sup> 1 Jn 4:8.



## PROVIDENCE

God, of your goodness give me yourself; for you are sufficient for me.—Juliana of Norwich

He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous.

Matthew 5:45

When good things or bad things happen in your life, who gets the credit? Often we claim that good things result from our hard work or goodness. But when the bad comes, we are tempted to blame others or even God. We call it fate or fortune, providence, or blame the universe. This was the primary understanding of how the world worked in pre-modern Christianity. There was no control. In a

post-industrial society, an awareness of risk became prevalent, and as a result, there was a desire to control outcomes.<sup>58</sup> There was a recognition of and understanding of mechanics and physics. We moved away from viewing the events in life as the results of fate or fortune and sought to control our surroundings. As we will look at later, this control is only an illusion.

Heartbreak after heartbreak continued for millennia until God finally risks a part of the trinity. The Father sent the Son to share God's love for us all, knowing full well that only through the work of the son could humanity and God be fully reconnected. We'll look at Jesus's risk next, but before we do, those of you who are parents and have sent a child out into the

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<sup>58</sup>Niels Henrik Gregerson, "Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk," *Zygon* 38, no. 2 (2003), 363.

world, you know the worry and the heartache. God must have gone through that and more but was willing to risk in this way so that we could be restored back to God.

### *Jesus & Risk*

The more risks God is willing to take within the order of creation, the more God must be able to absorb the risks and restore the loss imparted on the creatures in the order of salvation.

—Niels Henrik Gregersen

Jesus is the image of the Creator, the ultimate signifier for the Triune God.<sup>59</sup> We are to look to Jesus not only for an example, but we should ultimately trust his words are true and hope to do more than even he did.<sup>60</sup> As we look at how the Triune God takes risks, we look to Jesus.

### KENOSIS & INCARNATION

“Drama comes from the Greek word *dran*, which means ‘to do.’ The incarnation is all about God’s drama of ‘doing God,’ God’s drama of love. God didn’t just say, ‘I love you.’ God loved. God did God.”<sup>61</sup> It is morally reprehensible to impose risk on others. We cannot force others to risk. And God certainly

*Kenosis*: Refers to the self-emptying of Christ in the incarnation, as well as his conscious acceptance of obedience to the divine will that led him to death by crucifixion.

Stanley Grenz

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<sup>59</sup>Jn 14:9.

<sup>60</sup>Jn 14:12.

<sup>61</sup>Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 91.

did not and does not force us to risk. Nor does God require of us the consequences of God's risk. When the Creator was willing to risk with humanity, willing to give us free will and the opportunity to do both good and evil, God also had a plan to bear the burden.

Scriptures say that at the exact right point in time, Jesus became flesh.<sup>62</sup> The creeds remind us that he is fully human and fully God. In Jesus' incarnation (literally taking on flesh), he became fully human, which meant that, like all of us, Jesus was able to risk. Fully human "means to be subject to some form of finitude, to lack the comprehensive vision, power, and knowledge that is required to make risk-free choices. The early church considered heresy anything that diminished the authentic humanity of Jesus (e.g, Docetism, Gnosticism, etc.) and rightly so."<sup>63</sup> Risk for good and evil. We see the option to risk for evil in the temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. Like us, he was tempted to disobey God. We see this again in the Garden of Gethsemane, "If you are willing take this cup of suffering away."<sup>64</sup> He was tempted to take the risk to use his divine nature in self-serving ways.<sup>65</sup> Yet unlike the rest of us, Jesus never falls into temptation.

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<sup>62</sup>Ro 5:6.

<sup>63</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 1, sec. 3, Kindle.

<sup>64</sup>Mt 26:39 / Mk 14:36 / Lk 22:42.

<sup>65</sup>Mt 4 / Lk 4.

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The price of giving us freedom was God being willing to bear the responsibility for that freedom. Since freedom is a gift from God, the cost of that freedom is covered in the work of Jesus, the Redeemer, the Son. This means Jesus bears all the choices we make to do all the good, but also all the choices we make to do harm or evil. Take a moment and thank God for your freedom and for Jesus who paid the price for that freedom.

## MINISTRY

We do indeed have a God of resurrection,, a God who can create beauty from the messes we make of our world.—Shane Claiborne

Jesus displayed God's risk-taking nature throughout his ministry. First, we see it in who he calls to be his disciples. He does not take young, fully-prepared, righteous Jewish boys to mold as other Rabbis did. Instead, he calls fishermen, hated tax collectors, and a rag-tag group who never quite fully understood what he was saying or doing. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, became known as the sons of thunder because they were so power-hungry they offered to call down lightning on people opposed to Jesus. These same brothers would also argue about who would sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in heaven.<sup>66</sup> Jesus didn't choose the humble. He didn't choose the loyal. As we know, Peter would deny him, and Judas would betray him. He didn't

### RITUALIZE

Often we can feel as though we are not qualified to do the work of God. When feelings like this creep in, open the Gospels and begin to read through them again. Take it slow. Watch how often the 12 Disciples, the founders of our faith, often mess up. They deny, they don't get it, they betray, and doubt. Your qualification to serve God comes by virtue of your baptism. It is God at work in you. If you don't feel qualified, you're in great company!

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<sup>66</sup>Nickname: Mk 3:17; for calling down lightning Lk 9:54, for arguing about who sits at the right and left: Mt 20:21.

implement financial controls. Instead, he entrusted the treasury to Judas, who “stole some for himself.”<sup>67</sup> Let’s be honest, not a single member of the original 12 disciples, the apostles who spread Christianity to the ends of their known world, would make it through our Board of Ordained Ministry process. They’d be given tons of “growth opportunities” on theology (Peter), personal growth (James, John, and Judas), preaching (don’t forget Paul preached so long someone fell asleep, tumbled out of a window and died!<sup>68</sup>), and leadership (every single one of them!). It’s time we de-sanctify the people in scripture and admit they are more human than we like and more like us. This may be scarier because if Jesus chose the imperfect, doubting, faithless, corrupt disciples, it means he might choose us too.

Jesus risked in his ministry beyond who he called to be his disciples. He ate with sinners, tax collectors, and sex workers. He broke social protocols and ministered to the hated Samaritans. He broke holiness codes and by ministering to and touching lepers, the dead, and a woman with the issue of blood. He stood up to a group ready to stone a woman caught in adultery – possibly because they were only stoning her and not the man. He broke sabbath laws by healing on the sabbath, allowing his disciples to glean food, and so on. Jesus was always willing to risk for the good.

Jesus risked in how he related to women. There were women disciples; even if they are unnamed, we know they are there. It is women who are left with Jesus at the cross. It is women who first encounter the risen Lord and women who are the first evangelists. These resurrection

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<sup>67</sup>Jn 12:6.

<sup>68</sup>Acts 20:9.

encounters echo his ministry while alive; he allowed women at the dining table to sit and listen to his teaching, he allowed them to be evangelists, and he healed them even at the risk of becoming unclean.

He taught his disciples to risk in his teachings as well. In the parable of the talents, in Matthew 25, Jesus encourages us to invest in others and to risk with what is entrusted to us. The one entrusted with one talent, who operated out of fear, buried and hid his talent to keep it safe. He was cast out, and his talent given to the one who had been given ten talents. Lest we think it is an insignificant amount, a talent was worth more than fifteen years wages.<sup>69</sup> While the disciples are freaking out in the boat worried they would drown, Jesus calms the actual storm and calms the storm of their fears, and reminds them to have faith. Repeatedly the disciples are reminded to have faith, not worry, and trust God. Jesus tells us to take up our cross to follow, and we are reminded that a grain of wheat must die to produce fruit.<sup>70</sup> All of these things are required to take risks as Jesus did.

Nowhere is the risk God takes in Jesus more apparent than in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, he faces his greatest temptation: the temptation to avoid the cross. Jesus pleads with God, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want.”<sup>71</sup> He is living out the prayer he taught his

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<sup>69</sup>Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 66.

<sup>70</sup>Mt 16 & Jn 12 respectively.

<sup>71</sup>Mk 14:36.

disciples, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>72</sup> A prayer perhaps influenced by his mother who before he was conceived prayed, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”<sup>73</sup> This prayer of willingness shows an openness from Jesus to risk it all, his very life, for God and ultimately the redemption of all of us. It’s the same prayer of willingness that he asks of us, the one modeled first by Mary. Ultimately Jesus risks it all in an unwavering acceptance of the will of the Creator.

## REFLECTION

Jesus taught a radical faith. A faith that calls you out of the boat, faith that calls you to take up your cross, faith that calls you to invest 15-years’ worth of wages, faith that is willing to risk your life, faith that is willing to give everything away.

What is the riskiest thing you have done for God?

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<sup>72</sup>Mt 6:10.

<sup>73</sup>Lk 1:38.



## RECAPITULATION

But the free gift of Christ isn't like Adam's failure. If many people died through what one person did wrong, God's grace is multiplied even more for many people with the gift—of the one person Jesus Christ—that comes through grace.—Romans 5:15

Recapitulation is one of those fancy seminary words that means “sums up.” It's the belief that where humanity had failed, starting with Adam, Jesus succeeded. And in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we have grace and life available to us where once sin and death ruled. In Christ, all things, all creation, all nations, all peoples, all tribes are given access to God.

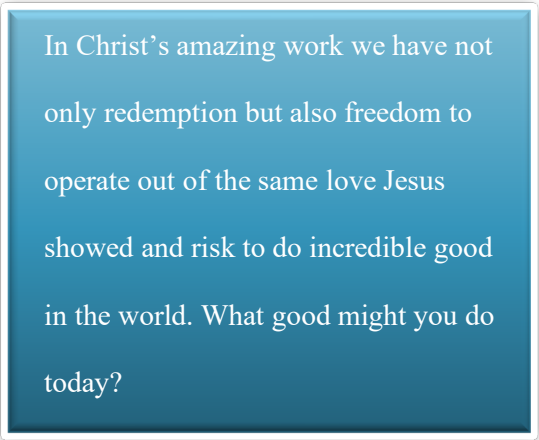
Re-cap-it-u-la-tion:  
The act of summarizing and restating the main point. In recapitulation Jesus is said to do what all of humanity could not: to be the faithful, God-loving human we were made to be. AND he made a way for us to do it as well.

In the recapitulation of Christ, he undid what we have done. In Jesus' outpouring of himself (*Kenosis*), in his suffering, death, and resurrection, God endures the consequences of the risks resulting from creation. “God is not only active but also responsive to the sighs, pains, and laments of creation.”<sup>74</sup> God doesn't shy away from bearing the consequences of our sin. Remember, until the fall of Adam and Eve, evil wasn't in the world. It only comes as a consequence of our free will. Yet, God, in God's goodness, is the one who is willing to make all things right through Jesus. “So deeply has God in Christ united God's self with the victims of risk that God not only passively endures risk but also actively transforms the lives of those who

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<sup>74</sup>Niels Henrik Gregerson, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk,” *Zygon* 38 no. 2 (2003), 374.

lose in the game of risk-taking.”<sup>75</sup> In Christ’s amazing work, we have not only redemption but also the freedom to operate out of the same love Jesus showed and risk to do incredible good in the world. It is the commandment Jesus left us with, not just to love others as we love ourselves (the golden rule), but to love as Jesus did (the platinum rule).<sup>76</sup>



In Christ’s amazing work we have not only redemption but also freedom to operate out of the same love Jesus showed and risk to do incredible good in the world. What good might you do today?

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<sup>75</sup>Niels Henrik Gregerson, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk,” *Zygon* 38 no. 2 (2003), 374.

<sup>76</sup>Dr. Leonard Sweet in our class meetings would refer to Jesus’ love for us as titanium it is worth more than the golden rule of loving our neighbor as ourself.

## *Holy Spirit at Work*

The Holy Spirit was to continue the work of Jesus—his Successor.... And this revelation of Jesus by the Holy Spirit was not to be from the outside—but from within.  
—E. Stanley Jones

### Ritualize

We profess faith in a Triune God (one God, three persons). When we pray and when we talk about God, thought, we often reflect a belief in a bi-une (totally made up word) God. We talk of the Father, the Creator and we talk of the Son, the Redeemer. But very little is mentioned of the Holy Spirit, the Sustainer.

Honor your Triune faith by beginning to include prayers to the Holy Spirit. She is, after all, our advocate and holy companion.

With the Creator and the Redeemer, the Sustainer, the Holy Spirit, joins in the risk of extending herself and being rejected. “Human responses,” to the Divine, “cannot be forced if God is really the love that sets free.”<sup>77</sup> Since it is not forced, it is the Spirit’s work to woo us and call us onward. Because of this, she accepts the risk of us ignoring her work in favor of trying to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

When Jesus was with the disciples in the Upper Room, according to John, he promised them that once he left, he would send the Spirit who would remind them of all Jesus taught.<sup>78</sup> This happened. The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and continues to

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<sup>77</sup>Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk,” *Zygon* 38 no. 2 (2003), 372.

<sup>78</sup>Jn 14:25-26.

come to each of us who believe. The Spirit resides or dwells within each of us. This indwelling is also a risk – that the most holy might reside within profane humanity. And this same Spirit, part of the Triune God, joins in the continued risk of rejection. A friend of mine in college used to say that most people talk about the Holy Spirit as if he were the creepy uncle that only comes occasionally to family gatherings. But, the reality is the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives long before we ever know it – there’s that prevenient grace again. God is always at work in us and in the world. Always risking. Always going forward. Always wooing us to and back to God. It is the Holy Spirit’s job to draw us to God, or as Vincent Donovan shared with the Masai, “You thought you were searching for [God]. All this time he has been searching for you. God is more beautiful and loving than even you imagined. He hungered for you ... Try as we might, we cannot reach up by brute force and drag God down from the heavens. He is already here. He has found you.”<sup>79</sup> It’s the Holy Spirit at work anytime we use the word grace. The Holy Spirit, who leads us to justification and sanctification, is often rejected and ignored by humanity.

The Holy Spirit, the primary person in the book of Acts, continues to push the envelope with the disciples. Our tendency as humans is to turn inwards and maintain the status quo. But the Holy Spirit pushed the disciples on. First, on Pentecost, when fire and wind fell, and people were miraculously able to speak other languages.<sup>80</sup> She pushed Peter to preach, and thousands became Christians.<sup>81</sup> Next, the Holy Spirit pushed Saul, blinding him and leading him to a place

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<sup>79</sup>Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 87.

<sup>80</sup>Acts 2:1-4.

<sup>81</sup>Acts 2:14, 41.

of repentance so complete that it changes him completely, name and all. Saul becomes Paul.<sup>82</sup>

The Holy Spirit continues to work in Paul as Paul is led to take the message that was thought to only be for the Israelites to the gentiles. This fulfills Jesus' call in Matthew 28 to make disciples of all nations. The word nations in Greek is the same word for gentile. The Holy Spirit pushed even more as Philip is led to the desert road where the first gentile is baptized, the Ethiopian Eunuch.<sup>83</sup> We still don't appreciate all that this baptism represents. He was a black, inter-sexed, intelligent leader and was the first gentile baptized! He brings the message back to Ethiopia, and through him and others, the Coptic Church is born, one of the longest worshipping sects of Christianity. The Holy Spirit continued to push the disciples to risk. Peter was given a vision of eating unclean animals. In conjunction with an experience with Cornelius the Centurion, he saw the Holy Spirit not only give the okay not to follow Jewish dietary laws but also that no person should be considered unclean either. Cornelius and his entire house ask Peter to tell them about Jesus, and as Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell on these gentile believers just as she had fallen on the disciples in the Upper Room. THEN they are baptized with water and affirmed as believers.<sup>84</sup> This urging of the Holy Spirit is seen all through Acts, and all through history, right down to you and me. The Holy Spirit continues to urge us not to give in to the temptation to turn inward or only seek the status quo, but instead to continue to honor what God has done for us and live lives that risk for the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>82</sup>Acts 9.

<sup>83</sup>Acts 8.

<sup>84</sup>Acts 10.

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## REFLECTION

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Throughout the book of Acts the Holy Spirit urges the church forward. She encourages the church to do new things.

What things have you opted to not change (it can be something like your nail polish color, to the way you pray, to your ideas about God. Take an inventory of the things you prefer to stay status-quo.

### Chapter 3: THE BIGGEST RISK OF ALL

God has always chosen to risk using fallible human beings to accomplish his work  
—E. Stanley Jones

We have seen that God, the Creator of all things visible and invisible, risked in creation, in re-creation, in offering relationship, and in providence. We have seen that Jesus risked in being poured out for us (*kenosis*), becoming human for us (incarnation), in his ministry and teachings, and in the work of recapitulation. And, we have seen that the Holy Spirit risks by indwelling imperfect humanity and risks rejection. But, we are only now getting to the greatest risk of the triune God: entrusting the work and mission of God to us! What began in the Creator, continued in the Redeemer continues now IN US by the power of the Holy Spirit. Think about it, the God who created everything you know, the Jesus who gave himself up for us that we may be reconciled to God, *that* God entrusts the continual work of God to us. To you and me, and to the church universal, corruptible as she may be, imperfect as she may be, the church is God's hope for the world. We will look at how we are entrusted with this work. We will learn some Latin that will help us understand more about God's plan, and we'll see how the church has been faithful with this work. It's seen throughout church history, especially in our Methodist history. It is so apparent in scripture and history that it is an oxymoron that there would be a risk-averse church because we are God's plan A for the expansion of the kingdom, and there is no plan B.

## REFLECTION

Use this space to reflect on the reality that God has entrusted God's work to us! (Not just to the clergy, and not just to the church universal, but to YOU).

### *We Were God's Biggest Risk (& Still Are)*

God took something of a risk in handing over his mission to the all-too-sinful human beings who were the original disciples —and all the sinful disciples beyond them.

—Michael Frost & Alan Hirsh<sup>85</sup>

Jesus lives and ministers in a time when the majority of the world believes in gods who manipulate humanity. Yet Jesus comes, fully God, and also becomes fully human. He walks as one of us. We often think of this as simply the work of Christ to reconcile us to God. But it is also to reconcile us back to ourselves and our original call. Humanity has always been called to

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<sup>85</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 1, sec. 2, Kindle.



reveal the greatness of God. (We will look at this in more detail in the section: Some Latin.)

Jesus could have come and done all things and never involved another human. But that is not what God wanted. Jesus calls disciples who he teaches and ministers to and with. Throughout Jesus' ministry, there are two key examples of when the disciples are entrusted with Jesus's work. What was Jesus doing? He made it clear in Luke 4:18-19:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Jesus' work was to preach good news to the poor. I once had a seminary professor say if it's not good news, and it's not for the poor, it's not the gospel. He came for freedom, he came for healing, and he came to liberate the oppressed. He came to let us know this is the time of God's favor and that favor is for all. Jesus did not just do these things by himself. He entrusted this work to his disciples as well, and not just to the twelve who were closest to him.

In Matthew 10 (also Mark 6 and Luke 9), Jesus sends out 12 disciples. He sends them with instructions to go only to the Jewish people, not the gentiles or the Samaritans. They are to go and let others know that the Kingdom of God has come. They are to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with skin diseases, and cast out demons. How's that for a job description!? It sounds an awful lot like what he said his own mission was. They were not to take payment for this. Instead, they were instructed to stay with strangers. He warned them that people would harass them as they had harassed Jesus. And here's the best part... THEY WENT! If we posted this job description and pay schedule, I don't think we'd get any applicants! Yet Jesus sent them with no other training than spending time with him. Jesus was willing to risk his reputation as the Messiah and the Son of God on these 12.

Then in Luke 10, Jesus sends 72 people out with the same authority.<sup>86</sup> Had they been with Jesus as long as the disciples? Probably not. YET, he sends them with the same instructions. Go, tell others that the Kingdom of God has come. Cure the sick. Do the things you've seen me do. Accept no pay. Stay in strangers' homes and eat and drink only what they provide for you. And people will harass you. Again... who among us today raises our hands for that job?! Yet they GO! They come back and tell Jesus that even the demons obeyed them, and they cast demons out (they did more than Jesus asked of them!).

### REFLECTION

The only qualification Jesus seems to have when calling the 12 and the 72 is that they have spent time with Jesus. They've seen Jesus do the work, now it's their turn. Why do you think we add additional qualifiers on ourselves and others before we can do the work of God? Do you feel qualified to do the work Jesus did?

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<sup>86</sup>Some translations say he sent out 70 – either way, that's a lot of people!

However, in Mark 9, we see them fail. Someone brought their demon-possessed boy to the disciples. (Why the disciples and not Jesus? Perhaps the one who brings the boy expects them to take him to Jesus? Or maybe they had seen the disciples do the same work as Jesus.) Yet, they are unsuccessful. They asked Jesus why they were not able to cast out the demon and Jesus responded, “Throwing this kind of spirit out requires prayer.”<sup>87</sup> I love it. They hadn’t tried prayer yet! See, Jesus allowed them to practice ministry. He didn’t expect perfection. He allowed them to mess up and learn. They had spent time with Jesus and were able to fail safely.

All of this was in preparation for coming after Jesus ascended. “What he did was to prepare a community chosen to be the bearer of the secret of the kingdom.”<sup>88</sup> When Jesus ascends, he hands over the work he began. In Matthew, the charge is given,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.<sup>89</sup>

And, in Acts, we hear Jesus say very similar words to the disciples before he ascends.<sup>90</sup> They are to be his witnesses, teach what they learned, and carry on the work they began to do while he was with them. Now the focus shifts to include not just their Jewish brothers and sisters but to take the message to the nations, which in Greek is clear it means to take the message to the

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<sup>87</sup>Mk 9:29.

<sup>88</sup>Leslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 133.

<sup>89</sup>Mt 28:19-20.

<sup>90</sup>Acts 1:8.

gentiles.<sup>91</sup> They are responsible for making sure the work and message of Jesus continues, even though Jesus had ascended. They are imbued with power from on high on the day of Pentecost. In this work, they were not “copiers of Christ but continuing incarnations of Jesus.”<sup>92</sup>

This continuing of the incarnation did not stop with the apostles, nor is it relegated to those within scripture. There was no copyright on the work of Jesus or the work of the apostles. The work continues and has been passed down through the generations and centuries until now. “The ‘not yet’ aspect of the kingdom of God means that the Acts of the Apostles is still being written by the church in every age, including the contemporary one.”<sup>93</sup> They had spent time with Jesus, had learned from him, and learned to emulate him. These ordinary people allowed the Holy Spirit to work within them and then spread the message to the very ends of the known world.

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<sup>91</sup>Leander E. Keck, ed, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. VII, New Testament Articles, Matthew, Mark, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 503.

<sup>92</sup>Leonard Sweet. *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2019), 219.

<sup>93</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 1, sec. 2, Kindle.

## REFLECTION

We see the disciples not get it right a lot, but in Mark 9 we see them mess it up publicly! They're asked to cast out a demon and they cannot. Sometimes the reason we are not willing to live a radical faith or willing to take risks for God is because we are afraid we will fail. Read Mark 9:14-29. Notice Jesus' reactions within the story. Jesus uses this as a teaching opportunity. Do you see your failures as learning opportunities?

God risks God's story and God's work in our world to us! "God continues to take great risk (Phil 2) in reaching out to us, refusing to save the world without us. Jesus Christ is not only God helping us but also God's incredible vulnerability in summoning us to help God's work of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18)."<sup>94</sup> Jesus did not leave behind a simple teaching or recorded word. Instead, he left a community he created. This community was to continue to announce that the

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<sup>94</sup>William H. Willimon, *Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 16.

kingdom of God had come and that Jesus, through them, would continue to preach the good news to the poor, heal, give freedom, liberate the oppressed, and proclaim God's favor for all.

This Jesus who lived once in Israel now lives in us right here in the keys. The story that began at the dawn of time and arched two thousand years ago continues *in us*. We are part of the living of God's story started in creation. We find ourselves somewhere between Jude and Revelation. And the same God of Acts has not changed. God is still willing to risk God's story, God's love, and God's ministry in us! This is why, as Methodists, we consider the church to be "a means of grace, an embodiment of God's power to create, heal, forgive, reconcile, and transform the world."<sup>95</sup> Remember, a means of grace is something through which we get God's grace, God's unmerited favor, and love. It is vital for us to begin to see ourselves as a means of grace, to know that we are God's workmanship. "His *poiema* (Eph 2:10)—the Greek term from which we get our modern English word poetry. In a very real way, then, we are Christ's physical poems. We are the living words of the living Word written into the drama of the divine author."<sup>96</sup> You are the one who represents the living Christ. You are his poem to the world. You are one of the ones entrusted with the life-changing message of the gospel.

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<sup>95</sup>Kenneth Carder, *Living Our Beliefs: The United Methodist Way* revised ed. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2013), 123.

<sup>96</sup>Thomas J. Terry and Ryan J. Lister *Images and Idols: Creativity for the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 36.

## REFLECTION

Jesus entrusted the same work he was doing while on earth to the disciples and they have in turn entrusted it to us. How are you teaching others what you have learned as you have spent time with God?

Perhaps this is why Peter reminds us that we are all a part of the priesthood of believers.<sup>97</sup>

By virtue of the baptismal water (and maybe, like Cornelius, even without it), God works in us and through us and calls us to the work of the kingdom.<sup>98</sup> We are all now members together of the Body of Christ; we are a chosen people to be a royal priesthood, to be God's own possession,

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<sup>97</sup>1 Pt 2:9.

<sup>98</sup>Acts 10:45-47.

to tell others of the things God has done. We have the privilege of incarnating Jesus in the world and letting the Holy Spirit do even greater things than Jesus did through us!<sup>99</sup>

## REFLECTION

Since we are living what will be the history of the church, what do you want it to be said of us at KWUMC? 10, 20, 50 years from now, what do you hope our legacy will be?

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<sup>99</sup>Jn 14:12.



### *Some Latin*

Some things don't translate well into other languages. Like the Inuit/Yupik, who have 40-50 words for our one: snow. The same is true of some Latin phrases we use in theology. These words teach us WHY God would take this biggest risk of all: entrusting us with the work of the Kingdom of God.

### *MISSIO DEI*

Mission is not an activity of the church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God, Jesus is a missionary Messiah, and the spirit is a missionary spirit.  
Missions is the family business.—Leonard Sweet

The work we are part of is not our own. It is God's. The international ministry council in 1952 leaned on the work of Karl Barth and coined the phrase, *Missio Dei*," which is Latin for Mission of God.<sup>100</sup> When we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, we become participants of the *Missio Dei*. We join God in God's work. You see, God loves the world so much that he not just sent his son into the world, but he also sends us, the Church, in mission. When we are "on mission," we are really on the mission of God. It's God's work, and it's God's work in us and through us.

We are the result of the *Missio Dei*, and we are entrusted with carrying it on. It is to be our defining characteristic. This is why the Florida Annual Conference tracks what we call "professions of faith," and when people return to God and the church, we measure that as

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<sup>100</sup>Anthony J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 10-11.

“reaffirmations of faith.” We measure it because it matters. Here at Key West UMC, we have seen 213 people come to faith since 1997 (when they began to measure), with an average of 9 people per year. That’s incredible in an age when the majority of the churches in Florida do not see a single profession of faith. Yet, it became easy to lose sight of this with the pandemic, especially as we shifted to having a congregation online. How can we continue to be on mission in light of our new realities? When we are in mission, it is our “acted out acted out doxology. That is its deepest secret. Its purpose is that God may be glorified.”<sup>101</sup>

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## REFLECTION

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Before the pandemic hit, we averaged 9 people coming to Jesus at our church each year. Since the pandemic we have only had 1! It’s time we dream of new ways to do ministry in this pandemic world.

One of my seminary professors loved to remind us that God has more invested in our ministry than we do. Therefore, there is no need to worry about failure. You did not create the story; you are simply a part of it. Often, when I have challenged people to be a part of the *Missio Dei*, wonder what if...? What if I try to talk to someone about Jesus and they reject me? What if I say yes to serving and I’m terrible at it or fail? The good news is that it is not yours to worry

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<sup>101</sup>Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 127.

about. If you get rejected, you are in good company as Jesus was rejected by many, including his closest friend. If you fail, know you can't fail so badly that you ruin the mission, because it's not your mission, to begin with. God who risks, risks letting us be a part of the *Missio Dei*; this is why we are created.

### *IMAGO DEI*

Part of the image of God in us is found in our yearning  
for a purpose greater than ourselves.—Adam Hamilton

Our next Latin phrase is *Imago Dei*. *Imago Dei* means the image of God. It comes from Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, 'Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth. God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them.'

I have had many questions about what it means to be made in the image of God. No one has seen God, so can we say that we are made in the image of God?

The word image in this passage, in Hebrew, is literally idol.<sup>102</sup> One way to define an idol is something carved into an image of a god that cannot otherwise be seen. Cultures around the Hebrew people had all sorts of idols. This passage in Genesis should be understood alongside the command from Leviticus 19:4, "Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the Lord your God." We are not to have them because we are to BE them. We are the imperfect

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<sup>102</sup>It is the same word used in 2 Kings 11:18 "Then all the people of the land went to the house of Baal and tore it down; his altars and his IMAGES they broke in pieces, and they killed Mattan the priest of Baal before the altars. And the priest posted watchmen over the house of the LORD." The word is *tzelem*.

reflection of God in this world created with God's traits. Each of us is a small reflection of the Creator. The temptation of Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge was based on a lie. The serpent tells Eve that she will become like God if she eats from the tree, knowing good and evil. She forgot (or to be generous, perhaps did not know) that she already was like God. Like God, she could love. Like God, she could do good. Like God, she could create life.<sup>103</sup> She got duped!

In the New Testament, Paul reiterates this calling, but instead of the word "image," we are to be ambassadors (representatives) of Jesus.<sup>104</sup> Ambassadors in our modern context serve their country as the representative of their country to another. In the same way, we are representatives of Jesus, created in God's image, for others. "God has designed us as decision

## REFLECTION

You are created in the image of God. List out the traits that you see in yourself that reflect this truth.

<sup>103</sup>The first creation account (Genesis one) has humanity as the crowing achievement of creation, made in the image of God. They are told to be fruitful and multiply. This is before Genesis 3 and the encounter with the Tree of Knowledge.

<sup>104</sup>2 Cor 5:20.

makers in his very image, as agents of the kingdom, not only to partake in history, but to prayerfully shape and direct it in his name as a true act of worship.”<sup>105</sup> Since we are created in the *Imago Dei*, and since God risks, we too are created to risk and are expected to risk in our continuation of the *Missio Dei*.

## PARTICIPATE CHRISTI

The participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus... *participate Christi*.  
—Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh

Created in the *Imago Dei* and called to be a part of the *Missio Dei*, we become *participate Christi* as we pick up the mantle of those who have gone before us and carried on the work of Christ. How often have you heard from pulpits that we are to seek to be like Jesus? While there is truth to that, it falls short. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. And if we are to follow him, we ought to take his words seriously when he says that we will not just do what he does, but will do even greater things by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>106</sup>

How is that possible? I don’t know about you, but I have not yet been used to heal the sick, cast out demons, or raise the dead, so how can we do greater things? Here is the beautiful reality of what Christ did for us in ascending to heaven and sending the Holy Spirit: where Jesus, as fully human, could only be in one place at one time, as the Holy Spirit indwells each of us the

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<sup>105</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh. *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Introduction, Kindle.

<sup>106</sup>Jn 14:12.

presence and power of Jesus are spread all over the globe. Jesus isn't relegated to Israel now. In humanity, he lives on all continents and at all times. God's biggest risk of all is entrusting the *Missio Dei* to us, risking that we could reject that call, and risking the reputation of God on us. We are not so important that God cannot reach people without us. As Vincent Donovan wrote, "Whether you or others are called to continue the work of the gospel makes little difference. It is neither your work nor theirs, but the work of the Spirit who moves beyond all of us, and leads all of us to the awareness of the One constantly pursuing the evangelist, the evangelized and the unevangelized, leads us all finally and ultimately to the awareness of the lion who is God."<sup>107</sup>

God is bigger than us, bigger than our mess-ups, and bigger than our negligence to the mission of God. And, at the same time, we are held accountable by God to the things which God has called us. One day, face-to-face before our creator, we will be asked how we participated with Christ, how we attended to the *Missio Dei*, and how we lived out of the *Imago Dei*. And, if we could learn anything from our current situation within the United States, it might be worth noting how often the church has damaged her own reputation and the reputation of others. It is attributed to Gandhi that he said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."<sup>108</sup> Whether he said that for sure is unknown, but he did say to E. Stanley Jones, "I would suggest four things: First, that all of you Christians, missionaries and all, must begin to live more like Jesus Christ ..."<sup>109</sup> So the sentiment of Gandhi

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<sup>107</sup>Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 134.

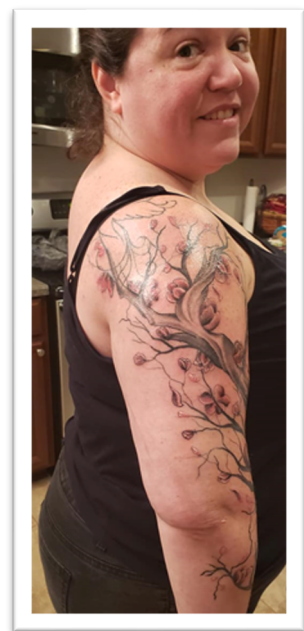
<sup>108</sup>It is attributed to him but there is no primary source.

<sup>109</sup>E. Stanley Jones. *The Word Became Flesh* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), 138.

indeed was there. And this sentiment has only spread since the time of Gandhi. We should take the call to participate with Christ in the Missio Dei extremely seriously. It is a risk God has taken on us, and we will answer for how we handled the call.

## REFLECTION

Why do you think Gandhi's sentiment of liking Jesus but not liking Christians is growing? We see this in the large number of people who are "Spiritual but not religious." What might we do differently at Old Stone to help people like not just Jesus, but Christians as well?



I have a large tattoo on my right arm. It is a reminder of this very principle. The tattoo that most assume is a cherry blossom is the branch of an almond tree that is budding, blossoming, and fruiting. It points to Numbers 17, all the tribes of Israel place a branch before the Ark of the Covenant, and Aaron's branch buds, blossoms, and fruits; this is the almond branch. Then, in Jeremiah, the prophet sees an almond branch, and God tells Jeremiah, "You are right, for I'm

watching over my word until it is fulfilled.”<sup>110</sup> This tattoo reminds me of my own call from God, and God’s faithfulness to watch over the work of God. But it is also a symbol for us all. Leonard Sweet wrote, “Aaron’s rod was a key symbol. The blooming rod symbolizes the ministry of each of us. And each of us is uniquely chosen by God. Each of us has a unique voice and a unique walk with God, yet all of us have a place within the community of faith. God’s wish for all of us is to become ‘living rods’ of faith, to bring forth buds and bear fruit, not to remain a dead piece of wood but to be a green branch, fresh in faith going forward into the world as a follower of Christ.”<sup>111</sup>

We hold our call with open hands, faithful to obey the call, and trusting that it is the Holy Spirit at work within us that we might bear fruit. So, while we have a responsibility, we also need the humility to recognize it is God at work through us. Through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we then become members of the priesthood of all believers. Each of us working as priests before the Lord, connecting people to a God who has always, always longed to be in a relationship with humanity. If, then, we are the priesthood of all believers, shouldn’t we be willing to take some risks for the one for whom we are in service of?

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<sup>110</sup>Jer 1:12.

<sup>111</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 260.



### *Honor Our Lineage*

We all carry within us this lineage of fearlessness.—Margaret Wheatley

When we are willing to take risks for the Kingdom of God, we honor not only God but also the incredible lineage we have. There have been attempts in recent history for the church to return to the practices of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. There is no shortage of terms applied to this and no shortage of theologians and pastors to turn to.<sup>112</sup> Yet, we cannot go back, no more than we can go back to before the pandemic. Nor do we re-create Christianity each generation. To subscribe to this is to step outside of the *Missio Dei*. God did not create us to move backwards. Our feet, our face, our body, point forward. At the same time, as we move forward we lean back onto the generations that have come before us. Like children on a swing set, as we lean back (gaining energy from the past) and as we move forward we kick to give us increased energy and momentum. “We also turn to our roots and seek what it was in the past that enabled persons like us to live courageously and faithfully in their time period. What was it that bound them to God and God's presence and power? What was it that bound them together in a common endeavor that challenged in transform them to a holy and righteous movement?”<sup>113</sup> What can we learn from those who have come before us?

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<sup>112</sup>Flip through Brian McLaren *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009) for a quick delineation of these various attempts.

<sup>113</sup>Reuben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 9.

Turn the pages of your New Testament and you will see person after person who not only risked, but risked their life for the kingdom of God. Paul takes pride in this and this only. In 2 Corinthians Paul boasts;

I've been imprisoned much more often. I've been beaten more times than I can count. I've faced death many times. I received the "forty lashes minus one" from the Jews five times. I was beaten with rods three times. I was stoned once. I was shipwrecked three times. I spent a day and a night on the open sea. I've been on many journeys. I faced dangers from rivers, robbers, my people, and Gentiles. I faced dangers in the city, in the desert, on the sea, and from false brothers and sisters. I faced these dangers with hard work and heavy labor, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, and in the cold without enough clothes.<sup>114</sup>

"Forty lashes minus one" was given as a punishment because it was thought that forty lashes would kill you, so they took you to the point of death without killing you. That happened to him FIVE times. Plus being beaten with rods, stoned (as in attempting to stone him TO DEATH), shipwrecked, and more. Paul not only risked, but risked it all time and time again. THIS is part of the heritage we have.

And by no means is Paul alone. Scripture records those who were martyred for the Kingdom. For the first three centuries to be a Christian was to be willing to risk your life for your own beliefs. "The martyrs recognized that discipleship would require risk, but they did not step back from it. They lived for something bigger than self-preservation, so the threat of death could not scare them into unfaithfulness. They were sustained by communities that not only taught them courage, but promised to tell their stories to future generations, assuring them that their

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<sup>114</sup> 2 Cor 11:23b-27.

sacrifice would not be forgotten. The courage of the martyr relies upon the courage of the community that dares to keep the martyr's story alive. Today more than ever, our churches need to be telling and celebrating their stories."<sup>115</sup>

## RITUALIZE

Every day people live out their faith in places where it may mean their death or harm to them or their family. Go to [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com), the website for The Voice of the Martyrs. You can subscribe to their email list and learn of these people and places.

Begin today by taking time each day to pray for those who are persecuted for their faith. Take time to also thank God for the freedoms we have to practice our own faith.

And lest we think this somehow stopped, there are still Christians around the world who risk their lives for their beliefs in Jesus. We have quite an inheritance within the wider Christian body. But we also have a great inheritance of risk within our own denomination. John Wesley risked in taking his message of reform to the streets. He said of himself that he vowed "to be more vile."<sup>116</sup> What did he mean by that? He was willing to break with social protocols and preach in the streets and fields. He was chastised because he was "meddling" in other clergy member's areas. But he did this out of an understanding of the call to do all the good he could. The second general rule

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<sup>115</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh. *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 2, sec. 1, Kindle.

<sup>116</sup>Paul Chilcote, *John and Charles Wesley: Selections from Their Writings and Hymns – Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2011), Introduction, Kindle.

of Methodism, to do all the good you can, is what motivated him to take the message of reform and the message of Jesus to the streets, to the mines, and to every nook and cranny he could find. For John Wesley there was no greater good one could do than to spread the message of Jesus.

## REFLECTION

Some things have not changed since the time of John Wesley. He was reviled by other preachers because he preached in their area. They were concerned about a competition. But the truth is they were all on the same side, all part of the church. Where do you see competition in the church, in yourself, or in our denomination? How might we move toward cooperation over competition?

Another person of our heritage that took great risks, and the one who has inspired me to do this work and this writing is someone mostly forgotten by Methodists. His name is Robert Strawbridge. He'd heard Wesley's message while in Ireland. And as you may know the Irish and the English have not always gotten along. So many Irish Methodists did not always obey Wesley's command to remain Anglicans (which again, the head of the Anglican Church is the Sovereign of England and this caused issue with the Irish as they did not want any English control). Strawbridge emigrated to the United States before John Wesley ever officially sent Methodist pastors, and well before Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke (the first American Bishops) were sent.

When he arrived, he was so in love with God and so moved by Wesley's understanding of doing good that he began to form Methodist Societies in America. He was tied for first with another person Captain Thomas Webb. But Strawbridge didn't just risk in sharing the message of grace found within Methodism, he took it one step further and, though a lay person, stood in as priest for those who had no priest. He served communion and baptized persons in his society. As previously mentioned John Wesley never sought to form a new denomination. He insisted that Methodists remain members of their Anglican parish and go there for baptism and communion. However, these were hard to come by in pre-revolutionary-war Maryland where Strawbridge ministered. So, to do the most good possible he offered communion and baptized members into the faith, though not a pastor. In our tradition these sacraments are only to be done by a clergy person. When Francis Asbury arrived he asked Strawbridge to stop.

## REFLECTION

My hero, Robert Strawbridge, not only risked but broke the rules. Take some time to think about rules that may be in place that are worth breaking for the sake of doing the most good and for the sake of helping others know God.

Strawbridge did not. One of the primary places this hero of mine is remembered is in Asbury's journals as he complains about Strawbridge. Asbury and others made attempts at scrubbing Strawbridge's name from the official records and did not allow him to become clergy or to be a part of the General Conferences (the official voice of the Methodist church).

When left to our own design we turn inward and seek out the status quo. As the church faces its current liminal reality and is on the precipice of something new, perhaps it is time to release the Robert Strawbridges of the twenty-first century. It's time we stand on the shoulders of those who went before us and began to risk for the Kingdom of God. It's time we risk in order to do all the good we can.

*Oxymoron: A Risk Averse Church*

Sanctuary should not mean a place of safety from risks,  
but a safe place to take risks and a place to deepen a risk-all faith. —Leonard Sweet

Considering that God has entrusted the work of the Kingdom to us (and fulfills this work through us as we indwell the Holy Spirit) and considering that we are created in the *Imago Dei* to be participate with Jesus in the *Missio Dei*, and considering our lineage of risk takers, it only makes sense that we also risk. There should be no such thing as a risk-averse church. That is an oxymoron. For if Christ took risks, and if the Church is the body of Christ, it is foolish for us to choose safety and

## RITUALIZE

Jesus said that we are not to be anxious, not to worry. If you find yourself to be a worrier or someone who struggles with anxiety take time each day to be mindful. Mindfulness is about being in the moment. As someone with an anxiety disorder I know how easy it is to worry about something that happened or will happen. Ask God to help you stay in the moment. The present is a gift.

comfort over risking for the Kingdom of God. When the church opts for safety and security over risk we are denying who we are meant to be and dishonoring the lineage of generations who risked their lives that others may know and love God through Jesus.

“Being risk-averse is problematic for a meaningful life in the world for any person, but especially so for Christians. Encouraging God’s reign in the world requires taking risks. We collaborate with the One who says, ‘[D]o not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall wear. ... But seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.’ (Matt. 6:25, 33).”<sup>117</sup>

Having sought our preservation and our safety we become more akin to museums dedicated to staring at our own exhibits, instead of opening the doors and displaying all that God has done in us and longs to do through us. In the words of Michael Slaughter,

Now is not the time, church, to hunker down in the bunkers of our sanctuaries and fellowship halls to wait out this economic tsunami. Today is the day of salvation! Today is the day of the Lord! Now is the time for the people of God to arise! Now is the time for the church to be the church! Why must we step out and risk in this time of great economic uncertainty? Not because we will have fun (there will be some out-of-sight adventure along the way, however), not because the mission will lack risk or loss, not because it will reverse our financial situations, and not because it will make us happy. We must go because that is where Jesus is going. We must go because Jesus calls us to go with him. We must go because it is the will of the Father!<sup>118</sup>

What would it look like for us to take risks as a congregation?

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<sup>117</sup>Richard Foster. *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 171.

<sup>118</sup>Michael B. Slaughter, *Change the World: Recovering the Message and Mission of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), chap 2 sec 5, Kindle. (Slaughter was writing to churches during the Great Recession.)

*There is No Plan B*

The church doesn't *have* an agenda; it *is* the agenda. The church doesn't *have* a missional strategy; it *is* the missional strategy.—Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh

Why is it so important for the church to be able and willing to take risks? Because there is no plan B. We are it. Many evangelical pastors have said that the church *is* the hope of the world. There is a caveat needed there, though. We *share* the hope of the world as Christ indwells us. In and of ourselves we are not the hope, in fact, when we stray away from God, when we turn inward, when we seek only to preserve an institution we are not hope at all. We are a turn off! Jesus is the hope of the world. With the Holy Spirit we are part of the inbreaking. We are plan A, we are the hands and feet of Jesus, we incarnate the living God in the world. We do this together. It's not a building or one person, it's the Church universal. And we do this best when we live out of an understanding that we exist for others, not for ourselves. "The church can exist only insofar as it is in mission, insofar as it participates in the act of Christ, which is mission."<sup>119</sup>

Jesus is the only hope of the world, and he calls us to participate with him in the mission of God to bring in the kingdom. It is not a call for someone else out there. It is our call, each one of us who call Jesus Lord. "We must be willing to dream again, to innovate, and to risk the rejection of peers who think that the status quo is sufficient to the task. The church should be one of the most adventurous places on earth—the locus of all quest, the highly adaptive Jesus community at the very forefront of what God is doing in the world. But let's be honest—this is

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<sup>119</sup>Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 77.



not the case with the church-as-we-know-it.”<sup>120</sup> What if we made a change. If not us, who? If not now, when? Perhaps we were born for just a time as this.

### RITUALIZE

Practice having daily affirmations. These are short sayings one says before beginning their day or before facing a challenge. Write out some affirmations, maybe even affirmations of faith, that you can use each day. Here are a couple of examples:

- JESUS WILL WORK THROUGH ME  
TODAY
- WHEN I TAKE A RISK FOR GOD I’M  
LIVING OUT WHO GOD MADE ME TO  
BE

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<sup>120</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh. *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Introduction, Kindle.

## Chapter 4: ZERO TO ONE

Know your disease! Know your cure!—John Wesley

Inertia is another word for “sin.”—Leonard Sweet

There are two sayings that I love. The first is, “The longest distance is the space between head and heart.” Meaning knowing something is different from feeling or doing something. It is certainly true in my own life. For example, I know I need to practice self-care but that doesn’t mean I always do it. The second saying is, “The hardest step is from zero to one.” “To learn how to go from zero to one—from nothing to something—to overcome inertia with initiative, is to develop one of life’s most constructive ‘crossover’ skills.”<sup>121</sup> Think about the times you have resolved to do something; – perhaps it was to work out, or begin saving for retirement, maybe it was that first step towards entering a relationship with someone. How long did it take you to go from thinking about it to doing it? For some of us who are more impulsive by nature, perhaps it doesn’t take as long.

We can get stuck in the paralysis of analysis. I have done some work with the Fresh Expressions of Church movement in the Florida Annual Conference. I have found in seeking to help others launch these new faith communities that we fall into our habits of wanting to study how to do it and be perfectly prepared before we launch. Because, “What if it fails?!” Lest we get stuck in our heads, or in thinking about taking risks and not actually taking risks. “Lifeway

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<sup>121</sup>Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch 2.0: Piloting Your Church in Today’s Fluid Culture* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 111.

Research conducted a study of seven thousand churches under the supervision of Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer. One of the most surprising findings? Passivity reigns. The majority of people in the majority of churches are not engaged in any significant ministry or mission. Christians have become passive spectators in worship rather than active participants.”<sup>122</sup> How do we overcome this passivity? We start by starting! We tend to heroize risk takers like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. But as Adam Grant wrote, “I want to debunk the myth that originality requires extreme risk taking and persuade you that originals are actually far more ordinary than we realize. In every domain, from business and politics to science and art, the people who move the world forward with original ideas are rarely paragons of conviction and commitment.”<sup>123</sup> Let’s see just

## REFLECTION

Stetzer and Rainer found that passivity reigns in the church.

- Do you think this is true for Key West UMC?
- Do you think it is true of you? If it is true for you do you find it true in multiple areas of your life or only one?
- Take time to pray and think about passivity in your own life.

<sup>122</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 23.

<sup>123</sup>Adam Grant, *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 13-16.

how we might go from no risk to a small step of risking, from inertia to motion, from passivity and potential to passion and action.

*You Already Risk – Tacit & Focal Risks*

As a hazing ritual Dr. Leonard Sweet has all of his doctoral students read *Personal Knowledge* by Michael Polanyi. I think he likes to watch his students squirm, but I also know it's because Polanyi is foundational to Dr. Sweet's approach to semiotics, ministry, and life. And, on the other side of the hazing I cannot express how eternally grateful I am for the re-introduction and deep dive into Polanyi.<sup>124</sup> Polanyi was a polymath; he was a physician turned researcher in physical chemistry, turned philosopher of science, turned theologian. A brilliant person on whose shoulders many stand, and I now humbly lean. In *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi addressed tacit and focal awareness. Tacit awareness is how we use tools. As I type I don't pay attention to the keyboard. I pay attention to my thoughts and the screen. My hands seem to go on their own to find the correct keys. (My high school typing teacher would be so proud!) More famously, Polanyi gives the example of how a person who has sight impairment uses a cane. They are not paying attention to the cane, but using it to be aware of their

TACIT – when you attend to one thing from another, like when using a tool.

FOCAL – what your attention is actively focused on

Polanyi 101

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<sup>124</sup>If you have read anything by Leslie Newbigin you will come across Polanyi there as well as Polanyi influenced Newbigin, especially in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Age*.

surroundings. The other form of awareness is focal awareness. As I type I am focally aware of the words on the screen and the thoughts in my head. As a sight-impaired person uses their cane, they are focally aware of the objects in front of and around them so they do not trip.

I share this to let you know that you are tacitly aware of all sorts of things. That is, you are constantly using tacit focus to be focally aware of something else. As you read these words you are tacitly focused on the words but focally aware of their meaning. Likewise, you have been risking all along, but doing it tacitly. Our culture is so very obsessed with risk-avoidance that perhaps you think you haven't taken a risk. Yet here are some examples of risk we participate in all the time. When we exercise our creativity in art or music we are taking on the risks of rejection and disapproval, or that we will be able to pull off the thing we are trying to do. You may be surprised to know that you risk with your retirement accounts (especially if they are invested in the stock market – though 2008 certainly taught us this lesson the hard way). Your

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## REFLECTION

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As you learn about tacit and focal awareness. Spend some time thinking about or journaling about how you use tacit and focal awareness in your life. What tools do you use? How do you use these tools to focus and attend to something else? Also take a moment to think through what risks you are already taking without being focally aware.

broker picks the stocks to invest in by using the S&P Futures, but that is only 30 stocks, a small sampling. It's not the entirety of the market. Your selected stocks could be climbing while the Futures are trending down, it's a risk that we take (or is taken for us).

Since we do not know what our future holds, we risk all the time, but we do it in ways that make us feel safe. The very nature of our zip code implies our willingness to abide risk. It has been almost 100 years since a level 5 hurricane has wiped out any part of the keys, and only a few years since Irma (a level four) came across the lower keys. We have no idea when the next one will come. Yet we go around blissful, ever hopeful that we will be spared and we light the candle in the grotto just in case. You've risked with technology as you learn new things, you've risked when you've loved. After all, "Learning to love, and therefore becoming mature, is no mean feat. It requires putting oneself on the line and embracing the risk, even likelihood, of pain and suffering. St. Augustine is right when he notes in his confessions that every new love contains 'the seeds of fresh sorrows.'"<sup>125</sup> Love is uncertain and risky. Brené Brown writes to this fact and encourages vulnerability in relationships. But even that vulnerability requires that we first be willing to risk.

When we attend to things tacitly, Polanyi says, we indwell them. The tool becomes an extension of who we are. Then pen, the paint brush, the keyboard, the knife, we indwell each of these tools as we use them. However, I want to introduce you to a different version of indwelling. E. Stanley Jones introduced me to the indwelling of the spirit. I highly recommend

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<sup>125</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 3. sec. 4, Kindle.

the devotional book *The Word Became Flesh* to learn of this more deeply.<sup>126</sup> The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, is the realization that the Holy Spirit dwells within us. There's no shortage of writings about this (many from the Pentecostal tradition) but Jones grounds this indwelling in scripture and in practice. I introduce you to

indwelling of the Holy Spirit to let you know that as the Holy Spirit abides with us and dwells within us we can lean on the Holy Spirit to enable us to risk for the Kingdom of God.

The biggest risk of all is the one we take far too often—the risk of not trying. “How is not trying a risk? You risk settling and continuing in the same direction in the same way, wondering about other paths and possibilities, believing that this is as good as it gets while discontent gnaws

#### RECOMMENDED

#### DEVOTIONAL:

*The Word Became Flesh*

By E. Stanley Jones

Available in print & e-book

### REFLECTION

The biggest risk is the one not taken. We often call this regret. We can regret things we've done, but we can also regret the things we've left undone. That second form are also known as sins of omission. Take time to reflect on what risks you could have taken and didn't. Spend time imagining how the world would be different if you had taken those risks.

<sup>126</sup>E. Stanley Jones, *The Word Became Flesh* (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1963).

## RITUALIZE

You may notice many times as I reflect on scripture throughout this text (or if you've heard me preach I do it there as well) that I try to connect the dots between history and text. But I also use a Scriptural Imagination. In the narratives within scripture we don't get 100% of the details. As you read scripture, try to imagine the rest of the story. Start by turning to Exodus 32 and reading it with a scriptural imagination.

For more on using a scriptural imagination I suggest reading Bishop Ken Carter's *A Beginner's Guide to Practicing Scriptural Imagination* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2019).

away at your soul.”<sup>127</sup> The risks we have taken, and the ones we have avoided are all risks. The goal now is to overcome the tendency towards not risking, and to overcome the inertia that holds us in place. As Newton said, “an object at rest stays at rest until acted upon by an outside force.”

Come, Holy Spirit, act upon us that we may be moved by you! May our fear of missing out on the things of God be greater than our fear of messing up. It is my prayer that God would teach us to risk in the same ways God has risked for us.

### *What is Your Idol?*

The spirit of bondage and fear is widely distant from this loving Spirit of adoption. Those who are influenced only by slavish fear cannot be termed the sons of God.  
—John Wesley

One of my favorite passages of scripture is Exodus 32. It is the story of the Hebrew people having Aaron shape a god while Moses is off talking face-to-face with God. It shows how often we settle when there is something so much greater ahead of us. Allow me to tell you the story. The Hebrew people, who have constantly complained through their desert wanderings do

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<sup>127</sup>Rob Bell, *How to Be Here* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 118.



not stop just because they've reached Mt. Sinai. When they get to Mt. Sinai, God gives them the 10 commandments and the multitude of other commandments. God had longed to talk with all of Israel directly but they asked for Moses to be an intermediary because they were afraid. So, after Moses completed the hard work of climbing a mountain and was speaking with God face-to-face, the Israelites ask Aaron to fashion a god for them. Aaron complies. As this is happening, God tells Moses what is going on and wants to smite the Israelites because they're forming this calf while God is giving the Law to Moses. But Moses talks God down. When Moses climbs back down the mountain with the tablets that have been written on BY GOD and sees what they have done, he too is angry and smashes the tablets.

Moses asks Aaron what happened and my favorite part is Aaron's response. (Please read the following in the voice of a teenager who "has no idea" what happened to the car you entrusted to them yet came home smashed up). "They said to me, 'Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!'"<sup>128</sup> *So I threw it in the fire and out came THIS CALF!* How the gold spontaneously forms itself in the fire into a formed calf Aaron gives no explanation. They made him do it, too. Did you catch that? He also has no idea how the calf was formed. *Right!*

You may not have a golden calf in your home, and I'm sure you're not throwing your gold into the fire to see what comes out – but that doesn't mean we're safe from idols! Idols

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<sup>128</sup> Ex 32:23-24.

aren't just a representation of a god. They are anything we put before our one true God.<sup>129</sup> What are you putting before God? Are you putting your desire for safety? Your comfort? Your reputation? Your assurance of what you think your present and future holds? Your power or prestige? How are these things idols you may be asking? They are only idols when placed ahead of God. So too, money and self can be idols when given more attention to than God. When we are not willing to follow God's call because we have to risk our safety or our comfort or our reputation, those things become idols. We have tamed Jesus. And, "the more tame and sanitized our Jesus is, the less he resembles the Jesus of the Gospels, and this in turn has a big impact on the way Christians live out their faith."<sup>130</sup> Jesus is the one who calls us deny ourselves and take up our cross. That's not some metaphor, he called his first disciples and calls us also to be willing to give up everything: our safety, our comforts, our reputations, our assurances. This is not a challenge for many around the world. Christians in Nigeria, in Indonesia, in Sri Lanka, and in sixteen other countries risk their safety and their lives for their beliefs every day. Not to mention the over forty countries where Christianity is restricted.<sup>131</sup> Yet in our cushy, first-world, safe (comparatively) American churches we tend towards safety and comfort and these can become our idols. "When our need for security becomes obsessive, we remove ourselves from

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<sup>129</sup> Ex 20:3.

<sup>130</sup> Alan Hirsch and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 50.

<sup>131</sup> For more information on Christian martyrs see Voice of the Martyrs at [Persecution.com](http://Persecution.com).

the journey of discipleship. By then we have given in to insecurity, and the price is a high one—it becomes an enslaving idol.”<sup>132</sup>

Part of the idolatry we practice is a cult of leadership. American Christians operate our churches in such a way that ministry is reserved, for the professional paid staff or for the spiritual elite. (As if there was such a thing!) When we do this what we're really doing is modeling the world's ideals of leadership. In corporate America the best and brightest (presumably) are at the top.<sup>133</sup> This

What if I told you the only true requirements are: 1) knowing Jesus and 2) the authority given to you in your baptism. By virtue of your baptism you are a part of a royal priesthood set aside for the work God has called you to.

is not how it is to be with the church. The church is to be a place where ALL have permission to live out their calling to be part of the priesthood of all believers. Look at who Jesus called again: the lowly fishermen, the tax collectors, and the hated; and he sets them free to do ministry.

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<sup>132</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011) chap. 1, sec. 1, Kindle.

<sup>133</sup>Much could be written here about the systemic racism and sexism at work in the world and how it is not always the best and the brightest, but the best and brightest white men.

## REFLECTION

Take time to inventory your thoughts, habits, calendar, and bank account. What things, thoughts, people, concerns occupy most of your time. These could be your idols. If you still have trouble identifying idols in your life pray the prayer found in Psal 139, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

When I was in college and became a devoted Jesus follower I found myself tossed into the deep ends of leadership. New to the church and relatively new to the idea of being committed to Jesus I began leading Bible studies, preaching, doing communal ministry with people with no training. I'm sure there were times I got it very wrong, yet since then I've longed to replicate that model. When we do this, yes, we risk but we also step out in faith and trust that the Holy Spirit is bigger and better at ministry than we ever could be. We get it so wrong. What would it look like for us to give permission not just to those who are part of the church but to those who are part of our community to be in ministry together even if we don't have all the “right answers”? I've

often reminded people to praise God that God's acceptance of us is not based on our theology!

Why are we so afraid to entrust ministry to others?

## REFLECTION

What do you think you need to "be ready" to do ministry? Take a moment to reflect on this.

What if I told you the only true requirements are: 1) knowing Jesus and 2) the authority given to you in your baptism. By virtue of your baptism you are a part of a royal priesthood set aside for the work God has called you to.

And it is not just the idolatry of leadership and position within the kingdom. What about the need we feel for safety, are we placing that before God? Our campus when viewed from the street looks like a fortress. Metal on all the windows, locked doors, locked gates. Sure we're open for a few hours on Sunday, but the rest of the time we keep the campus locked down. Bishop Will Willimon wrote, "It is the nature of the body of Christ that locked doors are ultimately more costly to the survival of the church than open doors. There is a high price to be

paid for fearing the threat of the Other more than we fear disappointing Jesus.”<sup>134</sup> Yes we have had vandalism occur on our property and so there is a sense that we must protect what we have. But we also serve a God who is not short on resources or on the call for us to extend God’s love to others. The motto of the United Methodist Church, after all, is “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.”

It is easy for us to become consumed with our safety and our idols. Peter Stienke points out, “Similar to a virus, anxiety needs a host cell in order to replicate itself. All forms of murmuring require the reinforcement of a host cell (cells) to continue to grow.”<sup>135</sup> Once we begin to fear, to worry, to be anxious about what we have or don’t have and seek only to protect it we become the host cell for the virus of fear. It spreads from one person to another. What if instead we became hosts for the fruit of the Spirit: for peace, for patience, for kindness, for goodness, for gentleness, for love and for joy?

This is what Jesus did. And Jesus provides us with the template for our life and our ministry together. But when we allow for it, our idols and our preferences stand in the way of us risking for God. “Our preferences for stability and security blind us to the opportunities for adventure when they present themselves.”<sup>136</sup> We ought to do what Jesus asked, to let go of idols, to put God first, to love others as he loved them, and to risk our very lives by taking up our cross daily. May God help us to have eyes open to the opportunities for adventure that are before us.

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<sup>134</sup>William Willimon, *Fear of the Other; No Fear in Love* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 22.

<sup>135</sup>Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1996), 57.

<sup>136</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 1, sec. 1, Kindle.

**REFLECTION**

Mark Batterson, author, and pastor of National Community Church in Washington DC (my church when I lived there) says that our idols are like our Isaacs – from the story of Abraham and Isaac. If you're not sure what your idols may be as yourself:

- What do I find my identity in?
- What do I find my security in?
- What am I putting ahead of God?

*No Such Thing as Safety*

Becoming an adventurous, liminal church means getting over risk aversion.  
—Michael Frost & Alan Hirsh

Our culture is set in such a way that we put all sorts of practices and protocols in place to make us feel safe. We get in our car and buckle our seatbelt. We know if there is another careless driver that hits us we have airbags, anti-lock brakes, and a myriad of other systems built into our vehicles. We also feel safe that if that person is responsible for injury or damage we can rely on the justice system to right the wrong. This all works for us ... until it doesn't. Until the systems fail. Until the one responsible isn't held accountable. And this is just one example of a multitude

of areas in our life where we have put systems and rules in place to make us feel safe. But nothing is one-hundred percent.

Our world is built on using samples to predict the goodness/validity of the whole. When you are served a glass of wine, you swirl, smell and sip. That one sip decides if the whole bottle is good. “Most critical decision would be impossible without sampling.”<sup>137</sup> We risk that the whole is the same as the part in making these decisions, yet the whole is not always one-hundred percent. I’ve always been satisfied with less than a 100 on a test, but we all want 100% out of our safety equipment, yet it’s just not there. So, safety does not exist nor does a calculable future. Yet another reason that risk avoidance should not be a value for us, especially as a church.

Nothing is guaranteed. As James 4:14 says, “Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” It seems to me there are two types of people those who do not think about any safety issues whatsoever, they just trust the systems in place, and there are those who spend a tremendous amount of time concerned about this. For some there is no shortage of things that pose a threat from germs to the stranger on the street. The safety we cling to is not risk-free. The Supreme Court decided in 1981 that what constitutes safety does not mean free from risk.<sup>138</sup>

In fact, often our attempts at securing safety lead us to new risks. “Today we also know that through our eagerness to take precautions and prevent risks we may incur new risks. For

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<sup>137</sup>Peter L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 73.

<sup>138</sup>Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch 2.0: Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 124.



example, we use antibiotics in order to get rid of infections that would otherwise go out of control. Such use, however, is making bacteria resistant to antibiotics, and future bacteria may get out of our control.”<sup>139</sup> Every augmentation, every attempt at more safety comes with some amputation and more risk. Helen Keller said it brilliantly, “Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.”<sup>140</sup>

There is no safety and yet it is just as useless to say that everything can be a risk. A gun isn’t a risk every time it is used, but when used with malintent it poses an incredible risk! This is why risk is not something that is generalized. It is always a risk for someone in particular and it’s always something in particular. We can’t avoid risks, and we have no guarantee of safety, but that doesn’t mean we hide in our “safe” homes or sanctuaries and wait for all the bad to pass us by. Jesus was clear that our faith should be in him and that we should not spend our time in worry. He reminds us, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”<sup>141</sup> We have to remind ourselves of this often as our brains are hard-wired to find and avoid risk. The fight/flight/freeze response that stems from our amygdala is powerful and innate. YET Jesus

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<sup>139</sup>Niels Henrik Gregerson, “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk Taking” *Zygon* 38, no. 2 (2003), 358.

<sup>140</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 1, sec. 1, Kindle.

<sup>141</sup>Mt 6:25-26.

calls us to risk. Adam Hamilton wrote, “Your amygdala is risk-averse. Its job is to identify risks, dangers, and obstacles and to protect you from them. This can be a wonderful blessing and can save your life, but it can also keep you from living.”<sup>142</sup> The only true security we have is not in anything of our present, it is the security we have in God, and the security we have in our future in the eternal.

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<sup>142</sup>Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 22.

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## REFLECTION

What do you put your trust in? Do you put your trust in the things in place to keep you “safe”? Do you put your trust in your own abilities to keep yourself safe (locking doors, sanitizing, etc)?

What would it look like to begin to have God be the place you primarily put your trust? Jesus didn’t promise safety. He did promise to be with us no matter what. What is one step you can take today to trust God more?

### *Finding Courage*

Someone I am is waiting for courage.—Josh Groban

The thought of there being no such thing as safety may leave us wanting to hide under our covers and never leave home. Or, we could peep out of the “safety” of our covers and find courage. “Courage is not the rare attribute of a small set of great men and women who are more daring or braver than the rest of us. It is the gift God gives ordinary people when we seek a clear vision of what God would have us do throughout our lives, or at this moment and time in our lives.”<sup>143</sup> We find courage by seeking God and building on recognizing the risks we have already taken. And as we recognize those risks we look to see where God has helped us along the way. Courage begets courage. “Mary Daly, a theologian, writes, ‘Courage is like—it’s a habitus, a habit, a virtue: You get it by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn courage by couraging.’”<sup>144</sup>

You have heard, as I have, the stories of people who find immense courage and strength in times of distress – the mother who lifts a car to rescue her child from underneath and so on. We have within us this courage all of the time. It sits there dormant until activated. And it is often activated by love. Our love for another pushes us out of our fear into a place of courage. Courage, after all is not the lack of fear, it is being afraid or unsure and doing something anyway. What if we allowed God to build love in us for others to the point that we are willing to risk our

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<sup>143</sup>Tom Berlin, *Courage: Jesus and the Call to Brave Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 34.

<sup>144</sup>Brené Brown *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010), 7.

safety and security and find courage to reach out to others? Doing all the good we can should be a prime motivator to courage. It was for John Wesley and for Robert Strawbridge. They were so moved by compassion for their neighbors that they risked their reputations (and in Wesley's case his personal safety). I love the way Shane Claiborne addresses this, "Until the courage that we have for peace surpasses the courage that we have for war, violence will continue to triumph, and imperial execution rather than divine resurrection will have the final word."<sup>145</sup> Until the courage we have for love, for good surpasses the courage we have for self-gain, self-preservation, and comfort we will settle only for those things.

Another way we find courage is in leaning on one another. Margaret Wheatley wrote, "We gain courage from learning we're part of a choir. We sing better when we know we're not alone."<sup>146</sup> It's easier to sing with others (something that terrifies many) than it is to do a solo. Just as it is easier to sing with the accompaniment of music than it is to sing acapella. It is easier to risk for good and for the

## RITUALIZE

We gain courage by joining in with others. Who in your life walks alongside you when you need courage? Is it your family? Is it a friend? If you don't have someone reach out to the church so that we can help connect you to fellow believers who can walk alongside you as you begin to take risks for the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>145</sup>Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), chap. 10 sec. 5, Kindle.

<sup>146</sup>Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler, 2006), chap. 8, Kindle.

Kingdom of God when we do not try to do it by ourselves, but instead together as the body of Christ.

In the words of Leonard Sweet, “Thou shalt not play it safe but instead take risks and dance the failure shuffle. (shake the dust off your feet said Jesus). All learning requires unlearning, which requires tremendous courage.”<sup>147</sup> There are things we must unlearn. We must unlearn our penchant for safety. We must unlearn putting idols of safety and comfort before God. “Courage ... involves taking risks despite our fear. And faith in God reassures us that regardless of the outcome of the risks we take, even the worst thing that could happen is not the end of the road.”<sup>148</sup> Courage is so essential to our life of faith that in *The Screwtape Letters* the demons write back and forth about the importance of taking courage from believers. Screwtape writes to young Wormwood, “... The point is to keep him feeling that he has something, other than the Enemy [God] and courage the Enemy supplies, to fall back on, so that what was intended to be a total commitment to duty becomes honeycombed all through with little unconscious reservations. ... For remember the act of cowardice is all that matters; the emotion of fear is, in itself, no sin, and though we enjoy it, does us no good.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2019), 27.

<sup>148</sup>Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid: Living with Courage and Hope in Uncertain Times* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 89.

<sup>149</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* found in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 184.

## RITUALIZE

You are probably familiar with the Serenity Prayer. But I have found most don't know the full prayer only the first three lines. If you need courage begin to pray this prayer regularly.

God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is; not as I would have it; trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.

DEBBIE NATHAN

## *Stability*

Having a sense of security in one realm gives us the freedom to be original in another.  
—Adam Grant

Once we find the courage to take the first step it's important that we not go from 0 to 100. We are working on taking the first step. As we begin to risk we need to have stability zones. Places in our life that we are not risking, that provide a touchpoint to “normalcy.” One-hundred-and-ten years ago, Henri Flagler rode into Key West on the first train to reach the island. What was called Flagler's Folly at the start was in the end considered the eighth wonder of the world. Who among us hasn't soaked in the

breath-taking turquoise waters as we've driven the 128 miles from the mainland to Key West? I made this trek for the first time this past summer when we moved from Jacksonville, ironically, the start of Flagler's railroad. As you cross the majority of the bridges that connect the keys not much thought is given to how these spans are cross. But, when you get to the seven-mile bridge and at some point there is no land in sight behind you and none ahead of you, for just a moment,

you're mid-sea by car. You see the remnants of Flagler's railroad as you drive, you wave to Fred and little thought is given to the wonder that once was.<sup>150</sup>

But Flagler did not go non-stop from Miami to Key West overnight. He had to build key by key with a long holdover at Marathon. Flagler forced engineers to develop something that no one else before him had thought possible, a seven-mile-long bridge with train track. This was done in the early 1900s! The risk to lives, pocket-book, and reputation were high. If we are going to take significant risks for the Kingdom of God, as Flagler took risks for Florida, we too will need to be not only willing to risk, but we will need places along the way where we can stabilize. It may be a short stabilization, or a longer one. No matter what it looks like, "We need stability zones that anchor us firmly in what we believe and why we believe it."<sup>151</sup>

What provides stability during risk and change? First, we begin with bearing 2 from the introduction. To stabilize we have to assess what we value we need to know what we are not willing to change or risk? For me the answer is my family. I'm willing to do all kinds of things for the kingdom, but not at the expense of my family. It's important to my husband (a pastor's kid himself) and I that we raise kids who don't hate the church because it took too much of my time. What might it be for you? What cannot change?

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<sup>150</sup>For the non-Key Westers (and for those without Facebook), Fred is the tree that grows on old railroad tracks. He has his own Facebook page.

<sup>151</sup>Christine Aroney-Sine, *The Gift of Wonder: Creative Practices for Delighting in God* (Downers Grove, IL; Intervarsity Press, 2019), 45.



The second thing that provides stabilization is to practice spiritual disciplines along the way. Staying in love with God is the third general rule for United Methodists. What are you doing to help you stay in love with God? Spiritual disciplines include worship, prayer, communion, practicing sabbath, fasting, reading scripture, and meditation. In the end though, spiritual disciplines can be anything that helps you connect to God. A friend considers doing dishes a spiritual discipline as she, “does dishes with Jesus.” Playing an instrument or singing are among my favorite ways to practice spiritual disciplines. These resting places along the way provide strength for the journey.

A third stabilizing factor can be healthy relationships that we have. These can be our immediate family, our small group, our friends, etc. These relationships provide a “sturdy, trustworthy space.”<sup>152</sup> One of the gifts the pandemic brought to me was more regular meetings with my covenant group (other female United Methodist clergy). We’d met once or twice a year before the pandemic with some texting in-between. But we recognized that we needed more frequent interaction through the pandemic and for the last two years have met weekly by zoom. It’s been a God-send for each one

## RITUALIZE

In the next section we’ll look at the importance of childlike faith. But as we talk about stability, children learn early on about the importance of stabilization. Think about being a child and playing tag. Do you remember having a home base? It was the place you couldn’t be tagged. You were safe. You could run from there, but you could also always return. Find something now that is your “home base.” Something that provides a touchpoint of stability.

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<sup>152</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 65.

of us in a time when so many other things have been in flux. Who are the ones who will ride with you through risk and change? Who are the ones who may provide a stabilizing force in your life?

### *Becoming Children*

The modern person knows everything about life, except how to live it!  
—E. Stanley Jones

As a mom of twin boys, I wish for a world that is safe and always stable. But from the moment we saw two flutters on the ultrasound life has been anything but safe and stable. From a high-risk, super-uncomfortable pregnancy to watching them crawl in opposite directions, they are my constant reminder of how unconcerned children (especially my children) are with safety. As parents we are the ones who are aware of these things—we’re reminding them not to talk to strangers, and pull their mask up over their face, to look both ways when crossing the street, to remember to buckle, to pull their mask up over their face, to wear their helmet, to pull their mask up over their face. (Ah, the joys of raising children in a pandemic!) Sometime between this rambunctious age and adulthood peer pressure sets in. But there is a blissful time when we are unaware what others think, when we do not care what is “supposed” to be, we are content to just be.



We are born to be risk takers. Every child is a risk taker.

Leonard Sweet



“We are born to be risk takers. Every child is a risk taker. With every step toddlers take risks. A baby’s first step is the biggest of all. ... For the distance from zero to one is greater than the distance from one to any other number.”<sup>153</sup> Though we lose this innocence, Jesus says that it is those who become like children who will inherit the Kingdom of God.<sup>154</sup> Have you watched a child go from crawler to toddler? It happens so quickly. They find out they can move, then before you know it they’ve pulled themselves up and are cruising along the furniture. And in the blink of an eye, it seems, something clicks and they see that thing they’ve wanted to get but couldn’t and seemingly without thinking that take that first step. When they fall they may cry (depending on YOUR reaction) but they will not give up. They will get up again and again each time they fall and teeter ever on unsteadily until they’ve reached that tremendous prize they’ve wanted. I wonder if sometimes we don’t move, we don’t take that first step because we don’t see a prize in taking the step. We’ve fallen on our un-diapered-bottoms too many times and we don’t want to risk getting hurt again. What would it be like for us to return to the innocence of childhood, to see with new eyes the things that await us if we are only willing to take a step? What if our love for God and others motivated us to be willing to take that step? Unfortunately, too often we lack a passion for the world God created and its inhabitants. This lack of passion turns to apathy and we find ourselves sitting while others walk on.

What if we realized that it is through us that others can see the God of love? Jesus never asked anyone to change an entire system, but simply to take a step of faith and see what happens.

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<sup>153</sup>Leonard Sweet, *AquaChurch 2.0: Piloting Your Church in Today’s Fluid Culture* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 111.

<sup>154</sup>Mt 19:14.

Think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who had taken more than he should. Jesus didn't ask him to lobby for a change in the tax code. Jesus asked him to start by taking the first step, to climb out of the tree and host (read: spend time with) Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus and welcoming him to his home, Zacchaeus changed and gave half of what he had to the poor. Jesus didn't chastise him and ask for more, instead he praised him and said salvation has come to him and his house.

Dr. Leonard Sweet wrote, "... it was a sense of wonder, not a sense of fear, that made discovery and invention possible."<sup>155</sup> As adults, we too often lose our sense of wonder. If it has been awhile since you have had young children (ages 3 through 9) I recommend spending some time with them. Volunteer for the church's children's programs if you don't have children, nieces or nephews or grandchildren around. Have a conversation with them. They will turn it into 1,000 questions (not just 20 questions!). The younger they are the more likely it is to simply be "why?" but as they age they see our world with such innocence. It truly is a gift to see the world again through the eyes of children. Recently, my children were reading a book about President Abraham Lincoln and asked what slavery was. I did my best to explain it and one of the twins asked, "Why would anyone treat another person that way, it's just rude!" Yes, buddy. Yes, it's beyond rude; it's evil. A few months ago I had a similar conversation with an adult who instead of

Have you lost your sense of wonder? Why not have a play break in your day. Yes, play. We were created for more than work and toil! We are human BEINGS not human DOINGS.

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<sup>155</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other To the God Who's Already There*. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2010), 22.

being shocked that this would happen in our history, felt the need to defend the system of slavery. “What difference would it make to our spiritual practices if we approached life with childlike enthusiasm and made modeling glimpses of God’s shalom world our goal?”<sup>156</sup> Oh, God, give us eyes and hearts of the wonder and innocence of children once more!

*Holy Spirit, You Are Welcome Here?*

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word.—Acts 10:44

In his book *Dangerous Church*, John Bishop says, “many of our churches ... are still living out an Acts 1 existence; we are constantly in a state of waiting and uncertainty, like the early church leaders. We often feel worried and overwhelmed, not sure what God is doing or may do in our midst.”<sup>157</sup> Acts 1 begins with the ascension of Jesus. And, just like in Matthew 28, Jesus gives them instruction to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Unlike Matthew 28, they are given the instruction to wait and watch until they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. From the ascension until Acts 2 they are in status-quo mode in Acts 1. They find a replacement for Judas and spend time in prayer and recalling Jesus’ teachings. We know they are there for 50 days when we are told in Acts 2 that it was Pentecost. Pentecost is a Jewish festival that remembers the receiving of the Torah as given to Moses, it always takes place 50 days after the

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<sup>156</sup>Christine Aroney-Sine, *The Gift of Wonder: Creative Practices for Delighting in God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2019), 20.

<sup>157</sup>John Bishop, *Dangerous Church: Risking Everything to Reach Everyone* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 16.

Passover. Jesus died the Friday of Passover week. What's the difference between Acts 1 and Acts 2? The presence of the Holy Spirit is real and tangible in Acts 2. John Bishop's charge against the church is concerning because if we are living as if the Holy Spirit isn't at work in our world, then we are doing it wrong.

Jesus said in John 14 that the Holy Spirit is to be our companion who reminds us of all that Jesus taught. The Spirit is God at work in us and in the world. The Holy Spirit is the one who produces the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.<sup>158</sup> And, the Spirit is the giver of gifts for the church. If we try to ignore spiritual gifts as only something for charismatic churches we miss out on the gifts that are less focused on – like faith! As Methodists we believe that the work of grace in our lives is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is there even before we're aware of her presence.

When Vincent Donovan had converted a Masai village he instructed them to “Learn to stop depending on me today. Start depending on the one you receive today, the Holy Spirit of God. ‘As of today, you have the power, as a community to reach even to the seat of God, and to serve your fellow man, because you are a chosen tribe, a royal priesthood, a nation that has been anointed, a people set apart.’”<sup>159</sup> If only more of us clergy had given this same sentiment to the church! The same power at work within the clergy you've known and love is at work in each of us. Each one of us has direct access to God. The question is, do we live like that?

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<sup>158</sup>Gal. 5:22-23.

<sup>159</sup>Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 73.

When we welcome the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives we welcome the faith we need to be able to take risks. We also welcome the reminder from the Holy Spirit of all Jesus said and did. So how do we welcome the Holy Spirit? There's no ceremony or prayer or "thing" to do other than to have a heart open to the Spirit. It certainly helps to practice spiritual disciplines, especially prayer, but remember, the Holy Spirit is present always. We simply need to be open. Now, there's no shortage of books you could read that will give you a step-by-step guide to living in the Holy Spirit, and those author's would disagree with my sentiment here. But the Church for millennia has welcomed the Holy Spirit without these books or trainings. The proof of this is Acts 10. When Peter goes to a centurion's home. The identification of him as a centurion gives us some information about how significant it is that Peter is there and that this whole house receives the Holy Spirit. A centurion was a Roman citizen, and even if they were what was known as a God-fearer (a gentile believer in God), they would have to swear allegiance to Caesar and worship Caesar as Lord. Also as a Gentile, he was not pure or holy, not circumcised, and not welcome in the Temple in Jerusalem. But, as Peter and Cornelius are talking the Holy Spirit falls on the entire household, and *then* they're baptized with water. If a gentile, new believer can receive the Holy Spirit without any other action than belief, certainly we can as well.

*WELCOME THE HOLY SPIRIT**SONG: SWEET, SWEET SPIRIT*

There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place,  
and I know that it's the spirit of the Lord;  
There are sweet expressions on each face,  
and I know they feel the presence of the Lord.  
Sweet holy spirit, sweet heavenly dove,  
Stay right here with us, filling us with your love;  
And for these blessings we lift our hearts in praise;  
without a doubt we'll know that we have been revived when we shall leave this place.

Doris Akers, "Sweet, Sweet Spirit"

*Holy Spirit you  
ARE welcome here!*



5...4...3...2...1...Go!

The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.  
—Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh

Running many small experiments with minimal risk is better than taking on a few big risks.  
—Susan Beaumont

Mel Robbins in her book *The Five Second Rule*, shares her trick to go from zero to one.<sup>160</sup> Essentially, if there something you don't want to do but should or must, you count backwards from five to zero and once you hit zero you blast yourself out of whatever you are doing into whatever you should be doing. That sort of self-talk does not work for me. Maybe it will for you. For me there is the simple phrase coined by Nike: "Just do it!" Or, I pause and think about my future self—would avoiding the hard thing make future me happy or just me right now? Is what I am doing the most good? The point is you have to find what will work for you. What will help you (and us collectively) stop what we are doing and start what we are not—which in the case of this study is to take risks for the kingdom of God.

Remember with me, if you will, back to science class. Newton's first law of motion is that an object in motion stays in motion and an object at rest stays at rest until they are acted on by another force. There is no shortage of self-help books to help us overcome inertia, but they rely completely on what is implied in their nature—helping yourself. But often that is not enough. It's not enough because these books often offer conflicting or confusing information.

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<sup>160</sup>Mel Robbins, *The Five Second Rule: Transform Your Life, Work, and Confidence With Everyday Courage*, (Brentwood, TN: Savio Republic, 2017).

Why not let God be the force that acts upon us and causes us to move? When we let God be the force that moves us it means we are willing to step out in faith, not faith in ourselves, but faith in God. This does not guarantee a perfect, happy, or easy road. But it does mean we trust that God is with us each step of the journey. We must learn to embrace the wisdom Gilbert Rendel offers, “Quietly courageous leadership is about taking the next steps even when the final destination remains hidden.”<sup>161</sup> Faith is not being able to see the whole journey from the start, it is being willing to start. It will not always turn out happy, the martyrs of the church teach us this. But it will always be worth it. When we are willing to step out and operate out of faith, to risk going from zero to one (or in Mel Robbin’s example from five to zero) we will find that “If you live your life to please God and put him in charge, your perspective will be transformed to one that is outward and characterized by God-given confidence that will lead your life.”<sup>162</sup>

### **You are called. Go! Take a Step!**




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<sup>161</sup>Gilbert R. Rendel, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Landham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2018), 218.

<sup>162</sup>Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons for Everyone From the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 21.

## Chapter 5: SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

It's the hard knock life for us. It's the hard knock life for us.  
 Instead of treated we get tricked. Instead of kisses we get kicked.  
 It's the hard knock life for us.  
 —Cast of Annie

Once you begin to risk you will discover that part of the reason you may have avoided risk for so long is because risk often does entail loss and we seek to avoid that at all costs. After all, “people aren’t generally risk averse; they are loss averse.”<sup>163</sup> There will be bumps and bruises as we begin to risk together for the kingdom. BUT, just as a child learning to walk falls, we do not stop getting back up. This chapter is all about lessons learned along the way while risking (my own lessons and the lessons of others). You will see that risking involves failing, it requires letting go of control, learning the important steps of discernment, and the importance of hope.

### *Failure: You are Wrong*

Once we are willing to accept that anything worth doing  
 might even be worth doing badly our options widen.—Julia Cameron

The right to be wrong is essential to being human but it's more right  
 even the essence of righteousness, to repent and confess when you're wrong.—Leonard Sweet

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<sup>163</sup>Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh, *The Faith of Leap: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure & Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), chap. 5, sec. 3, Kindle.

The first lesson in the school of hard knocks is that you are wrong. I do not know what you are wrong about but at the moment you read this I am certain that you are wrong. We all get it wrong. We all fall. We all fail. This is why we believe we need a Redeemer. Romans 3:23 makes it clear that everyone of us misses the mark. But the good news is, as we proclaim every time we celebrate communion, “Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God’s love toward us.”<sup>164</sup> Our failures and shortcomings, our sins, do not disqualify us from ministry. If it did, all the disciples would have been disqualified. There is only one perfect person and it is not you nor is it me. Jesus alone is perfect. And, wonderfully for us, in Jesus our weakness is our strength!<sup>165</sup> The first lesson from the journey is to realize that you are wrong. About what? All kinds of things. And guess what, it’s okay! The world continues to spin. The sun shines on. For some of us (okay, for me) it was very hard to get to the place where we can acknowledge it is okay to be wrong. I enjoy being right (don’t tell my husband I confessed to this!). I like winning at trivia and sweeping categories on Jeopardy. But none of us is always right.

At some point in our lives (I personally blame my second grade teacher) we are taught that we should do everything in our power to avoid mistakes. They are not opportunities to learn from, instead they are something to be avoided at all costs. How silly is that?! We learn by failing and figuring out what not to do (or do differently) the next time. The scientific process would not exist if we were not able to be wrong. What if we reframe “being wrong” as a

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<sup>164</sup>“A Service of Word and Table II” in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 12.

<sup>165</sup>2 Cor 12:9.

“learning opportunity?” Or, as Bob Ross used to say, “There are no mistakes in painting, just happy accidents.”<sup>166</sup> Of course, life is not painting and some mistakes and some wrongs cause harm. As Methodists our number one rule is to not cause harm. So, while we risk to do all the good we can we also seek to avoid harm. As we risk, if our failures cause harm to others it is important to seek their forgiveness and to ask forgiveness of God. Our failures always teach us something. “To fail without learning, to exhaust oneself without making a difference, does not make one a better leader; it only makes one tired.”<sup>167</sup>

Jesus knew we would fail. When he sends the 12 and the 72 out on mission he let them risk but knew it wouldn’t all go according to plan. Sometimes they wouldn’t succeed. Sometimes they wouldn’t be accepted. So he gave them the “sacrament of dirt” shaking the dust off our feet when we mess up or when we’re not accepted.<sup>168</sup> So, stand up, shake that dust off and take the next step. Or, in the words of Dori, “Just keep swimming.”<sup>169</sup> Too often we let our failures stop us or make us feel that we are disqualified. If that were true then no one is qualified. All fail. All make mistakes. All are wrong. This is the very reason we have a SAVIOR! There is a Japanese proverb, “Fall down seven times, stand up eight.” This is such a part




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<sup>166</sup>Bob Ross, star “The Joy of Painting,” created by Bob Ross (1983-1994, PBS), public television.

<sup>167</sup>Gilbert R. Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 192.

<sup>168</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2019), 176.

<sup>169</sup>*Finding Nemo*, Directed by Andrew Stanton (2003, Pixar Studios); Disney+ Streaming.

of their culture they practice the art of *Kintsugi*. When pottery cracks or breaks, they put it back together and fill in the cracks with gold.

Scripture says it this way:

God said that light should shine out of the darkness. He is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay pots so that the awesome power belongs to God and doesn't come from us.—2 Cor 4:6-7

“Life has so many mistakes to make, you'll never be able to get through all of them.”<sup>170</sup>

## REFLECTION

### Re-frame

To reframe is to change the way you think about something. Take some time to think about the failures you have had and the times you have been wrong. To reframe these things reflect on the following:

- What did you learn from the failure?
- What did you gain?
- What can you celebrate?

So when we make a mistake it shouldn't stop us. We know that “God doesn't think any less of us

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<sup>170</sup>Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 91.

when things don't go right."<sup>171</sup> We don't stay down when we fall. We get up, brush the dirt off, and move on. Each one of us are clay pots, easily broken, but when we break the beauty of God shines forth because in our weakness God is strong.<sup>172</sup> So, cracked pots, let your scars show, for they shine forth the glory of God.

*Let it Go: No Control Freaks*

Faith is the opposite of control.—Leonard Sweet

When we are aware of risks, our temptation is to try to prevent loss at all costs. This results in a need to be in control of all the elements. We do this as individuals and as a society. As individuals we lock our doors, install security systems, buy guns, or get dogs with loud ferocious barks. As a country we put laws in place to help prevent loss. These include things like mask mandates, seat belt laws, and vaccination requirements for school children. None of these things are bad or evil in and of themselves. But they must be taken with an understanding of *why* we feel the need to be in control. What are we afraid of losing?

RITUALIZE

A prayer from St. Teresa:  
Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. Those who cling to God will lack nothing. Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. God alone is enough."

When you are struggling with failures, try praying this prayer.

Henri Nouwen

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<sup>171</sup>Bob Goff, *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 149.

<sup>172</sup>2 Cor. 12:9.

If you are going to be willing to take risks you must let go of being in control. Here's a fact that control freaks do not like to hear: you are never actually in control. To be totally in control would make you equal with God. In Chapter 2 we met the God of Risk and we learned that God gives us free will and to do this God relinquishes total control. Why, then, do we think we should be in control? You cannot know all the outcomes before you start. You cannot control how others will respond when you begin to take risks. You cannot control what happens once you take risks. "Needing to be in control will kill you."<sup>173</sup>

In chaos theory there is the "butterfly effect." The butterfly effect is when "small changes in initial conditions can lead to large-scale and unpredictable variation in the future state of the system."<sup>174</sup> In essence, the flap of a butterfly wing causes significant changes in a type of chain reaction. Every single choice has a consequence. And while you may try to control your own choices and outcomes you have little to no control over the choices and outcomes of others. Any mother knows this for a fact. No matter how well you teach your children, they will make their own choices.

Whether you identify as a control freak or not, we can all learn this lesson from Henri Nowen, "As I reflect on this reality, it is clear that God is present in the events of my life, yet I act and speak as if I am in control. But if the future is not in my hands, then I have all the more reason to stay in the present and give honor and glory to God from where I am, trusting that God

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<sup>173</sup>Tony Morgan, *The Unstuck Church: Equipping Churches to Experience Sustained Health* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 35.

<sup>174</sup>Gilbert R. Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 71.



is the God of life who makes everything new.”<sup>175</sup> If we can get to the place where we let it go and realize we are not, in fact, in control we can get to the place where we can truly value the present. When we value the present it makes it a lot easier to begin to risk for the Kingdom of God. We’re not trapped in the “what ifs” and can live in the “why not!”

### *Discernment – Learning to Dance*

My soul can learn the dance steps of the  
Lord of the Dance—Sydney Carter

Taking risks for doing good while trying to avoid doing harm involves a delicate dance. We have to learn when to step towards good and when to pause before doing harm. How do we know when to risk and when not? This is the dance we must learn, the dance of discernment.

“...discernment is the spiritual practice that accesses and seeks to understand what God is trying to say.”<sup>176</sup> We must learn to let the

### RITUALIZE:

The prayer of examine is a spiritual discipline from St. Ignatius of Loyola. At the end of the day move through give steps:

- 1) Gratitude,
- 2) Petition (requests),
- 3) Review – review your day – I add reviewing the 3 General Rules,
- 4) Confession and Forgiveness, and
- 5) renewal.

You can pray this prayer or journal this prayer. It is a great way to begin to yield to God and learn to discern what God is doing in your life.

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<sup>175</sup>Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 87.

<sup>176</sup>Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 69.

Holy Spirit take the lead. When partners dance, one leads and the other follows. If there were two leaders the dance would not be in sync and all would just be confused. We must learn to listen, to follow, for “...all who attempt to live the questions and follow the movements of the Spirit, know discernment is not a step-by-step program or a systematic pattern. Rather it is a regular discipline of listening to the still, small voice beneath the truth of the whirlwind, a prayerful practice of reading the subtle signs in daily life.”<sup>177</sup>

To hear this still, small voice we must spend time in prayer. We circle back to ask God to help us see if we still have idols, still have places where we are not placing our trust in God. We have to let Jesus be Lord. I confess I often have issues with the word Lord. It is antiquated. It fits into the life of first century Rome through the Middle Ages. It's from the feudal system in which the king would grant land to lords, who in turn would allow others to live on their lands. In exchange for this allowance they served their lord. They tended to the fields and protected the lord. But the term lord is in scripture. Famously, in Psalm 23:1, “The Lord is my shepherd....” But this is deceptive, for the word “lord” is not there in the Hebrew. It is the name of God, the tetragrammaton (*YHWH*), which we translate to Yahweh. This confusion is there because of the Jewish belief that one does not say the name of God, and so it became the tradition to translate *YHWH* as Lord. The idea of a “lord” as we are more familiar with is a Greek concept and so in the New Testament it is the word *Kyrios*. Jesus, as he does in all other things sums up both meanings in one. As part of the Triune God he is *YHWH*, *AND* he is our Lord, who we should

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<sup>177</sup>Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 96.

listen to and who we should let lead our lives. In Luke 6:26 it is clear that if we are going to call Jesus Lord, we should listen to what he instructs us to do.

## REFLECTION

Miriam Webster Defines Lord: One having power and authority over others. Jesus or God are the second definition.

Reflect on our use of the word “Lord” for Jesus and God. Is there another phrase that we could use in its place so that we move away from feudal ideology?

Whatever word we use for this concept, the point is that we are to yield our will and our lives to Jesus. And while you learn to do this dance of letting Jesus be Lord, and the dance of discernment lean on the General Rules for Methodists. If the risk will cause harm do not take it. If it will enable you to do all the good you can, then take it. If it takes you farther from God, don’t do it. If it helps you stay in love with God, take it. These three simple rules: 1) Do no harm, 2) Do all the good you can, and 3) Stay in love with God are tremendous guides to the living of our lives while we learn to hear the Spirit’s direction. John Wesley particularized what it meant to do no harm for the 18th century it included a variety of things of which you are probably guilty of. The particularizations include: lending or borrowing with high interest (credit cards anyone?), buying or consuming spiritous liquors (sorry MOST of Key West), and the list goes on.

John Wesley’s list, though, does not take into account our 21st century life. For example we live in a globalized economy and as Americans we benefit from what is essentially slave wages paid to others so that we can buy the cheapest possible thing from Kmart. John Wesley’s

list also doesn't include the harm that we've done to our earth and our environment as climates rise. His list doesn't include the harm that we perpetrate when we support causes that inevitably damage others. The point is we need to particularize for our time and our setting what constitutes harm. We must do the same thing for listing all the good we can do. Wesley emphasized doing good to the community of faith, in a post-Christendom world, it's more important than ever that we turn outwards, not inwards. What will it look like to do all the good we can in 2022 and beyond? Even the three *simple* rules become more complicated. This is why we must press on and learn to listen to God. We must learn to listen and respond "to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God's desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses,

### REFLECTION

Reflect on the 3 General Rules listed on the previous page. How might you particularize what doing harm means? What does it look like to do all the good you can? And how can you stay in love with God? Make your own list appropriate for 2022.

motives and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.”<sup>178</sup>

### *Sailing Lessons*

In this emerging culture, everyone is an explorer,  
and every profession requires sailing in uncharted waters.—Leonard Sweet

Towards the top of my bucket list is sailing lessons. Every day I drive past the Marina and on Saturdays you can watch as students in small sailboats learn to tack and jib and work the various riggings. There are some sailing lessons that we need to bring forth in these school of hard knocks lessons.

### *There is One Skipper!*

When you board any of the ships to take you away from the island, whether for recreation or one of the ferries, you may notice that there is one person in charge. The ones operating the boat, or serving as crew are not waiting until everyone on board agrees with the proper way to sail. The skipper or the captain know the waters. They know where the shallows are, they know the tide schedules, and channel markers.

My last year of seminary I had been working for a church in administration. As a full-time job I did all the “office work” and as a seminary intern I did a lot of pastoral work as well. But it became a bit too much. So the Staff Parish Committee agreed to hire another person to

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<sup>178</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 177.

take some of my responsibilities. This person, on their first day came in and immediately began to make changes to the office. They'd never worked for a church before but suddenly the things I had in place were not right (though I'd been working for churches in administration and ministry for 13 years at that point). When I gently tried to explain why things were being done the way they were this person ignored me and went about doing things as they saw fit. In the end, through mediation with the pastor I helped this person to learn that though you've been a passenger on a plane, that doesn't mean you can fly it. You cannot just go into the cockpit and push buttons without knowing what to do. This is true on planes and it is true on boats. In the short time I've lived in Key West I've already lost count of the number of tourists who rent boats and "know what they're doing" only to find out they don't know the waters around the island. They end up needing rescuing. When we're on any vessel (and in the church) it's important to know our role.

You may think I'm writing this to tell you to listen to me as the pastor. But, this is not my point. There is but one captain of the vessel, one that all of us are to equally listen to – the Holy Spirit. As we risk together we must learn to listen to the instructions of the captain. We listen to know where we need to be so we don't get hit in the head by the boom, we need to know where the life vests are, and we need to know where we need to sit if the boat needs balancing. Listen to the ONE captain!

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## REFLECTION

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There is but one captain for the church – Jesus. And, also 1 Cor. 12:12 says, "Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many." So, while Christ is the head or the captain, we all have a part to play. There is no unimportant part of the body of Christ. Reflect on your part. Read 1 Corinthians 12 and see if anything jumps out.

### Perseverance

As I've mentioned, I want to learn to sail so I've spent some time learning about sailing. One of the things I've discovered as I've priced out sailing lessons is that it is lessons plural! You don't jump on a sail boat as a novice and sail off into the sunset without practice. It is the same when learning to risk. We don't have to begin with the biggest risks of all. There's not (usually) a need to go from zero risk to selling all your possessions to live on the streets and do street ministry. But there's also a need to persevere when the winds aren't in your favor, or when



you get lost, or run aground. “Endurance is an active, working word that suggests the opposite of ‘hang in there’—which is, after all, a horrible way to go through life, neck in noose, feet dangling midair.”<sup>179</sup>

Perseverance helps us to become “antifragile.”<sup>180</sup> Fragility means the object gets weaker under stress. Antifragile means the object improves under stress. Perseverance is the grit it takes to not give up when things go wrong. To persevere we don’t let our failures stand in our way, and we don’t let our successes stand in our way either. We press on and in the words of the author of Hebrews, we “press on to maturity, by moving on from the basics about Christ’s word. Let’s not lay a foundation of turning away from dead works, of faith in God,”<sup>181</sup>

## REFLECTION

Building endurance requires do the same thing many times. You begin small and over time you can endure more. (Think of weight lifting you begin with small weights and then gradually increase weight and reps.) We have things we must endure and persevere through. Might we begin to see these as endurance builders? Might we thank God for the complicated blessings that help us grow?

<sup>179</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Summoned to Lead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 49.

<sup>180</sup>Luke Burgis and Joshua Miller, *Unrepeatable: Cultivating the Unique Calling of Every Person* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2018), 175-176.

<sup>181</sup>Heb 6:1.

## Kedging

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.—Heb 6:19-20

One key lesson that I have learned from Dr.

Leonard Sweet is to exegete biblical images, to take apart their meaning. He wrote,

“If one exegetes the biblical image of ‘anchor,’ one of the key texts that immediately surfaces is Hebrews 6:18-29, where ‘hope’ is said to be like an ‘anchor’ that is ‘offered to us.’ We are instructed to move ahead in safety and confidence by casting our anchor forward and then ‘grasping the hope set before us’ (NEB). Now here is a strange image: that of casting an anchor into the future and winching one’s way forward by holding on to the past for dear life. ... The biblical image is clearly one of casting an anchor ahead, not behind, and then pulling oneself forward.”<sup>182</sup>

Exegete: a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially a biblical text. It helps us connect the dots between history, etymology, and current meanings.

This act of throwing the anchor ahead of you is called kedging. It’s used when there’s no

A Kedge Anchor



wind, or when trying to turn the boat in a narrow canal. We must learn to lean on the anchor of our souls, but not so that it holds us in place, but instead pulls us through behind “the curtain.”<sup>183</sup>

As we risk there will be times when we will get stuck. There will be times when the “winds of inspiration” are not blowing or the voice needed for discernment is not loud. The way we make it

<sup>182</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Aquachurch 2.0: Piloting Your Church in Today’s Fluid Culture* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 88.

<sup>183</sup>The curtain reference here is to the veil in the temple, not the one the wizard of Oz hides behind. 😊

through is to grab ahold of the rope connected to our kedging anchor and throw it ahead of us. Trusting that Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, is on the other side pulling us forward. We won't have it all figured out before we set sail and so it's important to remember to use this tool to help us get through these times.

### You Can't Sail at the Dock

Every day God invites us on the some kind of adventure ... and then, leaning over us, He whispers, "Let's go do that together."—Bob Goff

To sail, you have to leave the dock. Life is supposed to be enjoyed and an adventure. With the pandemic all of us had to find new ways to live and to cope. As I was talking with a therapist recently, they mentioned that with the increase in social distancing and the disruption caused by Covid people have turned to or discovered all sorts of self-soothing solutions; some healthy, some not. Then, what began as a way to self-sooth turned into a habit. One habit I've seen in the churches I have worked for and or am acquainted with is that we have fallen out of the habit of "church." This isn't necessarily a bad thing, especially if church was nothing more than a habit. But I worry that some of us have gotten stuck at the dock, as it were. We've just gotten in the habit of not going. This is not who we were made to be as individuals or as a church. We are meant to live with passion and purpose, to sail the seas of adventure with God, not to sit tied down and immobile.

What is it that excites you? What is your purpose and passion? You were created to play and enjoy this life, not just to toil. Bob Goff says it this way:

Jesus doesn't invite us on a business trip. Instead, he says let's go after those things that inspire and challenge you and let's experience them together. You don't need a lot of details or luggage or equipment, just a willingness to go into a storm with a Father who's kicking footholds into the steep sides of our problems while we kick a couple in ourselves too. He guides us into those footholds with

His strong hands while we're safely tethered to Him by a bright red rope of grace, which holds us securely. Somehow in all of this the terrain we navigate doesn't seem as scary either, because when we're on an adventure with God we're too excited to be afraid and too engaged to be thinking of anything else.<sup>184</sup>

Don't you want to set sail on an adventure with God? Can you hear God whisper to you, let's do this together? But no good adventure story is about staying put and not being willing to go. There was never a story of adventure that went this way: then they got in the boat and went nowhere and did nothing. In the end we will be more disappointed by the things we didn't do than by the things we messed up. So, "throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."<sup>185</sup>

## REFLECTION

What excites you? What is your passion? When we find our gifting and unique purpose and combine it with our passions we are unstoppable.

<sup>184</sup> Bob Goff, *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 133.

<sup>185</sup> Mark Batterson, *In A Pit With A Lion On A Snowy Day* (New York: Multnomah, 2006), 101.

## Chapter 6: COFFIN PACKING

Once we get the hang of starting to risk for the kingdom it's important to lean back on our heritage once more. To remember that generations upon generations have risked their very lives that we might come to know Jesus. Missionaries in the eighteenth century would pack all their belongings in coffins when they set sail. They assumed bringing the gospel to others and being part of the inbreaking kingdom would cost them the ultimate price—their lives. While we don't start to risk by risking our life, there may come a time when we are asked to take significant risks for the Kingdom.

### *Christendom & Liminality*

Faithfulness is not holding the fort. It's storming the gates of hell and taking back enemy territory that belongs to God.—Mark Batterson

The time of Christendom has come to an end. Christendom, you may remember, is a culture in which everyone is expected to be a Christian or conform to Christian norms. You can already see it ending. Depending on your age think about what folks on the island did on Sundays and Wednesday nights 20 years ago. There wasn't sports. Many stores were closed. It was the expected norm that you would be in church. In Christendom everyone knew of Jesus;—at least something about him. In Christendom church was a social venue, the normal place that people met others outside of work.

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## REFLECTION

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As Christendom comes to an end it's important that we work through the stages of grief. We are experiencing a loss (compounded loss with the pandemic and potential split). You find yourself: in denial, numbness, shock, you may want to bargain, depressed, or angry. Be sure to take time to tend to these feelings and know that grief is a process.

In many parts of our country this is already well in the past. In parts of the south, though it is still going strong. In the laid-back Keys it's fading faster than in other parts of the south. There was an ad recently that encouraged us to make Sundays your drink local day. Rather than hitting up the Hard Rock or Margaritaville, or some other chain, drink at one of our local venues. That's what Sunday is now. Our postmodern, post-Christendom world is anti-Christian. It is hedonism. Unless we begin to make a change in the way we do church we will be the last generation that is familiar with the Christian story and places cultural significance in the church. When you look around the congregation on Sunday morning, how many young families do you see? We do have some, and hopefully will have more, but they may not come to us. We will have to go to them. They don't see a need for church or they would be with us or with another church on Sunday morning instead of on the boat. I know it is our desire to grow with more young families, but this will require us being willing to innovate, to risk, to reach out and not just

sit and wait. If you want to catch fish, you go to where they are. You don't keep your boat in the racks at the marina and expect the fish to jump in. You and I are both equally called to this work, our baptismal certificate is "both an ordination certificate and a passport to a missional life."<sup>186</sup>

To move forward as a church will require risk taking, innovation, and adaptation. We must risk with one another, trusting that we are on the same team, that the motivation for each of us is love of God and love of neighbor, and that we are all working to do all the good we can. We must build this trust with one another because to adapt and innovate means that we may leave behind some of our cherished past. It may mean some loss so that we may gain. Every augmentation comes with an amputation. When this happens, will we trust one another? 2020 gave us a great example of what happens when our "normal" is interrupted. The liminal space provides a place where conflict and instability surface. "Intuitively, people play it safe rather than put at risk the love, esteem, and approval of people or institutions they care about. The experience of disloyalty to our deeper attachments is often so painfully unacceptable that we avoid wrestling with them altogether, or do so by acting out."<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup>Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 31.

<sup>187</sup>Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 41.

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## REFLECTION

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We need to rethink the tools we used to reach people in Christendom and in the pre-Covid world. Just as you wouldn't use scissors to cut your grass, we need to have right tools for the environment. We used to think in programs. We now will need to create new tools, using the same gospel message, but a different vehicle to share it. Spend time in prayer and reflection about how we might reach to the new culture surrounding us.

Liminality is from the Latin for threshold. We are between two places. And right now we are in hyper-liminality. The American Church is trying to adjust to a new post-Christendom norm but we don't know what is next. We are no longer in the world that existed in 2019. We're stuck in this in-between-place of COVID, not knowing what will come after. As Methodists we are in the in between: between the denomination that was and the denominations that will be after the soon coming split. The impending changes and the existing uncertainty shape this hyper-liminal state. But liminality is not all negative, it provides us with the opportunity to grow and move.



What was is gone. What will be is unknown. We're in a similar place to where the keys were in 1935 after the railroad and many structures were destroyed by a hurricane. We still see remnants as we drive over the seven mile bridge onto the lower keys of this epic engineering feat. Yet, no one has ever chosen to rebuild the railroad. Before the hurricane there were already plans in place to build a road. There was no going back, only forward. Thanks to their forward progress we now benefit. Whether it's the Amazon package that made its way down to us, the ease of getting to the mainland, or the fresh water that comes out of our taps



all of this is because in 1935 they chose not to go back but forward. Now our present challenge is to learn to risk. We risk in order to build a new future. Like the generations that came before us, we risk to plant seeds that we may never see grow fruit. When we're not in a liminal time it is more difficult to risk because we don't want to disrupt the status quo. But in this liminal reality we might as well risk because there is no more status quo. We get to decide what the future of Old Stone Church will be as we move forward as part of the New Methodists. (or whatever name they come up with for the new post-split Methodist Church.) Might you be willing to risk and to dream not just for our now but for our future and for the generations that will come after us. "To be responsible inventors and discoverers, we need the courage to let go of the old world, to relinquish most of what we have cherished, to abandon our interpretations about what does and

doesn't work. We must learn to see the world anew. As Einstein is often quoted as saying: 'No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it.'"<sup>188</sup>

We sit in this post-modern, post-Christendom, liminal space with a choice. We can try with all our might to go back, to hold on to what was. If we do, we will watch it slip through our hands like sand and within twenty years there will be a discussion about closure of our church. Or, we can be willing to experiment and innovate. We can be willing to try something new. There is a pod of orca off Orcas Island in the San Juan Islands in Washington. This one pod is endangered because they refuse to eat anything but salmon. Wild orca that migrate will eat anything that will keep them alive. But this pod is choosing death over change. May God save us from such a fate. While we are not an "endangered" church, it only takes a generation or two to get there. Will we be willing to make the necessary changes to be here for the children of the children in our church right now?



Liminal seasons are thin spaces, where the presence of the divine is palpable. Liminal seasons are ripe opportunities for communities of faith to deepen their practices of group discernment, to watch for the movement of God.

Susan Beaumont




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<sup>188</sup>Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Barret-Koehler, 2006), introduction, e-book edition.

*Packing Coffins*

Even death in Jesus's cause is only the beginning of even greater things in God.  
—Michael Frost & Alan Hirsh

As of the writing of this material 354,816,079 people have died from COVID in the world 72,957,118 of those in America and 64,002 in Florida.<sup>189</sup> It is my sincere hope that each of them has entered into heaven. Scripture is clear though as we enter those proverbial pearly gates we'll be asked to give an account of the time that we had here on earth.<sup>190</sup> This is the dash that we get to spend between birth and death. When you stand before Jesus and your life plays out before you, do you think Jesus will be more or less pleased at the times you chose to risk for the Kingdom of God? I don't know about you but I want to live in adventure. I don't want Jesus to have to fast forward through the boring bits where I just ignored the call to risk for the Kingdom or risk for doing good.

Not too long ago, I answered the office door and there stood a homeless man whose name was Greg. Greg told me a story about how he had read the story of the rich young ruler.<sup>191</sup> He decided he had heard God call him to sell and/or give away everything, his car, his home, all except for a camp chair, a backpack filled with a few things, and the clothes on his back. Where

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<sup>189</sup>“Coronavirus,” worldometers.info, last modified Jan. 25, 2022, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?%22>.

<sup>190</sup> Mt. 25

<sup>191</sup> Mk 10:17-27.

he was living got too cold to live on the streets and so he wandered, hitchhiking his way to where so many others do: Key West.

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### REFLECTION

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How do you think you would have reacted to Greg? Would you have let him in and talked with him? Would you have tried to convince him that his extreme literalism can be dangerous? What about if you saw him sitting in front of the church? How might you have reacted and how might you have risked?

The next breath he explained to me how God had also told him that strangers would give him \$100 bills. As we learned in the discernment phase there's certainly a fine line to walk when called to do something that we feel extreme. Otherwise, we may be the next Jim Jones or David Koresh. I don't know if God called Greg. That's not my call to make. I can tell you he had people give him \$100 bills, he showed them to me. In fact, he was the first homeless person to offer ME money. The next day he was shooed off our property by a member of the church because we don't want him hanging out in front of our church. Just down the road St Paul's has their doors open seven days a week. It is used by some of our homeless friends. There they find a place to

escape the heat and take a nap. St. Paul's has security cameras in case the worst should happen. One block down Eaton St you come to Old Stone to find it locked down. Shutters that make the building look like a fortress, gates, locked doors: a clear sign folks aren't welcome. I know part of the motivation of this is because we were recently vandalized by fire. But, I also believe that

## RITUALIZE

### Listening to God

God speaks to us in all kinds of ways. Rarely in scripture was it face-to-face or an audible voice. More often, God speaks to us through scripture. But we should also have accountability with our understanding of what God is calling us to do. Discernment in a community is much better than by ourselves. And we look at what we are sensing through the lenses of tradition, reason, and experience.

God has more in store for us than to hide behind our stone walls and simply wait for people to come to us.

Perhaps God will call one of us to take up the mantle of those 18th century missionaries who packed their coffins. Maybe God will call someone from Old Stone into missions work across the sea. I hope we will all hear the call that we don't have to go far. We simply have to open our doors, be willing to gather with people over dinner like Jesus did, go to where the people are and not just expect them to

come to us. It is time for coffins and funerals but not our own coffins. We don't necessarily have to give up our lives, as in our physical heart-beating-lung-filling lives, but we might need to give up our overscheduled, underwhelming, self-important, inward facing lives. Or we might be called to continue to live what seems an ordinary life, but one that is made extraordinary by the love of God.

*The Great Work of our Time*

The church can neither retreat to safe institutionalization nor abandon its faith altogether.  
It is called *out*—beyond itself into the liminal place of mission.  
—Michael Frost & Alan Hirsh

The God of Risk has taken risks so that we can be in relationship with God. Jesus risked it all for us and for our salvation. The biggest risk of all is entrusting the continued work of the Kingdom of God to us. Are we up for the task? The martyrs, the founders of our faith, and the legends before us call to us from history begging us to not let the life changing message of the Gospel die with our generation. “All did their bit; you and I can do no more.”<sup>192</sup> The great work of our time is to honor the legacy of those who have come before us and live as people of faith who are willing to take risks for the Kingdom; people who are willing to risk it all in doing good. We are called “to be first responders, those who run toward, not away from the future.”<sup>193</sup>

One year after the death of Jesus the gospel had already spread to the four corners of the known world and thousands upon thousands of people had become Christians. The great work of our time is to build a new expression of Christianity outside of Christendom. Regardless of the challenges of the pandemic and the other things that have put us in hyper-liminality, we still need to be disciples. And disciples disciple others. It is in our DNA. It will be difficult because we have memories of what it used to be like. When we were in consumer-Christendom Christianity

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<sup>192</sup>John Wesley, in Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 294.

<sup>193</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019), VIII.

we shopped churches, picking our favorite aspects whether it was their programming or the sermons, or the music, or the atmosphere. Living in the present will mean going from being fed to feeding ourselves then on to helping to feed others. The great work of our time is to go from passive, one-hour-a-week-Christianity to a life devoted to the cause of Christ.

### REFLECTION

Sacred and Secular: I get a kick out of when people cuss in church and then turn red and look at me and apologize. First, it's not like I haven't. And, second, and more importantly, it reveals that most of us still think of the church as being separate and different from the rest of our world. The danger of that thought is then we can be tempted to live bifurcated lives. Split between sacred and secular. But God is everywhere. If you apologize for what you say or think "in the holy place" work on recognizing everywhere is holy for God is already there. If God can be there, it is holy by God's presence.

It is time for the church to be signifiers of God's love. "God the signified can be known through the lives of Christians, and that meaning is clarified, defined, and redefined through the continual accretion of signifiers."<sup>194</sup> We are to be the hermeneutic, the interpretation, of the

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<sup>194</sup>Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), chap. 4, sec. 10, Kindle.

gospel. This is our primary task. In a world where most people are not Christian, where there may even be some anti-Christian sentiments, our work is to shine forth the love of God in a multitude of simple and accessible ways in our every-day life. We may be the only representation of the gospel that some people meet. Our faith is best caught, not taught.

The great work of our time is to build a new post-Christendom community of faith. Each member of this community of faith must see themselves as being sign-posts of the God of love in the world. God is already at work in the world around us, we simply get to join in the *Missio Dei*. In this new post-Christendom community of faith there will no longer be the lines of sacred and secular. How silly is it for us to think that there are only some sacred places? When Jesus died the curtain of the Holy of Holies in the Temple was torn from top to bottom.<sup>195</sup> This most holy place was where God's presence was contained B.C. But Jesus made a way for that sacred/secular line to be erased. Now

#### RITUALIZE:

As this journey unfolds before you may the words of this hymn sustain you:

#### *God Will Take Care of You*

Be not dismayed, whate'er betide, God will take care of you; beneath his wings of love abide, God will take care of you. God will take care of you through ev'ry day, o'er all the way; he will take care of you, God will take care of you. No matter what may be the test, God will take care of you; Lean, weary one, upon his breast, God will take care of you. God will take care of you, through ev'ry day o'er all the way; he will take care of you, God will take care of you.

Cilvia d. Martin, "God Will Take Care of You,"

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<sup>195</sup>Mt 25:57.



everyone has access to the living God who is at work in the world. “There isn’t sacred and secular. There is only life.”<sup>196</sup> There should be no more segregation of our lives into spiritual and secular. We have but one life. We have assumed that what the world needs is better knowledge of Jesus. We have assumed wrong. What the world needs is not theology or biblical interpretation or us arguing with their beliefs. They need us. They need us to go and be Christ for them. For most people you meet you are the only Bible they will read; you are the only image of God they may see. “This is the time to blaze new trails, to explore strange new lands, to build better spaces in which to live and love. If you want a quiet life, a life of peace and contentment, then don’t follow Jesus. If you want a safe life, a life of security and caution, then don’t follow Jesus. If you want a life that is all mapped out, a life you can plan and control, then don’t follow Jesus.”<sup>197</sup> This is his call. Let’s blaze those new trails and begin to risk it all for the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>196</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other To the God Who’s Already There* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 76.

<sup>197</sup>Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 91.

## Conclusion: WHAT NOW?

We are the music makers; and we are the dreamers of dreams.—Willy Wonka

We have found our bearings. We know what risk is, we know what we value, and are on track to know what we want. We have practiced theology and encountered the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of Risk. We've seen that, incredibly, we are God's biggest risk. We've learned to overcome inertia and take the first steps. We've gleaned some wisdom from the school of hard knocks, and learned of those who were willing to pack their coffins for the Gospel. What now? What will you do with this? My hope is that this learning journey has been transformational not just informational.

Now we as a church must begin to take steps of faith, to risk by doing all the good we can so that God's Kingdom may come upon the world. We will be open to the future, knowing what we will never forsake or change. It will be steps forward and backwards as we learn the dance of discernment. But we will not resist change, for "when the church resists change, it is a classic case of letting the dead bury the living."<sup>198</sup> As we follow Jesus together, we will not have all the answers at the start but we know that as we go God will be with us.

"Today's church crisis stems from one thing: Jesus Deficit Disorder. ... The church has been busy telling stories other than God's story, dreaming other dreams than God's dream as

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<sup>198</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2019), 142.

revealed by Jesus.”<sup>199</sup> It is time for our story to be God’s story and for us to dream together and find God’s dream for us. Our faith ought to be an adventure, an exploration and discovery of God in every nook and cranny of our lives. We were made for more than the ordinary that we have settled for. We were made for a life that takes risks that looks at the potential of loss and says “you won’t win!” A faith that looks at our fears and lets them be conquered by faith. We were made to model a God of love who risked for us and who risks with us. We can change Key West, the lower Keys, and the world. How do I know this to be true? If a bunch of nobodies on Reddit can upset the stock market by buying GameStop stock – then certainly, we the followers of Jesus, indwelling the Holy Spirit can make a difference! Our own history shows this to be true. We will be prepared for whatever adventure God may call us to!

### *What Story Do You Tell?*

The grace of God then often bears a human face.—Kenneth Collins

If we are to be the hermeneutic of the Gospel in the world, the signifier of God’s love, what meaning are you giving to God’s love in the world around you? As you live out and share the love of God you give it meaning and value, as do those who interpret what you are saying with your life. You are uniquely called. You have a sphere of influence that others do not. You

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<sup>199</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Devine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 22.

have experiences that others have not had. “Each of us is a song. When God created you, God created you to be unrepeatable, irreplaceable song, the likes of which will never be again.”<sup>200</sup>

As people listen to your song and read your life are they seeing you indwell Jesus? We are to “indwell the story, tacitly aware of it as shaping the way we understand but focally attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it.”<sup>201</sup> When we live focally on ourselves we miss the opportunity to be a part of the risky mission of the Church. We, the body of Christ, get to help people find hope. We help them by putting a “future tense in their language.”<sup>202</sup>

### *Who Tells Your Story?*

The last act in the show *Hamilton* is called “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story.” George Washington and chorus tell us, “Let me tell you what I wish I’d known when I was young and dreamed of glory. You have no control: who lives, who dies, who tells your story.”<sup>203</sup> We have today. That is what is given to us. We do not get to control what comes after us, who will stay, who will go, who will join. And we have no control over the story told of us in the future. My hope is that when they tell the story of Old Stone during the pandemic they would

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<sup>200</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Summoned to Lead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 42.

<sup>201</sup>Leslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 38.

<sup>202</sup>Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 59.

<sup>203</sup>Cast of *Hamilton*, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story” by Ron Chernow, with music, lyrics, and book by Lin-Manuel Miranda, recorded Aug. 16-21, 2015, Act II, Track 23, Atlantic, Amazon Prime Music.

say, they did not shrink back from the challenge of ministry in a pandemic, the challenge of ministry in a post-Christendom world, or the challenges of a pending denominational split.

The challenges we face can provide for us the fuel to form the future. Together, we can tell the story anew, living a purposeful future that provides, the space to shape new forms to live out ancient truths at a higher level.”<sup>204</sup> We are a part of a story that began long before us and we get to be a part of the story of God as told in Key West and Old Stone Church. May we live lives that point others to the God we love and who loves us, risking along the way for the Kingdom, and retelling the ancient stories in new ways.

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<sup>204</sup>Gilbert R. Rendle, *Quietly Courageous; Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 221.

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## ASSESSMENT

The ultimate test of success for this work will be seen when the congregation moves out of nostalgia, overcomes inertia, and begins to take risks for the Kingdom. This will be evaluated over several years. However, there is already forward progress. Through the development of this curriculum, materials were tested with twelve participants. In the four weeks of studying risk together in the Bible shifts towards risk taking are already being seen. Some examples include: the leadership's agreement to invest endowment funds into new ministries, the church's adding new staff for new ministry areas, and the leadership looking at expanding our coffee house. It seems that once more of the church is able to participate in this curriculum; and as the curriculum is coupled with some sermon series, the church will be primed to take significant risk for the Kingdom of God. This adoption of risk taking will then lead to needing to move through adaptive challenges that will arise.

Through the development of the project church members gave feedback and helped to shape the presented curriculum. With their input it was written at an undergraduate level. It also has call outs with definitions and suggestions for resources for further study. Based on the feedback of early participants, it seems as though the congregation will find this work to be too academic and written at a level they can understand. It is also not a stand-alone work. It will be read by individuals but discussed in small groups which will allow for further clarification.

There is a clear theology of risk. And, this theology of risk is Wesleyan. To my knowledge this is the first curriculum on a theology of risk from a Wesleyan perspective and is the only one written by a woman. The theology of risk uses the theological method taught within the curriculum. There are scriptural examples from the whole of scripture. This material is held

alongside church tradition and history. It is reasoned and presented in a logical format and has examples from lived experiences. This curriculum uses the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

The curriculum will be printed for participants in a workbook. This will allow participants to use the reflection boxes as journaling space. Large portions of chapters are divided into subsections and each section has either highlighted quotes, reflection questions, or opportunities for ritualization. This lends to an attractive aesthetic for the work. The colors chosen are representative of the waters around the island and chosen for that purpose. All of the graphics within the curriculum were created by me and so there are no notations to artists. In the final version of the material I may incorporate more visual elements. I will also review each of the rituals to incorporate a variety of learning styles as I believe that the current edition is most appropriate for visual learners.

If the work is ever published or used by a wider audience there will be a great need for modifications as it is very particularized to Key West. In order for other churches to utilize this material they too will need to particularize. This requires contextual intelligence. Initially this project was set to be done at the conference level. However, I believe it is much stronger as it is so very particularized. The Florida Annual Conference is too large and too varied to have a curriculum that is contextualized at that level; it loses the particularization needed. This is because the various parts of Florida are very different from one another. The northern part of the state is more like south Georgia. The middle of the state (the parts without theme parks) are very rural. Even South Florida is not one cohesive unit, nor are the Keys a cohesive unit. This work holds tightly to the adage: you get to the universal through the particular. I believe this project has met all the benchmarks set forth for evaluation in the introduction of the project.

## PROJECT LAUNCH PLAN

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The opportunity exists to develop a curriculum on a theology of risk for Key West United Methodist Church. If the congregation grasps a theological of risk it will allow them to risk substantially for the Kingdom of God. A curriculum was developed on this subject. It includes a biblical understanding of risk as well as research on the areas of risk, adaptation, liminality, and missional theology. Liminality is a place or time of betweenness. It is from the Latin *limen* for threshold and comes initially from the field of anthropology. Missional theology is a theology that centers on the great commission of Matthew 28:19-21 and the understanding that Christians participate in God's work in the world. Each chapter includes areas to reflect on the subject matter and to develop rituals needed to work through the liminal space participants are in. Participants are encouraged to see God as a God who risks, who takes a risk on each of us, and calls us to risk it all for the Kingdom of God.

### AUDIENCE

This project was created specifically for the congregation for Key West United Methodist Church. The congregation has a mixture of multi-generation families born in Key West (Conchs) and those who have moved here. There is a large seasonal population. While there are families, the mean age is 70. In addition, the church has a coffee-house that includes local musicians and a spiritual conversation. The mean age there is 50. The congregation is wealthy with a mixture of conservatives and progressives yet also identifies as an "open and welcoming" church. The

greater community includes a large military population, hospitality industry workers, and wealthy retirees. The church will be engaged in this topic through preached messages and small group studies. Copies of the materials will be available at no charge to the congregation.

I have also been asked to share this material with other United Methodist churches in the Florida Annual Conference. More work will be needed to explain the highly contextualized ideas presented in the curriculum. At this point there is no plan to publish this work.

### **DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE**

- The written component of the project was completed in January 2022.
- Sermon Series on a Theology of Risk from the Bible study will be preached in January, February, and September of 2022.
- In May I will present this material to the clergy of the South-East District of The Florida Annual Conference as a way of sharing this research and work with fellow clergy.
- In June work may begin on elaborating the highly contextual concepts within the written work for wider distribution.
- An all-church study (at KWUMC) will take place in September and October with participants in various small groups working together through the written project.

### **ITERATION PROCESS**

- After presenting the information to the clergy of the South-East District, I will survey participants to assess:
  - Interest level in using the materials in their own settings
  - Difficulty level of the course

- If a clear theology of risk was developed
- Before the church-wide study participants will be encouraged to take a pre-study survey to determine how risk averse they may be.
- After the church-wide study the same participants will be encouraged to take another survey to see if their risk-tolerance shifted and if they have a clear understanding of why Christians should take risks. The survey results will help church leadership continue to move towards the ultimate goal of taking significant risks for the Kingdom of God.

## APPENDIX A—MILESTONE 1 THE NPO CHARTER



## **PERSONAL RESEARCH MANIFESTO:**

I will value the God-shaped journey that's made me who I am; as I use inductive reasoning, while also aware of tendencies towards inattention blindness, confirmation bias, and groupthink.<sup>1</sup>

## **NPO STATEMENT:**

Considering declining numbers in the UMC, there's an opportunity to re-mission, re-tradition, and retool through the theology of Fresh Expressions of Church; which is caused by a poor Ecclesiology. If solved, it would mean the church would live into its purpose.<sup>2</sup>

## **NPO SCOPE:**

This NPO will be focused on The United Methodist Church. Some research will need to be done outside of this denomination as origins of Fresh Expressions of Church began outside of the denomination and have continued outside the denomination. The goal is to remain theologically grounded in a Wesleyan approach and develop a solution that re-missions and retools and ties into the well-established history of going outside the /church/ within Methodism

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<sup>1</sup> As understood from Schulz, Kathryn. Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error. New York, NY: Harper Collins. 2010, Kindle Edition. Especially chapters 3, 6, and 7.

<sup>2</sup> The published purpose of The United Methodist Church is, "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." United Methodist Church. The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016. Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2017, Kindle Edition. Par. 120

as it re-traditions. I am hoping research will be theological, experiential, and tied to actual church demographics provided by the denomination.

### **NPO CONTEXT:**

While I hope what develops out of this NPO is something applicable beyond my own setting, I plan to use my local church as a learning lab. It's considered a vital congregation within the bounds of the Florida Annual Conference of the UMC. Located in North East Florida, it's set in a distinctive beach and military community. A suburb of the largest cities, it's predominately white, with a mixture of ethnicities and is reflective of the surrounding community. The average age is 65, while the average age of the community is 35. It's in the process of launching 2-3 Fresh Expressions of Church and has little familiarity with its theology and ecclesiology. The average worship attendance is 143. The greater context is the NE District with 68 churches. I may also work with churches within this area or within the Conference as both my District Superintendent and Bishop are fully supportive of this NPO.

### **ROOT CAUSES:**

The decline in the UMC has many causes and there is no shortage of opinions or finger-pointing to who or what is to cause. The stakeholders at the discovery session listed many. For the main opportunity they listed that the church is an activity, not an identity, that we lack grace, that it is not a priority, that there are generational gaps, that the church is disconnected from the community, and there is a rise of cause-effect theology. When identifying root cause they named lowered Christology and Ecclesiology. Most of this is really related to discipleship. Through

one-on-one interviews and further reflection what has come to light is the true root cause seems to me to be an ill-defined, and therefore poorly practiced ecclesiology.

### **DISCOVERY SESSION STAKEHOLDERS:**

Stakeholders who participated in the discovery session were:

- The District Superintendent of the NE District of the UMC
- A pioneer of Fresh Expressions of Churches and the Administrative Assistant to the District Superintendent of the NE District of the UMC
- A local pastor / church planter and pioneer of Fresh Expressions of Churches
- A campus ministry pastor and pioneer of Fresh Expressions of Churches
- The lay leader of my church

### **ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS:**

One-on-one interviews were conducted with:

- One of the creators / pioneers / developers of Fresh Expressions of Church and author of several books on the subject.
- Bishop of the Florida Annual Conference.
- A local church pastor who has not had much exposure with Fresh Expressions of Church nor participated in any.

### **ACADEMIC RESOURCES:**

- Fields:

- Theology especially:
  - Christology
  - Ecclesiology
  - Missiology
- Fresh Expressions of Church
- Adaptive Leadership
- Scholars:
  - Barth, Karl
  - Beck, Michael
  - Chilcote, Paul
  - Hauerwas, Stanley
  - Heath, Elaine
  - Hirst, Alan
  - Inbody, Tyron
  - Jones, E. Stanley
  - Lowry, Michael
  - Male, David
  - Moynagh, Michael
  - Newbigin, Leslie
  - Sweet, Leonard
  - Tanner, Kathryn
  - Willimon, William
  - Wright, NT

- Academic & Theological Resources:
  - Atla – journal articles
  - Dissertations available
  - Commentaries

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## APPENDIX:

**Discovery Session Description:** Prior to the session, stakeholders were invited to participate by email. Those invited to attend the Discovery session were a mixture of clergy and laity. They represented varied demographic categories including education, socio-economic levels, familiarity with Fresh Expressions of Church, gender, and age. Ten were invited, five participated. Participants were 3 clergy, 2 laity. Three were female and two were male. All have at least a bachelor's degree, two have a master's, and one a D.Min. All but one participant has

had previous experience with Fresh Expressions of Church, and most are leading, or have led, one.

Participants met at the District Superintendent's office, a typical comfortable, and middle-of-the-area meeting space. As we gathered participants were invited to partake of provided snacks, acquainted with the space, and introduced to each other. Together we formed a short covenant agreement for how the time together would proceed. This was posted on the wall.

I provided a brief introduction to what the goal of the Discovery Session would be, what the process would be, how we would proceed, and what I hoped to accomplish. We followed the Discovery Session Guide closely with little to no variance. In this introduction I shared a broad version of my NPO: that as the United Methodist Church is in decline, it has been focused on outdated missional models and needs to be re-missioned, re-traditioned, and re-tooled through the theology and practices of Fresh Expressions. I then posted a blank "Discovery Statement" on the wall.

**Discovery Statement:** I led the participants through the Discovery Session. Together they created the following Discovery Statement:

Considering the growing number of "Nones," "Dones," and "Unchurched" (audience), we've discovered the opportunity to re-mission the church to reach these groups by retraining the church (NPO), which is caused by a lowered Christology and Ecclesiology (root cause).

If solved, it would mean the church would actually "be" the church. (outcome)

**Critical Insights from Discovery Session:** The audience portion surprised me. I anticipated the audience would be the inherited church and its members. I was pleasantly surprised to see the heat map lead to those outside the church. Second on the heat map was a tie for two forms of the

institutional church: the local inherited church and its staff, and the denominational bureaucracy. This was surprising because all participants, but one, are paid by churches or the denomination. Another surprise was the root cause. The root causes presented were varied, yet they all circled discipleship issues, which the heart is a matter of ecclesiology. The stakeholders agreed that it was a theology issue, and, in particular, Christology and Ecclesiology issue. The /church/ has forgotten who Jesus is, which I again would point to discipleship as the real root cause of this, and with this has forgotten who she (the /church/) is. This deepened my understanding.

**One-on-One Interview Discoveries:** Interviewees represented: the institutional church, an expertise in Fresh Expressions of Church (Fresh Expressions), and a local church pastor without experience with Fresh Expressions. The interviewees provided clarity about audience as all had varying definitions of categories. If the audience were the “nones,” “dones,” and “unchurched” we begin by needing to define ecclesiology. We also begin with a misunderstanding of Fresh Expressions as being only to reach these persons. Greater clarity was also gained around the root cause. The expert showed it is not merely a theological issue, it is also a necessity of time and space. The local pastor pointed out this is a discipleship issues, and these begin before adulthood. I concur.

Interviewees asked for greater clarification of what it meant to “be the church.” Upon further reflection, this is nearly a circular argument as it requires ecclesiology in order to answer the question.

**Synthesis:** This process has shown me that this project is needed. It has become clear, as one interviewee said, that this will serve as a bridge between those who practice Fresh Expressions of Church (Fresh Expressions) and the inherited Church. What is needed is a translation, a connecting of dots, a semiotics between the two. Both /sides/ are seeing the same problem,



decline in the /church/, but cannot see a way forward, and/or, a need to reach the other /side/. I hold that Fresh Expressions offers a way, not just to reach the audience the Discovery Session stakeholders identified, but also to revitalize and re-mission the church. It is a tool that can enable the church through stronger discipleship, clearer Christology, and ecclesiology to do more than just nurture those that have already been reached. Likewise, Fresh Expressions can also benefit from this project, as another interviewee pointed out, they need the inherited church just as the inherited church needs them.

Pushback given is that efforts have been made to re-mission the church, to revitalize it, and to re-tool it. What makes Fresh Expressions the silver bullet? That will be the key question to answer – and it is a needed question.

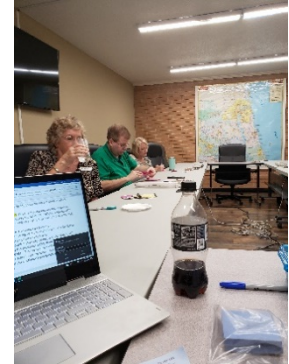
**Next Steps:** One of the areas of research will need to be around finding and or providing definitions of key terms. Another area of research that I would like to explore is with the churches that have Fresh Expressions of Church and those that do not. Are there measurable differences in measures of vitality as measured by The United Methodist Church? The UMC measures weekly attendance, professions of faith, reaffirmations of faith, and other signs of vitality. How can these be compared across churches that practice Fresh Expressions and those that do not? Is there already an answer to the question, “what makes this a silver bullet?”? The process of one-on-one interviews has been so invaluable I would like to do more of these with additional stakeholders. Finally, I would like to do research around the areas of Christology and Ecclesiology (in a modern context) and how Ecclesiology might be redefined to include discipleship.

## Appendices:

### I. Discovery Session Documentation:

#### A. Introduction & Overview:

- a. Participants were thanked for coming, welcomed to the space, and invited to sit at a board room seat. Most of the participants knew one another. There was a brief period of introducing each themselves. We formed a covenant agreement for our time together and said that we would: respond respectfully, not interrupt one another, be honest, and have fun.



- b. The topic was also introduced, and the idea of Fresh Expressions was explained for the participant who did not previously know what it was. I shared a broad version of my NPO: that as the United Methodist Church is in decline, it has been focused on outdated missional models and needs to be re-missioned, re-traditioned, and re-tooled through the theology and practices of Fresh Expressions.



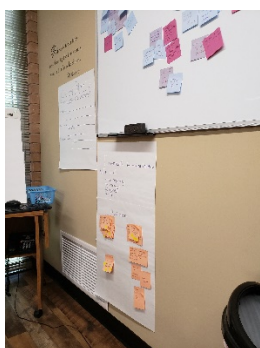
- c. The blank Discovery Statement was put up

- B. Charting the NPO Audience: Participants brainstormed audience surrounding the NPO... and then voted using dots to determine, via a heat map, which audience had the most traction. (Responses were grouped by likeness once collected)

Responses:	Heat Map Votes
The institutional church The “establishment” Denominational Bureaucracies	★ ★ ★
Clergy Pastors	
Church neighbors Business and agencies in the community	
Students / young adults who say the church is not relevant Children in need of being raised in a tradition (church kids)	
Existing Congregation Church supporting staff and clergy Older traditional members who don’t understand Congregants who go to church out of obligation but don’t have a clear mission as to why Local church members	★ ★ ★
Unchurched (nones and dones) People who need to know and feel love and compassion from others People resistant to church due to previous bad experiences with religion/church Young adults who have never been raised in church New people not familiar with church in any form Those people who do not have any “church” affiliation	★ ★ ★ ★

<p>“FSU fans finally coming to know Jesus”<sup>3</sup></p> <p>Dechurched people</p> <p>Unchurched people</p>	
--	--

Key audience: nones / dones / unchurched



### C. NAILING NPO:

- a. What is the need / problem / opportunity?
  - i. PROBLEM: Bridget is going to save us all by: leading the church to redefine its mission and tradition by seeing fresh expressions as a primary conduit of the church not a silo or side project.
  - ii. PROBLEM: Creating some form of credentialing
  - iii. PROBLEM: Creating financial sustainability

#### 1. PAIN POINTS:

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<sup>3</sup> Part of the “having fun” of the covenant was my District Superintendent’s need to mock my college allegiance

## 2. ROOT CAUSES:

- a. Churches previously engaged in mission to marginalized communities concerned with scarcity
- b. It will cost us
- c. No one knows what tithe really is

### iv. PROBLEM: Cranky Christians

#### 1. PAIN POINT: Loss of love

#### 2. ROOT CAUSE:

- a. Christians don't practice what they preach
- b. Western Consumerism

### v. PROBLEM: The church does not always reflect the community around them

#### 1. PAIN POINTS:

- a. Church membership is limited to one generation, race and socio-economic status
- b. Difficult to find diversity amongst the called
- c. Commuter Christians – no one from surrounding neighborhoods

#### 2. ROOT CAUSES:

- a. White flight drastically reshaped neighborhoods where churches were
- b. Evangelism wrapped up with colonization and racial that persists

- vi. PROBLEM: Church is stuck and can't move forward / can't get support from current church / some will be hostile and not supportive / overcoming congregational inertia / overcoming bureaucratic inertia

1. PAIN POINTS:

- a. Some clergy preach hate instead of love
- b. Country club & Methodist Mafia mentalities
- c. Blinders on / narrow minded thinking
- d. Failure to effectively use technology
- e. Limited imagination / "we've never don't it like that"
- f. Boring
- g. Exclusive to certain racial or socio-economic persons

2. ROOT CAUSES:

- a. Like attracts like / comfort with similar types
- b. Failure to understand appropriate missiology
- c. The establishment sometimes works in a bubble
- d. Curriculum focus – church-school boring?

- vii. OPPORTUNITY: Many areas of unchurched people out there – multitudes / There is so much hopelessness in the world today / People need hope in Jesus / There are many that want to go to church but cannot on Sundays – the church is sometimes inflexible / Being able to see and know God anywhere /

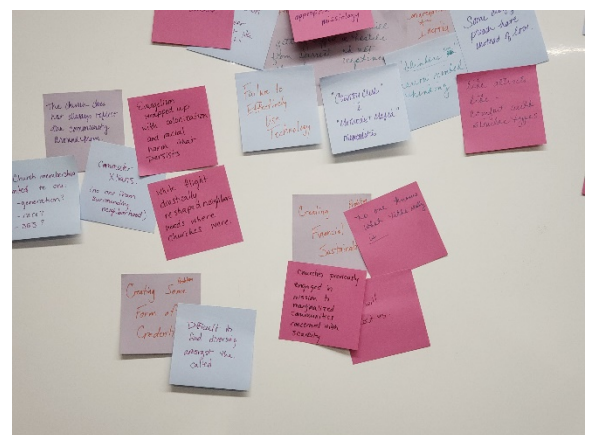
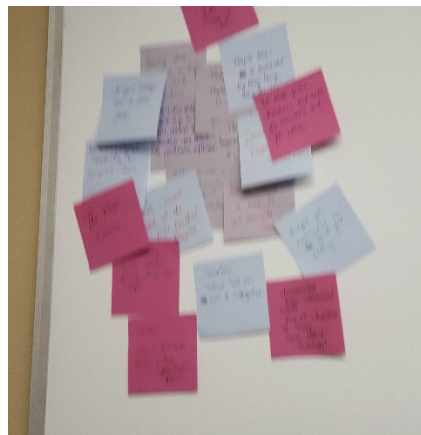
1. PAIN POINTS:

- a. Increasing demographic of nones and dones

- b. People are so distracted by being busy all of the time / too many things competing for people's time
- c. Hope for everyone to just get along
- d. Status – it's not cool to love Jesus
- e. We've lost our will to evangelize

## 2. ROOT CAUSES:

- a. Church is something to do not who we are
  - b. We lack grace, kindness and love for ourselves and others
  - c. Too busy with other priorities in life
  - d. Generational gaps – children not raised in the faith
  - e. Disconnected from communal needs / rise of churches with easy cause-effect theology
- b. We've discovered (NPO): the opportunity to re-mission / re-tradition the church to reach the nones and dones and unchurched



## D. What will audience think/say/feel/do differently when the opportunity is addressed?

- a. Church recaptures heart
- b. Transformational change agent

- c. A center of worship – not *the* center of worship
  - d. More room for the /other/
  - e. People become followers of Jesus every day of the week
  - f. Smaller before bigger
- E. Putting it all together: Considering the growing number of “Nones,” “Dones,” and “Unchurched” we’ve discovered the opportunity to re-mission the church to reach these groups by retraining the church the need for which (root cause) is a lowered Christology and Ecclesiology if solved, it would mean the church would actually “be” the church.

## II. One-on-One Interview Notes:

- a. “The Expert” – Author, practioner, teacher in Fresh Expressions of Church
  - i. Agreed with:
    - 1. “...need to reach those categories of people. The reason is that the existing church is inaccessible to such people by its very nature. Once a congregation has decided to meet at a particular time and place, in a certain style and with a certain agenda, it is bound to exclude all those who can’t come at that time and to that place, and who do not identify with the style and agenda. So it needs to start new communities with and among people who find the existing church inaccessible.”
  - ii. Disagreed with / reservations about...
    - 1. “...the categories of ‘nones’ etc. These are all categories in relation to the church. It reinforces an overall church-centric approach. I would prefer an approach that starts with what God is doing in the



world and asks how the church can join in - ie a stronger world-centric approach.”

iii. What’s missing?

1. “The main omission is the need for Christians to get together in small groups, find a simple way to love the people round them, build relationships with them, share the gospel when opportunities arise, and encourage those coming to faith to form a worshipping community where they are and connect with the wider church.”

b. “The Institutional Rep” a denominational leader:

i. Agreed with...

1. Overall vision, the division between Fresh Expressions of Church and the Inherited Church are artificial. In reality they depend on one another. The Inherited Church needs Fresh Expressions for Renewal and Fresh Expressions needs the Inherited Church for resources and multiple generations.
2. Wording of re-missioning and re-traditioning; help people tie into who Methodists have always been, and who God has always been and is. Most churches have something in their DNA that ties them back to the mission of God they just needed to be reminded of it [shared stories of FL churches for which this is true].

ii. Disagree with? Offered nothing

iii. Missing?

1. Address reasons why for decline such as passivity, dependency on old models, lower birth rate, the reality of wanting white churches
  2. Adding a piece of missiology, potentially from Graham Cray who acknowledges that all Fresh Expressions borrow from Leslie Newbigin. We are dependent on the Holy Spirit who goes ahead of us.
- c. “The Local Pastor” One without experience, and limited exposure to Fresh Expressions of Church:
- i. Agree with:
    1. Need to address decline, audience (sees purpose of Fresh Expressions to reach nones, dones, and unchurched).
  - ii. Disagrees with:
    1. The idea that without solving this NPO we are not the church / Discovery language was harsh. Are we the church if we do not make new believers? For her this read as seeker church, she sees Fresh Expressions as getting people to say yes to Jesus – not as full expressions of church, but fully confesses that Fresh Expressions of Church are a foreign language to her.
  - iii. What’s missing?

Definitions, descriptions, helping the reader understand what Fresh Expressions are, and what is meant by “to be the church”. What is meant by the goal of re-missioning and re-traditioning? The concern is that this would then become the only thing the church does. Currently the vision of The United Methodist Church is “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of

the world.” We’ve been very focused on the transformation of the world and not focused on the disciple making. But overcorrecting to disciple making may not be the answer either.

### **Summary of Discovery Session**

On October 1, 2019, I held a Stakeholder Discovery Session with 5 participants, including clergy and laity. Most of these participants were Fresh Expression practioners/pioneers. However, included in the group was one person who had not participated in or experienced a Fresh Expression of church. Here I share with you what we discovered together.

**Initial presentation of need, problem or opportunity:** As we gathered, I shared our process for the time we had together. As a part of my doctoral work, my project will be to work on an opportunity I sense to help address decline within The United Methodist Church through Fresh Expressions.

**Narrowing Audience:** Together we examined who would be impacted by this work. We realized that it would include those inside and outside the church. After using a heat map, we determined that the most impacted audience would be the “Nones,” “Dones,” and “Unchurched.”

**Restating Need/Problem/Opportunity:** Next participants restated the need/problem or opportunity in their own words. For each one, a specific symptoms or pain point and the root causes of each were identified. In the end, it was determined that opportunity with the most traction was the opportunity is to re-mission and re-tradition the church [through Fresh Expressions] in order to reach the “Nones,” “Dones,” and “Unchurched.”

**Putting it all together:** After looking at what it would mean for the church if this were solved, we put it all together in a “Discovery Statement.” That is: Considering the growing number of “Nones,” “Dones,” and “Unchurched” we’ve discovered the opportunity to re-mission the church through Fresh Expressions to reach these groups by retraining the church, the need for which

(root cause) is a lowered Christology and Ecclesiology if solved, it would mean the church would actually “be” the church.

## APPENDIX B—MILESTONE 2 NPO TOPIC EXPERTISE ESSAY

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## INTRODUCTION

Statistics prove The United Methodist Church is in decline and has been. Between 1974 and 2013 the church lost 26% of its members, 20% of its attenders, and 18% of its churches.<sup>1</sup> According to the most recent data an additional 8% of members were lost between 2013 and 2018, 15% of attenders, and 4% of churches.<sup>2</sup> Methodism finds itself, once again, in a space of liminality while it faces this decline, the potential of a denominational split, cultural shifts from Christendom to Post-Christendom, and the realities of living in a global pandemic. While many are ready to abandon hope, there is an opportunity to discover within this liminal space a gift and opportunity within the DNA of Methodism. By examining Methodist history in light of liminal spaces and how contemporary attempts to resolve tensions of liminality have been addressed this essay seeks to show that what is needed is a personal knowledge and a non-reductionist approach to moving through these realities to discover methods for retooling and re-missioning the church.

## SECTION 1: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The United Methodist Church finds itself in a liminal space. Liminal, “derives from the Latin, *limins*, and refers to the threshold passageway between two separate places.”<sup>3</sup> The past is

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<sup>1</sup>Lauren Arieux, *The United Methodist Church, a 40-Year Overview* (Nashville: General Council on Finance and Administration, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>General Council on Finance & Administration, *2017-2018 UMC Local Church Statistics (US)* (Nashville: General Council on Finance and Administration, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>Timothy Carson, *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power: Transition, Renewal and Hope* (Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2016), 16 ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/lib/georgefox/detail.action?docID=4514056>.

no longer. The future is unclear. Yet, this is not the first time Methodists have been in a liminal space. From this history and heritage, it is clear, there is a need to retool and re-mission The United Methodist Church. Its current tools and approach to mission are not working, as evidenced by the continued decline. Within Scripture is found a God familiar with liminality - the Creator existing outside of time and liminality, Jesus willing to enter into it and identify with those in it, and the Spirit empowering those within liminal spaces.

### **Decline, Liminality, Ecclesiological Identity and the Need to Retool and Re-mission in the Biblical World**

Decline can feel as though flood waters have swept over and the membership can feel forgotten and forsaken by God. However, feelings are not truth. God speaks directly to this, reminding God's people that God has rescued and will rescue. This reminder is seen in Isaiah 43:2. Spoken directly to a people in liminality – in exile, this passage may also tie into the liminal space of baptism where the baptized join Christ as he joins humanity in liminality. As one enters the body of Christ through baptismal waters, she or he becomes a part of God's own possession, established for a purpose. This will be explored through 1 Peter 2:9. Even in desert wanderings one eventually finds her or his purpose is to continue the *Missio Dei*<sup>4</sup>, as the church, the body of Christ in the world, as seen in Ephesians 1:22-23. Finally, through Galatians 6:10 is seen the call to do all the good possible – a call that sustained John Wesley in his own liminality.

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God.: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 62-63.



Methodists believe this to be the result of God's grace. The required response is to bring God glory through living out the Three General Rules: 1) to do no harm, 2) to do good, and 3) stay in love with God.<sup>5</sup>

### **Textual Discussions**

*Isaiah 43:2 "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you."*

Israel, God's chosen people, were in exile in Babylon when the prophet Isaiah relayed this message to them. It was not the first time they had been in captivity and would not be the last time. Captivity is a liminal space. The familiar life is gone. There is a hope that they will return to Israel, but no guarantee. Nevertheless, in this space, Isaiah is replete with this hope.

Israel has learned in their captivity that: God is still God. This passage echoes back to one of the most famous times of liminality – the Hebrew peoples time in Egypt and their subsequent desert wanderings. As God delivered them from Egypt they passed through the waters of the Red Sea and were not overwhelmed (Exodus 14) and as they entered the promise land the Jordan river was split and again, they walked on dry ground (Joshua 4). The fire that is walked through is reminiscent of the pillar of fire that guided Moses and the Israelites through the dessert wandering (Exodus 13).

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<sup>5</sup> Reuben R. Job. *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 10.

Yet, this passage does more than to call the Israelites who find themselves in captivity to look back. It reminds them in their looking back, that God was with them in their trials and in their liminality – with them in their captivity, with them in the desert, with them in the waters, and with them in the fire. And God rescued and redeemed them, so that, as verses 10-12 of Isaiah 40 makes clear, they can continue to be his witness.

In the baptismal liturgy for The United Methodist Church there is a prayer of “Thanksgiving Over the Water.” It reminds participants of these occurrences as they say, “When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea. Their children you brought through the Jordan to the land which you promised.”<sup>6</sup> And the congregation responds, “Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of God’s mercy each day.” The reality of the Israelites is continued in these worship services. Participants are reminded that the water will not overtake them, and the fire will not burn them, and that God is with them and are reminded to tell of God’s mercy. But as the numbers of members declined, and average worship declined, with it declined the number of baptisms and thereby the number of times Methodists reminded one another of these truths. Many congregations have not had a single baptism or profession of faith in their congregations in years. How are they to remember? What is needed more than ever is the reminder of the baptismal pool that calls Methodists back to Isaiah 43:2, that calls them back to Exodus, that calls them back to the faithful God. As Christine Aroney-Sine wrote,

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<sup>6</sup> “Baptismal Covenant II” *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 41

“Remember, remember, remember! The more we remember our stories with God at the center, the more we are able to become the people we are meant to be.”<sup>7</sup>

*1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

Here in 2 Peter 2:9, the names once given to Israel are now procured for Christians. Commentators argue if this verse means that Christians have replaced Israel as the chosen race or have become the chosen race in addition, however as the verse is silent on the matter, both sides argue from this silence. What is clear is that the language of “royal priesthood” and “holy” comes from Exodus 19:6.

What is meant in Methodist baptism? There are several things but four key ideas are 1) that God is the primary actor, 2) that through baptism one shares in identification with Christ’s death and resurrection, 3) baptism procures entrance into the family of God, and 4) entrance into the priesthood of believers. Methodists believe that God is the primary actor in baptism. Baptism is a means of grace, a way to receive God’s grace directly. It is also, as this passage says, the method whereby God claims participants so even if one were to claim God in baptism (as in a believer’s baptism) it would merely be in response to God’s already having claimed humanity. The baptized are God’s possession, God’s own people, who are merely answering this call to come out of darkness. Baptism is also a place where one shares in Christ’s death and resurrection (cf Romans 6:4). Death and resurrection are also times of liminality – and in baptism the

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<sup>7</sup> Christine Aroney-Sine. *The Gift of Wonder: Creative Practices for Delighting in God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 42

participant joins Christ in this liminal place dying to old ways, rising to newness of life. In this new life, a new identity is found as part of God's family. Thereby, each baptized member becomes this "holy nation", "God's own people," and a "chosen race." Finally, the great equalizer, all become priests in the priesthood of all believers. Early Methodists took this very far as will be seen in the history section. I contend it is not taken nearly far enough today. There is a ritual to remember one's baptism, to remember one is in Christ. It is time to remember baptisms and be thankful for the church's role in the priesthood of all believers.

*Ephesians 1:22-23: And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

Initiates, the baptized members of this "holy nation," also become members of something even greater. They become members of Christ's body, the church, according to Ephesians 1:22-23. This passage is full of pronouns which may make it difficult to follow who the subjects of the verbs are. Perhaps it is better understood and read this way, "God has put all things under Jesus' feet, and made Jesus the head over all things for the church, which is Jesus' body, the fullness of Jesus who fills all in all." There is no shortage of scholarly banter over the trouble caused by "fullness" and the syntax of "body of Christ" which is interpreted many ways. The problem here is that fullness can both mean to fill or to be filled. So, is Christ filled by the church or filling the church? Most translators have opted for the later, arguing that God can never be filled by the church. However, when she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, when she is in fact the very body of Christ, can she not also fill Christ?

What is incredible about these two verses, is not the fullness that gets argued over. It is that these two verses collide ecclesiology and Christology into one study. Jesus IS the church;

the church is Jesus' body and he is its head. "Man does not have a body, he is a body."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Jesus does not have a church, he is the church – and Christians are members thereof.

What is it to say then, when the "church" is in decline? What is it to say then when the "church" is fractured? It is good to be reminded that Jesus, in his earthly ministry, identified with humanity's liminality in his own desert wanderings, in his baptism, in his marginality, in his suffering, and in his death. Christ indwells believers, and the church. The church can and should be an extension of the incarnation and is to be the incarnational people carrying out the work of Christ who was about the work of the Father – the *Missio Dei*.

*Galatians 6:10 "So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."*

Galatians, written to the churches in Galatia and not to a particular church, was a circulatory letter. As with the Israelites of Isaiah's time, these Christ-followers, were also in a time of liminality. They had been taught by Paul but were being influenced by stricter sects to follow a different teaching. They find themselves conflicted and between two teachings. Paul's response is this letter.

Paul exhorts the Galatians, reminding them throughout the letter who they are and whose they are, especially in chapter 3. And, as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit are to do good (reminded of such in chapter 5). This exhortation bears with it two important connotations missed in the English translation. The first is rendered, "whenever we have an opportunity," which in Greek is *Kairos* and is better represented with an eschatological emphasis of needing to

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<sup>8</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1958) 192. Quoting Builtmann.

seize every opportunity as a God-ordained opportunity to do good. The second, is translated as “family of faith” in English. However, contemporary concepts of family tend to be tied simply to blood lines and those who dwell within one’s household. However, the Greco-Roman understanding of family was much broader. There is a wider sense, a sense of all associated with the household, not just immediate family.<sup>9</sup>

John Wesley was so moved by this verse in Galatians it became the basis for his famous line, “the world is my Parish.”<sup>10</sup> For Wesley there was no greater good that one human could do for another than to offer them Christ and to instruct them in discipleship. It is also the fulfilment of the first of Wesley’s general rules, doing no harm. These are really two sides of one phrase for Jesus – simply put, “love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments**

While in liminality Methodists have forgotten who they are. They need to remember and re-member (return the members to the body of Christ). There is a need to remember who God has been, who God is, and who God will continue to be. There is a need to remember their baptism by which they have access to be members of the royal priesthood. There is a need to remember that when discussing the church, one talks not only of the work that is set before them – but of Christ himself who indwells Christians and the church. And through all of this they are to embody and live out the *Missio Dei* by attending to spiritual needs (attending to the ordinances

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<sup>9</sup> Leander E. Keck, ed. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. XI: 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon. (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998), 337

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, *John Wesley*. Albert Outler, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 72.

<sup>11</sup> Cf Mt 19:19

of God), and by loving one's neighbor as oneself as no harm is done and all good is done. In this way they will begin to work back towards discovering not only who they are as Methodists but who they are as a part of the chosen race and God's own possession.

## Section 2: Topic History and Key Voices

### **Topic History**

#### *Liminal Times Within Methodism*

Within Methodist history there exists several times of liminality. In this section, three distinctive liminal and shaping times for Methodism will be examined. These are: 1) John Wesley moving from an Anglican Parish to the World as his parish, 2) Lay persons beginning Methodism within America, especially Robert Strawbridge, and 3) the Methodists moving from societies to churches.

John Wesley is the founder of Methodism. He was an Anglican priest as were his father and one brother. Anglicanism, a protestant reform of Catholicism, placed importance on hierarchy and each priest was assigned to one parish. The first liminal space to be examined is when John Wesley left this Anglican understanding and developed his own understanding of field preaching. John Wesley experienced a "warming of the heart" that led to his own assurance of salvation, though he was already an ordained minister. Though some claim this to be merely a result of the Great Awakening, it is in fact the result of an encounter with the Moravians after a

failed missionary journey to America.<sup>12</sup> This event, remembered now as “Aldersgate Day,” so named for the place where his heart was strangely warmed, was the foundation of Methodism and John and Charles Wesley’s theology that shaped a movement that eventually became a denomination.

John and his brother Charles sought to reform Anglicanism through a message of grace. A key essential to Methodism is what is known as the Three General Rules: 1) do no harm, 2) do all the good possible, and 3) attend to the ordinances of God. This is how Methodists are to live in response to the grace given by God. It was in his desire to do good and not do harm that he applied Galatians 6:10 and realized that in order to “work for the good of all,” he could not relegate his message to a single parish or to only preaching within Anglican parishes. And so, he decided to “be more vile” and began to emulate George Whitfield in field preaching.<sup>13</sup> This shift from a single parish assignment to the world as his parish was a time of liminality. John Wesley left behind the old, Anglican understanding of one parish, one priest, and took to preaching in the fields and cities. This resulted in the feeling of other priests that Wesley was “medaling” with their congregations. This was a time of great tension, yet remarkable growth for Methodism. This time came from a desire of Wesley to respond to the grace of God in his life and to do all the good he could do. This period profoundly shaped Wesley’s identity and the identity of early Methodism.

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<sup>12</sup> Liam Iwig-O’Byrne, “How Methodists Were Made: The Arminian Magazine And Spiritual Transformation In The Transatlantic World, 1778-1803” (Dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy, The University of Texas at Arlington, 2008), 18. Also see in particular John Wesley, John Wesley, editor Albert Outler.

<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, *John Wesley*, ed. Outler, Kindle Edition Location 391



A second time of liminality is that of the time of early American Methodism that existed before a sanctioned mission was sent by John Wesley. While Wesley focused on field preaching and reforming the Anglican Church, converts and those zealous with the gospel carried his message to Ireland, the Caribbean, and the Americas. There are several of these converts who served as lay ministers within the early American Methodist movement. One Irish convert who emigrated to America was Robert Strawbridge. Most historians view Strawbridge as a lay person, however some doubt has been cast on this through genealogical examination. Upon his arrival to America he continued the faith that he had accepted in Ireland. Strawbridge did not have permission from John Wesley to begin Methodist societies in America. Nonetheless, as he shared his faith, the first Methodist society was formed in Maryland. This later became a place of tension and liminality when Wesley finally did send ordained pastors to oversee the growing societies in America. One of the first bishops of American Methodism, Francis Asbury, wrote in his journal that he did not know what to do with Mr. Strawbridge who, would not yield his place of authority over societies. Strawbridge, though probably not formally ordained or commissioned, continued to form societies which eventually became parishes. He continued to serve communion and baptize converts – though this was (and is) not allowed within Methodist doctrine. Strawbridge took seriously the idea of 1 Peter 2:9 that as a baptized Christian, he was a member of the priesthood of all believers. While Strawbridge lived, the Methodist societies existed in liminality between what was “supposed to be” (priest-led) and what was (laity-led).

As Methodists grew in England, Ireland and the Americas, John Wesley organized people into societies. His desire was not to begin a new denomination, but rather to reform his own. Therefore, he did not want to plant churches. Those who reformed with Wesley were to remain members of their churches and join bands, classes, and societies. Bands were small, same-sex

gatherings set up to be a place of accountability. Classes were larger groups of devoted followers, and societies were like worship gatherings where a message was received, and converts were created. These gatherings were viewed by Wesley as “*ecclesiola in ecclesia*—that is, the little circle of serious Christians existing within the large church.”<sup>14</sup> As these societies grew both in England and in America there was greater tension. Wesley went through a period of liminality and had to decide if he would ordain priests and create a new denomination. While in the end, he did ordain bishops who ordained priests, he did ordain priests, and Methodists did build and form their own churches and denominations, it was not neat and tidy. It was a liminal time, forced by lay members like Robert Strawbridge who took authority even when not granted and others in America who built their own meeting houses which turned into churches. All of this was expedited by the American Revolution. American Methodists would no longer submit to the head of the Anglican church (the king of England); and the Methodist-Episcopal denomination was formed. In so doing, Wesley and the People called Methodists embraced their ecclesiology and their own *Kairos* moment accepting their place in the body of Christ.

#### *Attempts to Retool and Re-Mission Methodism*

Methodism was fast growing and one of the largest denominations for most of American History thanks to frontier revivals and expansion. This is no longer the case. Shortly after the time The United Methodist Church was formed (by joining Methodists with Evangelical United Brethren) in 1969, the church was already in decline by 1970.<sup>15</sup> It has been in steady decline

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 32

<sup>15</sup> “United Methodist Membership Statistic,” General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church, accessed August 8, 2020. <http://gcah.org/history/united-methodist-membership-statistics>

since its inception. With this decline have come many attempts to reform, retool, and re-mission the Methodist Church. Heifetz & Linsky in their seminal work *Leadership on the Line* identify two types of problem solving. The first is technical and the second is adaptive. There are times that call for technical solutions, such as when an electronic device is broken, you take it to someone who can perform the necessary technical solutions to repair it. However, within business (the realm that Heifetz and Linsky focus) and within the church many of the solutions congregations need while in decline are not, in fact, technical. The solutions that are needed are adaptive. Adaptive solutions, as the name implies, enable the leader and the organization to adapt to changing environments. This has become the prescription for the church especially within the last decade.

Technical solutions for churches line most bookshelves of pastors' studies. These technical solutions may seek to increase giving, membership, or the education and discipleship of the congregation. Some of these books seem as though they may be adaptive in nature – usually with words like “turn around” or “revive” or “come back.” These meet with varying success in congregations. These technical solutions have helped churches to thrive across the denomination. However, these technical solutions are not one-size-fits all. Thus, there is a need for adaptive leadership. These adaptive solutions are built on the work of Heifetz and Linsky. The goal of adaptive leadership books tends to be to develop adaptive skills within their own context.

Adaptive solutions can be key in times of liminality. Methodism's decline comes in part as the culture around the Church shifts to a post-Christendom position. There is a need to adapt from the maintenance mode of a Christendom context, wherein all are expected to know about

Jesus and have a desire to attend church, to a post-Christendom context in which the church no longer occupies its prominent space in culture.<sup>16</sup>

However as important as adaptive solutions are, they are not the only solution to church decline. What is needed now is an appreciation of non-reductionist theology that embraces the personal knowledge of participants who can thereby indwell the living God who alone can restore life to dead places. Tod Bolsinger approached this when he wrote, “You can’t lead from outside the system. (You can be a prophet or critic or consultant or supporter, but not a leader.)” But he does not go far enough or carry this idea through his work.<sup>17</sup>

A return to apprenticeship styled catechism is required so that the apprentice may learn from master practitioners how to partner with the Holy Spirit already at work within baptized members. In so doing they may fulfill the call to be more like Strawbridge and take authority of the priesthood of all believers, seizing the *Kairos* moment before them to do all the good they can by the means they can.

## Key Voices

### *Embracing Liminality*

Before navigating to new places, the starting point must be known. Methodists ought to embrace their current state of liminality. Decline in and of itself does not necessitate a liminal

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<sup>16</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, Kindle edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 21.

state, though it can. Again, Liminality, “is a term borrowed from Arnold van Gennep’s formulation of *rites de passage*, ‘transition rites’ –which accompany every change of state or social position, or certain points in age. These are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*—the Latin for threshold, signifying the great importance or real or symbolic thresholds at this middle period of the rites, through *cunicular*, ‘being in a tunnel,’ would better describe the quality of this phase in many cases, its hidden natures, its sometimes mysterious darkness), and reaggregation.”<sup>18</sup>

Liminality is the space between, and decline can be a state between life and death but is not always. The Methodists face additional states of liminality at present. In 2020 the denomination was to hold its quadrennial General Conference. At this General Conference, with delegates from around the world who represent Methodist’s broad tent of theology, there was to be an amicable split between traditionalists and progressives. Churches have lived in the leading up to this quadrennial meeting in a state of liminality, knowing that what was The United Methodist Church will no longer be after this meeting. However, another layer of liminality was forced upon the world through the COVID-19 pandemic. This pushed the quadrennial meeting back to 2021 and extended the occupying of middle space. Now the Church is adapting to new requirements of social distancing including many congregations not meeting in person as it

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continues to look to 2021 and what it will bring. The Methodist Church, at the writing of this paper, finds itself in hyper-liminality.<sup>19</sup>

If Methodists embrace their liminal state they have the ability to remove arbitrary structural orders and find its core, or cores as the case may be.<sup>20</sup> William Bridges who also based his work on Van Gennep says that in times of liminality rituals are needed to assist those involved to move from what was to what will be. He wrote, “in times of transition to reflect on the past for several reasons—not least of which is that, from the perspective of a new present, the past is likely to look different. For the past isn’t like a landscape or a vase of flowers that is just *there*. It is more like the raw material awaiting a builder.”<sup>21</sup> Turner identifies those within a liminal space as “liminars” or “passengers” who exist in an ambiguous state, “neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification, he passed through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state.”<sup>22</sup> As passengers and liminars the Methodists have an opportunity to build upon their history.

What seems to be needed now is an embracing of the space the Methodists occupy and will continue to occupy for the foreseeable future. And in embracing this reality what is needed is a ritual of remembrance. In particular, a need to remember one’s baptism. For as Bruggeman

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<sup>19</sup> Seth Jones in conversation.

<sup>20</sup> Iwig-O’Byrne, “How Methodists Were Made,” 16-17.

<sup>21</sup> William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 146.

<sup>22</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 232.

wrote, “Baptism is a dramatic act of reidentity.”<sup>23</sup> When one has lost who they are and are not yet sure who they will be, it is essential to begin with what should not change – one’s core identity found in baptism.

### *Adaptive Leadership*

The field of adaptive leadership was created by Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz. He has over thirty years of research and books to go with it. Heifetz’s key principles appear in any work dealing with adaptive leadership. However, Heifetz’s primary focal point is business. Two key people have applied Heifetz’s work to church leadership. These are Gil Rendle and Tod Bolsinger.

A Methodist consultant who has worked with bishops, conferences, and large churches, Gil Rendle has published many works. Some of his earlier works are more technical in nature. However, his book Quietly Courageous, helps readers understand the liminal space in which we now exist. Building upon the idea that society now exists in a post-Christendom context, Rendle introduces the reader to reality that Methodists (and mainline denominations in general) have moved from an aberrant time to a post-aberrant time. In this move there has been a loss of identity. There is also a reality that ministers within this context must be “both/and” ministers, ministering within a construct formed during aberrant, Christendom times, yet needing to lead people to the unknown post-Christendom and post-aberrant time. He writes, “Doing both/and

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Bruggeman, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 65.

requires continuous improvement of what is known, along with simultaneous inquiry into what is not known.”<sup>24</sup> He also admits that “Doing both/and is, itself, a formula for fatigue.”<sup>25</sup>

Without using the term liminal, Rendle does liken the current state of the church to that of being in the wilderness (which is a liminal space as mentioned above). He rightly points out that this space is “disorienting and deeply unfamiliar.”<sup>26</sup> He assesses that what is needed is to be honest about the current reality and calls for leaders to be quietly courageous. One of his calls of “quietly courageous” leaders is for these leaders to find themselves in God’s story and help others to do the same. Rendle, rightly, calls for leaders to not be solo heroes, but rather to equip others with the tools to carry on the work of courage in this disorienting time.

Another popular key voice within the field is Tod Bolsinger, author, and professor at Fuller Seminary. Bolsinger’s work *Canoeing the Mountains* relates the current need for change to the expedition of Lewis and Clarke who expected to find a water passage from the Mississippi River to the West Coast. As they reached the end of the Missouri River and faced the Rocky Mountains it was clear they had to adapt, quit, or die. Bolsinger takes readers through a process, largely based on Heifetz work, that teaches leaders to begin to practice adaptive leadership. He helps readers understand these key principals and helps to hold a mirror before the church in decline and in need of adaptation. He, like Rendle, points out that the systems we have are “perfectly designed for the results we are getting,” and that “*our denominational system exists*

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<sup>24</sup> Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018), 211.

<sup>25</sup> Rendle, *Quietly Courageous*, 211

<sup>26</sup> Rendle, *Quietly Courageous*, 214



*for institutional self-preservation.*”<sup>27</sup> Bolsinger does not take this far enough. As the priesthood of believers, Christians are to be more about the *Missio Dei* than self-preservation of systems. These systems do not reflect the call of Jesus or within the Methodist context do not go as far as Wesley did in attempting to do *all* the good by being willing to buck the systems of the day.

Adaptive leadership is a masterful skill. No matter the number of books one reads or the conferences attended, leaders struggle to put into practice these principles (as evidenced by the continual decline of the church despite adaptive leadership books flooding the markets). This is because what is needed is a personal knowledge. Bolsinger wrote, “The church will not change until we get a change in leadership. Either we need new leaders who are ready to make the future or the current leaders of every level of the church must find a courage and creativity that has so far eluded them.”<sup>28</sup> However, it eludes them not for lack of courage, creativity, or adaptability but because it has been demanded of leaders that they become masters without the apprenticeship that is needed to attain master-level work. Leaders are essentially asked to fly to space when they are learning to fly and build the plane. It is for this reason I believe what is needed more than adaptability is the building of a personal knowledge as put forth by Michael Polanyi.

### *Non-reductionist Personal Knowledge*

Polanyi was a polymath, who began life as a doctor and went on to varying fields of science, then economics and finally philosophy. Victor Turner pointed out that “scientists and

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<sup>27</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 177.

artists both think primordially in such images,” he goes on to link metaphor and a scientist’s and artist’s use of it to “what M. Polanyi calls ‘tacit knowledge.’”<sup>29</sup> In his work Personal Knowledge, Polanyi helps readers to understand this tacit knowledge over against focal knowledge. Tacit and focal knowledge are best understood through metaphor. As one rides a bike, they do so with tacit knowledge (the rider is not actively thinking about the riding of the bike, especially the advanced rider) they do not tell themselves, *balance, left foot, right foot, steer*. They simply ride the bike. On the other hand, the one who is learning to ride a bike at first must focally attend to these items. The reason that this sort of personal knowledge is needed in the church’s time of liminality, and the reason that calls for adaptive leadership have failed is that leaders are expected to learn simply by reading. However, Polanyi points out that the best way to pass on tacit knowledge is through apprenticeship.<sup>30</sup> Dulles rightly points out that this mentor/apprentice relationship can be applied beyond adaptive leaders to “the reception of new converts and the process of catechesis.”<sup>31</sup> Some may say this already happens, and it does, but could be attended to focally in such a way that new converts and the church embrace this more fully.

A contemporary of Polanyi who was actively applying this sort of thinking to the church, though as far as I have discovered they did not know each other, was Fr. Vincent Donovan. In his work Rediscovering Christianity, he relays his story of missionary work with the Masai. He

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<sup>29</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962), 53.

<sup>31</sup> Avery Dulles, "Faith, Church, and God: Insights from Michael Polanyi," *Theological Studies* (Baltimore 45, no. 3, 1984), 537-50.

passed on his faith to the Masai in a master/apprentice relationship and encouraged in the end the that the Masai form for themselves an incarnational church. He acknowledged the work of the Holy Spirit within the Masai people and encouraged them to indwell that Spirit. He acknowledged that the “who” of doing the work does not matter. “It is neither your work nor theirs, but the work of the Spirit who moves beyond all of us, and leads all of us to the awareness of the One constantly pursuing the evangelist, the evangelized and the unevangelized, leads us all finally and ultimately to the awareness of the lion who is God.”<sup>32</sup> He was hoping that they would develop a Christianity not consumed with temple maintenance.

In passing on a personal knowledge from master to apprentice Frost and Hirsh point out that one must take care in how they present or re-present Christ. The goal is to invite the apprentice into the story so that they may too indwell this living Christ. Frost and Hirsh warn, “By making Christ seem otherworldly, even ethereal, the church has inadvertently put him out of reach to us as an example or a guide.”<sup>33</sup> George Hunter echoes this in The Celtic Way of Evangelism saying, that St. Patrick did and others in the Celtic evangelism crusade should, “...stress possibility; what a person’s life can become. If you tell stories of heroes of the faith, the goal is not for the people to admire the heroes (that is counterproductive) but to glimpse what their own lives can become.”<sup>34</sup> In order for a personal knowledge to be lived out it must be non-

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<sup>32</sup> Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, twenty-fifth anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 134. Throughout his book, Donovan builds on the idea that as the Masai hunt the lion, in reality the lion also hunts them. And, like the lion, God hunts them.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 19.

<sup>34</sup> George C. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 62.

reductionist. Polanyi uses an analogy of a clock.<sup>35</sup> If one wants to tell time, it is not necessary to reduce the clock to each of its mechanical functions, or further break those down into alloys and chemicals. Reducing a clock to its smallest part does not help know the time. In the same way, reducing the church's current (or even past) liminal state to merely technical solutions does not help. These technical solutions are akin to the various pieces of the clock. Adaptive leadership principles work to change the clock from analog to digital, but both attempts miss the point – the church cannot be reduced to its parts or its function. It must be appreciated on the whole through personal knowledge.

Lesslie Newbigin directly worked with Michael Polanyi and worked to integrate Polanyi's philosophy into Christian missiology. He wrote, ““Using Polanyi's terminology, I shall suggest that the Christian community is invited to *indwell* the story, *tacitly* aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but *focally* attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it.”<sup>36</sup> Newbigin helped others to live in a pluralistic society both in mission and at home. His goal was for Christian congregations to become hermeneutics of the gospel. I encourage my congregation reminding them in a similar tone that they are the only Bible many people will read. Newbigin wrote, “I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. ... This community has at its heart the remembering and rehearsing of his [Jesus'] words and deeds, and the sacraments given

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 329.

<sup>36</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 38.

by him through which life again and again through sharing in his risen life through the body broken and the lifeblood poured out.”<sup>37</sup> Newbigin returns us, as Turner and others have, to heritage, to sacraments. Here Newbigin links the participant to communion.

There exists within Christianity today, and present within Methodism, and expression of this Polanyi-ian methodology. It is lived into through Fresh Expressions of Church. These are witnessing communities, as Michael Moynagh, points out because “God does mission through communities. This is hardly surprising because God himself is community.”<sup>38</sup> These communities of believers seek to indwell a personal knowledge of God and to incarnationally live this out. Through “discipleship” that looks more like apprenticeship community and converts are created. These witnessing communities have the equipotential to develop and form disciples and to be expressions of church, not just *ecclesiola in ecclesia* as Wesley’s small groups had been. Rather these witnessing communities, these Fresh Expressions of Church, are in reality more akin to morphogenesis that occurs within cellular structures. Polanyi discusses morphogenesis and equipotentiality of fragments within a frame of interdependence required both at the biological level and beyond.<sup>39</sup> These Fresh Expressions have the potential to develop into new forms of ecclesia, however, they work within a fixed system of potentialities. Not all succeed. Not all last. But each has the equipotential to develop into a new form and expression of

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<sup>37</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 227.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Moynagh, *Being Church Doing Life: Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens*, (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2014), 33.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 355.

the Church, the body of Christ in which participants may be drawn into and indwell the larger story of the Church.

### Section 3: Synthesis and Conclusion

In the face of its own liminality Methodism has keys within its very heritage to move into the new phase of its life. There is no going back, no turning around. To do so dishonors God who always goes before. To do so is to forget that God is with God's people when they feel that the waters will overtake, or the fire will burn. Instead, Methodists can embrace the gifts of their heritage, the gifts given in baptism, in order to navigate through this liminal space to the newness that awaits them. In the introduction to the revised version of Christianity Rediscovered, a person reflects on the work of Vincent Donovan and sets a challenge before the Church and I believe it is a poignant call for The Methodist Church today. It says, "In working with young people in America, do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before."<sup>40</sup> The true power of the church, the body of Christ, can be unlocked, but only if its members will stop relying on the clergy and instead embrace and indwell the Holy Spirit who beckons each member to participate in audacious good-doing like Wesley and Strawbridge and join in the *Missio Dei* set before each one. As Leonard Sweet writes, "Your baptism is both an ordination certificate and a passport to a missional life, spent in being sent to live and dwell in diaspora, in Babylon not Zion."<sup>41</sup> After all

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<sup>40</sup> Donovan, *Rediscovering Christianity*, xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C.

the Mission before us is the missional God. It is God at work within each believer calling us and drawing us into a new future and reality for the people called Methodist. Methodists have tried technical and adaptive solutions. What is needed now is to live into the indwelling of the Holy Spirit present within each believer, to tacitly live into this, and focally attend to the world around them.

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## APPENDIX C—MILESTONE 3 DESIGN WORKSHOP REPORT

### NPO STATEMENT

The declining United Methodist Church needs to address fear and embrace a theology of risk, thereby enabling greater empowerment of laity, and ultimately embracing missional theology.

### NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

The non-negotiables for this NPO include a Trinitarian approach, empowerment of others, and the UMC's doctrines on baptism. Boundaries for the project will be coordinated with Florida Annual Conference and District personnel. Costs associated with addressing the NPO may include: production of videos, purchasing items for lab (packaging, art materials, and other items as decided), and printing costs.

### NPO CONTEXT

The ministry setting for this NPO is the Florida Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. This covers a geographical area of nearly all of Florida, except the area west of the Apalachicola River. It will begin with the local church I serve (which may change in 2021), then the district (which also may change), and finally the Conference. I will work within the confines of the United Methodist Church which includes various ages, ethnicities, races, and education levels. This conference predominately older and a majority white. I have already established relationships with the conference and the district and have buy-in to iterate and produce within these levels of ministry.

## ROOT CAUSES

Fear exists within the UMC at three levels: the institutional level (Conferences and local churches), within the clergy, and within the laity. The institutional level of fear is based on a need for preservation and security. It is also founded in a scarcity mentality. These fears are based in a lack of faith in God as God has declared that God will be with us always, even in the hardest times.<sup>1</sup> God has also asked the Church to place her trust in God and not on risk analyses.<sup>2</sup>

The clergy's fear is rooted in a desire for control and power and is based on a consumer Christianity mindset. This mindset desires excellence to attract more people to the church. With an increase of attendance typically comes an increase in prestige. Clergy have been rewarded for this by increased salaries and larger churches. This is founded in a misplaced sense of calling and self-worth.

The laity's fear is based in a misunderstanding and lack of embracing: the priesthood of all believers, the baptismal and membership vows taken, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is also a natural byproduct of the hyper-liminal space in which the church currently exists.

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<sup>1</sup> Evidenced throughout scripture, but explicitly stated in IS 43:2, see Topic Expertise

<sup>2</sup> E.G: John 14:1, 1 Peter 1:8, 1 Cor. 8:6

### THREE BIG IDEAS

1. A multi-vehicle teaching on the theology of risk with book, workbook, leader's guide, and videos.
2. A lab that encourages embracing risk that is replicable.
3. Rebuild existing platforms used to train laity and clergy by including a theology of risk and an environment that supports risk taking.

### DEFINITION OF 'DONE'

The goal is a decrease in fear and an increase in embracing risk. This will enable greater empowerment of laity and ultimately will enable a more missional faith. This will be measured by an increase in mission engagement, lay involvement, and perhaps professions of faith.

### 3 NAPKIN PITCHES

1. **Big Idea #1:** A multi-vehicle teaching on the theology of risk with book, workbook, leader's guide, and videos.
  - *Audience:* This approach best reaches local churches and would be suited for an all-church study. This would address both the clergy and laity.
  - *NPO:* The declining UMC needs to address existing fears by embracing a theology of risk.

- *Benefit:* The user benefits by identifying fears and learning to embrace risk while studying with others. This enables a church to move towards empowerment of laity and missional living.
- *Approach:* The book would be a multi-platform book, (within the book there will be links to videos, podcasts, and/or art that helps engage the reader with the subject matter). There would be an accompanying interactive workbook. Finally, videos and a leader guide to facilitate small group studies.
- *Risks.* 1) People's unwillingness to engage the subject matter. 2) Could be "white noise" in a church culture filled with many studies. 3) Could fail to take hold with the clergy and then the laity would still not be empowered.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* The lagging indicator for this hypothesis is an increase in lay empowerment / involvement. All UMC congregations track numbers of engagement and service of members, the numbers would show an increase in this area.
- *Benchmarks of success:* 1) Completion of book and workbook 2) Testing material with sample congregations/groups 3) Numbers within congregations of engaged laity would increase.
- *Other Approaches:* It is similar to other multi-vehicle books; however, it differs in topic and format. Most books on the market that address fear deal with fear of the Lord or overcoming personal fears/phobias. This approach is designed for the whole church/group rather than the individual and is addressed to teach to embrace risk.



**Big Idea #2:** A lab that encourages embracing risk that is replicable.

- *Audience:* This approach could reach all target audiences: institutional level, clergy, and laity.
- *NPO:* The declining UMC needs to address existing fears by embracing a theology of risk.
- *Benefit:* The user benefits by identifying fears and learning to embrace risk in an environment that fosters experimentation (where risk is often associated as positive) and trains participants to apply principles to every-day ministry.
- *Approach:* A lab kit would be created along with a leader guide and participant guide. The leader guide would provide instructions on set-up and facilitation. The participant guide would function as a journal. The kit would include all required materials. It would use the approaches of art and science where risk is embraced and rewarded.
- *Risks.* 1) Unwillingness to engage subject matter. 2) Unprepared leaders may alter the results for participants. 3) Leading a lab requires someone who is already willing to embrace risk (as the very lab can be a risk with a group). 4) Lack of engagement / interest
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* The lagging indicator for this hypothesis is an increase in lay empower / involvement. All UMC congregations track numbers of engagement and service of members, the numbers would show an increase in this area.

- *Benchmarks of success:* 1) Completion of workbook, journal, and sample of materials assembled. 2) Test with groups/churches 3) Judge replicability – the kit and lab need to be replicable in order to be successful.
  - *Other Approaches:* The market is flooded with labs for writers, artists and scientists, however, none exist for teaching people to theologically embrace risk. The Florida Annual Conference in conjunction with two other conferences created MLAB which is an innovation / design thinking lab that has a replicable model for the local church. This would be similar but focus on finding freedom from fear and embracing risk, rather than on design thinking.
4. **Big Idea #3:** Rebuild existing platforms used to train laity and clergy by including a theology of risk and an environment that supports risk taking.
- *Audience:* This approach best reaches clergy and laity who are already in leadership positions and already going through trainings.
  - *NPO:* The declining UMC needs to address existing fears by embracing a theology of risk.
  - *Benefit:* These platforms are already in place and being used by the local church and the conference as the place to train and equip leaders.
  - *Approach:* I would work with the Board of Lay Ministry in Florida to create a curriculum that either augments what already exists for lay ministry trainings or would work to rebuild the system. I would add to the existing training with mentoring, accountability, a testing process, and curriculum associated with the theology of risk.

- *Risks.* 1) Lack of a desire to engage this topic. 2) Lack of interest in the Board of Lay Ministry in wanting to change their system. 3) Only reaching those who are already in power and not making enough impact.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* The lagging indicator for this hypothesis is an increase in lay empower / involvement. All UMC congregations track numbers of engagement and service of members, the numbers would show an increase in this area.
- *Benchmarks of success:* 1) Engagement with the Board of Lay Ministry 2) Permission given to augment or change the curriculum 3) Recruiting mentors and creating an accountability and testing process. 4) Creation of new process and materials to support it.
- *Other Approaches:* The training currently relies on having participants take a class and read a book. Those who have been through the training have stated to me that it is not helpful and there is no mentoring or accountability.

## DESIGN WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders who participated in the workshop held the following roles:

- Florida Annual Conference Lay Leader
- Florida Annual Conference Co-Lay Leader
- Lay Staff member of the Florida Annual Conference Office / Leader of Lay Delegation to General Conference
- Pastors (2)

## ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

The roles of those who participated in One-on-One Discovery Interviews are:

- District Superintendent / Director of Fresh Expressions Florida
- Director of Connectional Ministries for the Florida Annual Conference
- Pastor / Adjunct Professor / Director of Re-Missioning for Fresh Expressions US
- Bishop of the Florida Annual Conference

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Frost, Michael and Alan Hirsch. *The Faith of Leap: Embracing A Theology of Risk, Adventure and Courage*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011. E-book edition.

Frost and Hirsh introduce a theology of risk through biblical examination and a grounding in missiology. Their theology of risk is grounded in liminality and its unknown future. Their impetus is a divine urgency to see the gospel spread. They provide a path for readers to follow from risk-averse to being an “Adventurer” with a “Wild God.”

Gregersen, Niels Henrik. “Risk and Religion: Toward a Theology of Risk Taking” *Zygon* Vol. 38, No. 2 (June 2003): 355-374.

Gregersen addresses the phenomenological perspective of risk, examines the complexity with risk, and examines how one might conceptualize faith in conjunction with trust in the future and risk awareness. His phenomenological examination provides a vocabulary around risk. He provides a helpful review of authors who have written about risk and theology and ultimately couches divine risk in the love of God exemplified through Christ.

Hari-Singh, Alison. "New Wineskins for New Wine" *Anglican Journal* Vol. 146, No. 1 (January, 2020) *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 3, 2020). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A611548449/AONE?u=newb64238&sid=AONE&xid=05c3a9a8>

Hari-Singh approaches the need for embracing risk in a context similar to the one in which I am in ministry. Both are traditional mainline denominations and share a common ancestry. The focus of the article is addressing the need for risk in an environment of decline, which is also similar to this NPO. The call of the author is to a prophetic reimagination through embracing the risk of the unknown.

Rahner, Karl. "The Theology of Risk" *The Furrow* Vol. 19, No. 5 (May, 1968): 266-268.

Rahner's purpose is to present a claim for the need for embracing risk within the Catholic Church. His impetus is on the rapid changing culture of the late 1960s. He insists that risk is not always appropriate, rather it is only necessary in certain times. He also works to distinguish between innovation in the "secular world" and in the church and how the two are different. This source is helpful in seeing how others may desire to separate secular from religious.

## APPENDIX A

### DESIGN WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

The design workshop took place in three phases. Phase one was to initiate participants into the NPO subject matter. Videos were created and shared with the group that summarized key concepts. There was a private Facebook group created where the participants could engage with one another, with the videos, and the documentation that was uploaded. This was an asynchronous way to begin the work with the design group. Phase two was conducted through Zoom. It took place on November 10, 2020 from 9am until 12pm. There were five participants. The group began by narrowing the audience of the NPO and then moved to addressing causes. A heat map was used to narrow down both subjects. The group then moved to an ideation session from Game Storming called 3-12-3, and the session concluded.<sup>3</sup> Phase three was a second session held on November 12<sup>th</sup> from 9am until 12pm. In this session we began with a heat map to pare down ideation. Next the group worked to find the anti-problem to further ideate solutions. After that we looked at the blind side to discover what was missing. Finally, an impact/effect map was used to narrow down ideas to the three big ideas. Starting questions around a napkin pitch were addressed before time ran out. The roles of the stakeholders present are listed in the Design Workshop Report.

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<sup>3</sup> Dave Gray, Sunni Brown and James Macanufo. *Gamestorming; A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2010) Kindle Edition, 77-79.

On a scale of 1-5 I feel the session was a 4. It would have been better to have one longer session but schedules did not allow. I will use these tools again in the future and feel the overall process worked very well.

## DESIGN WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

See attached:

1. Videos made for asynchronous discussions

- a. VIDEO 1



- b. VIDEO 2



## c. VIDEO 3



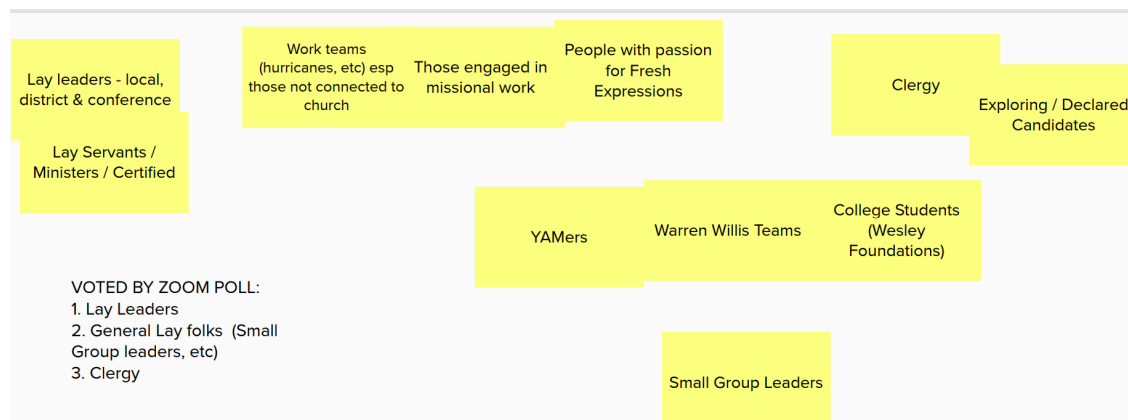
## 2. Notes of asynchronous discussions

- a. Discussions with local church lay leaders around training:
  - i. Not helpful
  - ii. No follow-through
  - iii. No support beyond pastoral
- b. Discussions with Lay Delegates to annual conference:
  - i. Home church setting made all the differences
  - ii. Supportive laity who helped mentor made the difference
  - iii. Competing priorities is a real issue
  - iv. The church often doesn't provide opportunity for others – it isn't available
    - 1. Story of one of the laity who quickly learned that there are things that are not available to him – reflected on similar experiences he had as a person of color and a homosexual.
- c. Observations of the church not shifting into 21<sup>st</sup> century
  - i. Not just technology but in acceptance of divergent culture
  - ii. Need to teach resilience
  - iii. How can you enable an approach from the “bottom up” rather than being the professional clergy with the answers, how can you empower laity to help solve the problem for the laity?

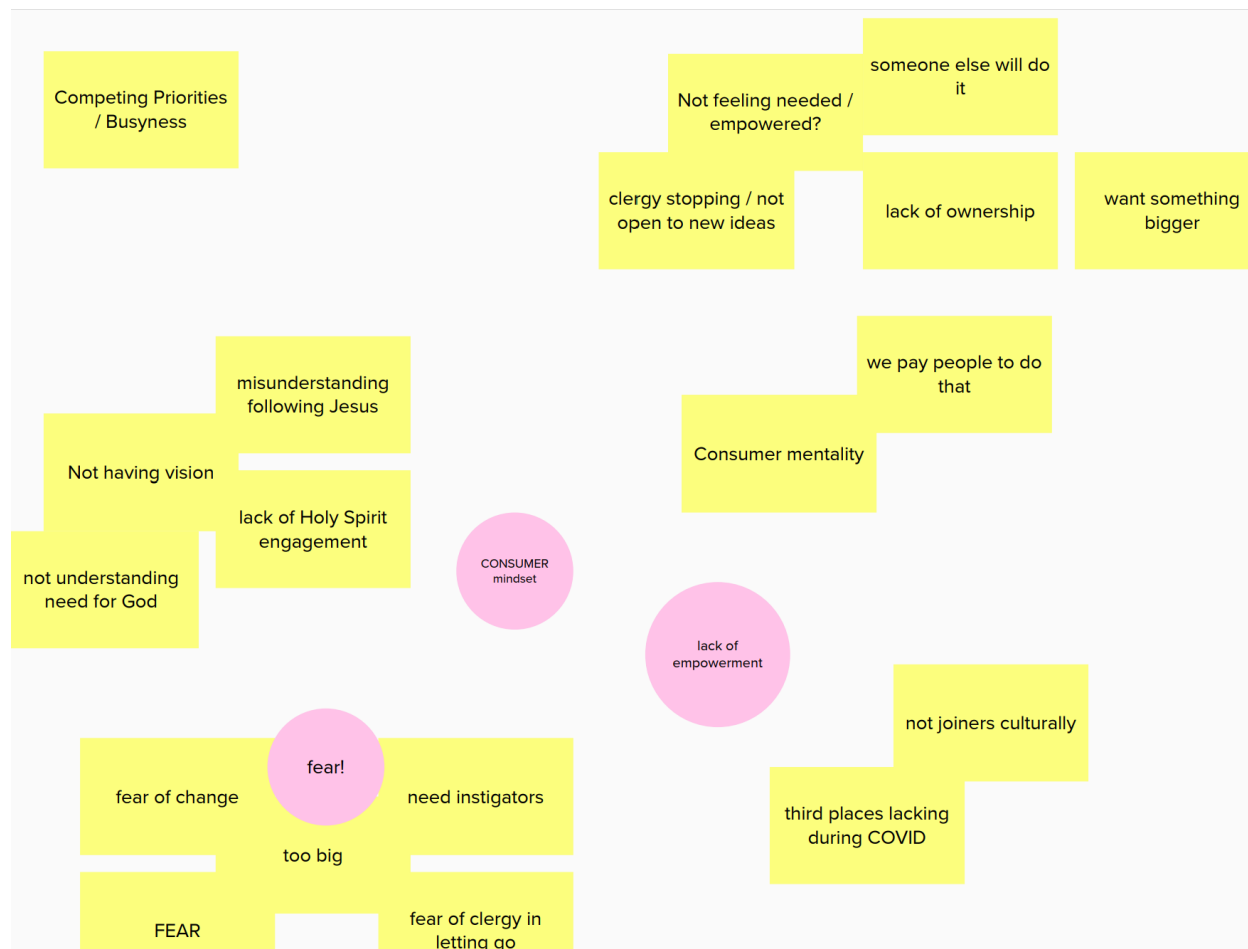




### 3. “Audience” artifact from meeting with heat map



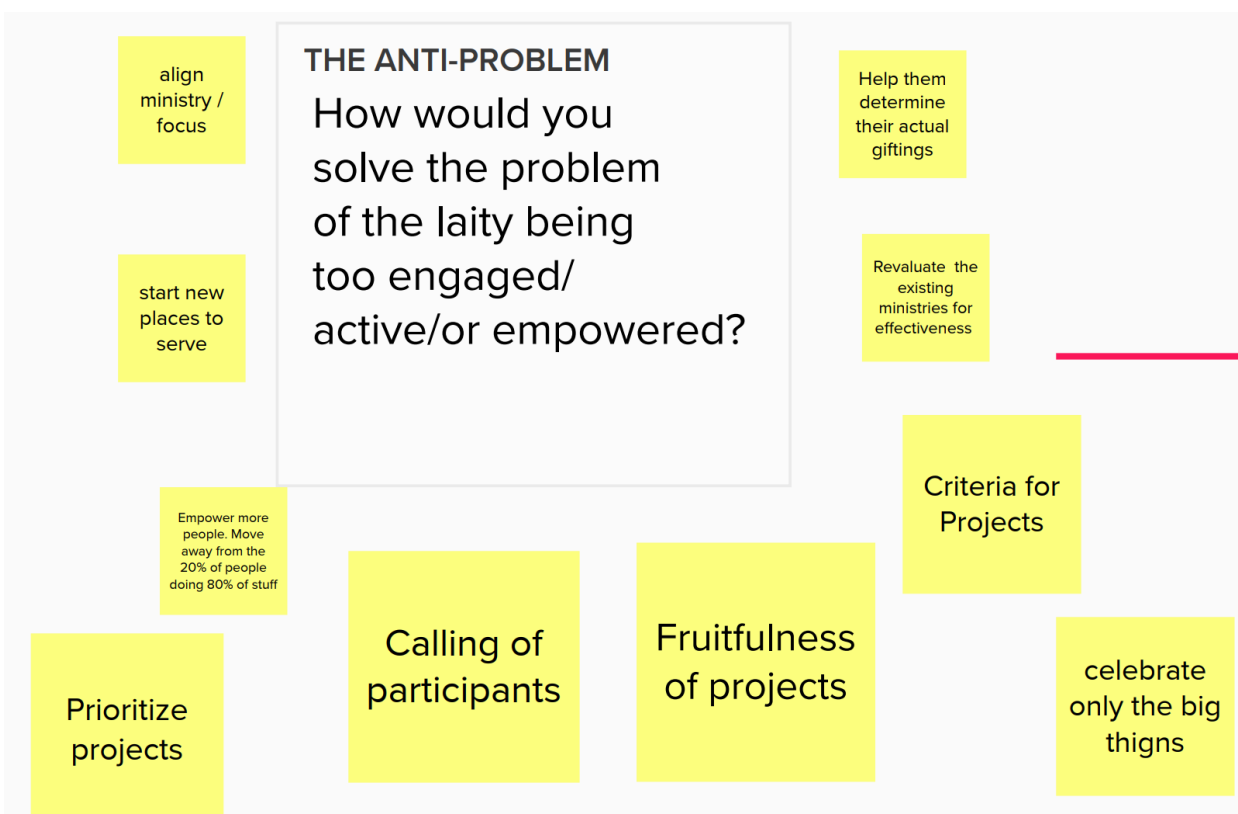
### 4. “Causes” artifact from meeting with heat map.



## 5. “3-12-3” artifact



## 6. Mural Group Session – this includes the anti-problem work and the blind side

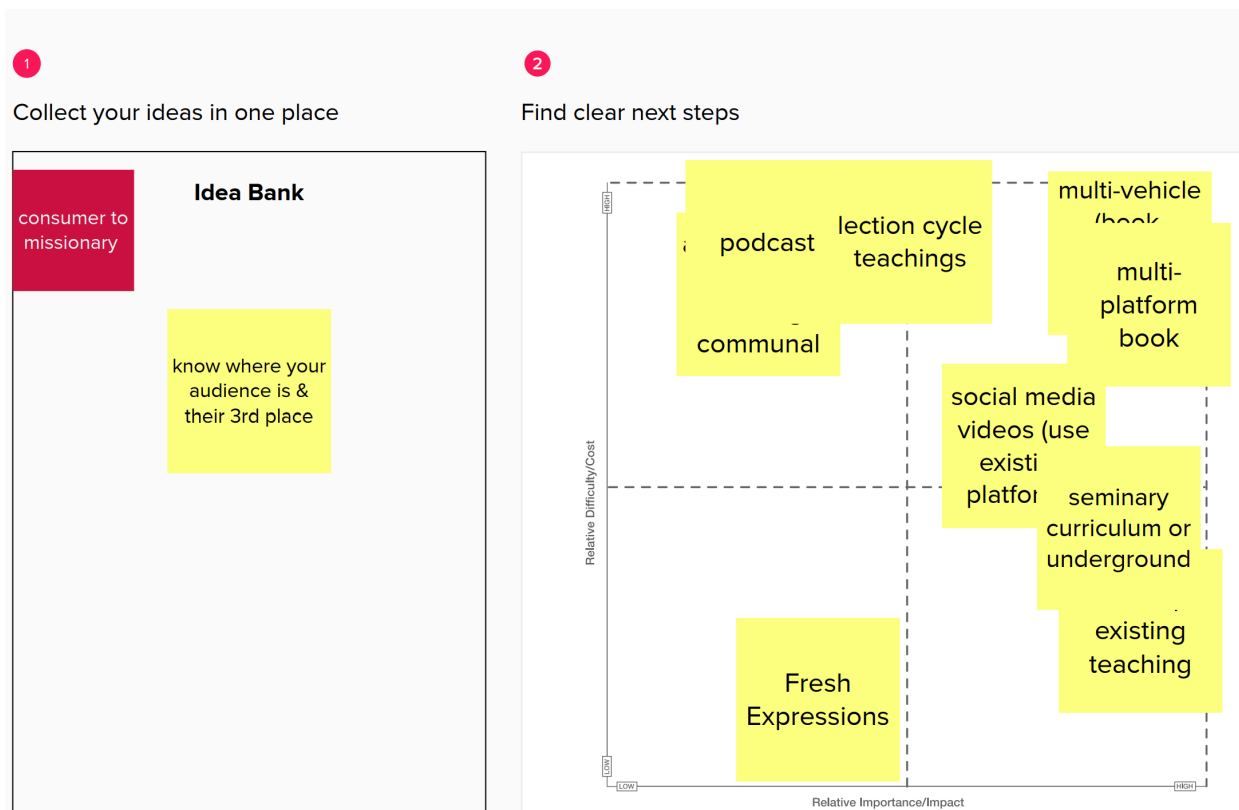


## BLIND SIDE

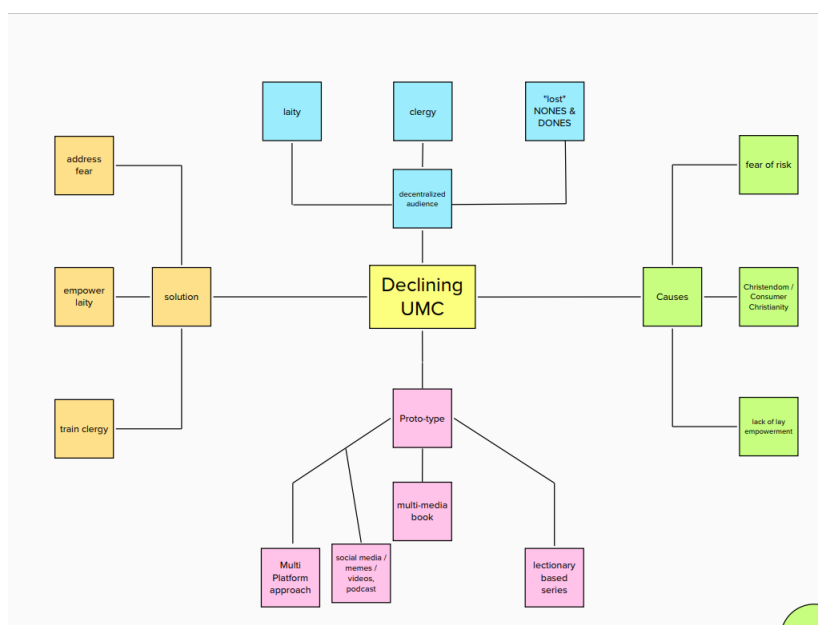
- Things We Know We Know:
  - Fits in Christendom
  - Curriculum Driven rather than experience driven
  - Cultural Christianity rather than missionary
  - 80-20 rule
  - Not important enough
  - Mostly older retired people
  - We are too tired to build new things
  - Mobility of society – those who stay are builders
  - Ability to blame pastors as they move
  - Ability to rely on pastors
  - Paid staff hired to do ministry
  - Siloed ministry
- Things we know we don't know:
  - What worked for the super engaged
  - How to train in a post-Christendom setting
  - How to be comfortable with on the job training
  - Lost art of mentorship
- Things we don't know we know (untapped resources)
  - How laity help form laity
  - Easier to do it yourself
  - Let go of control – what will happen

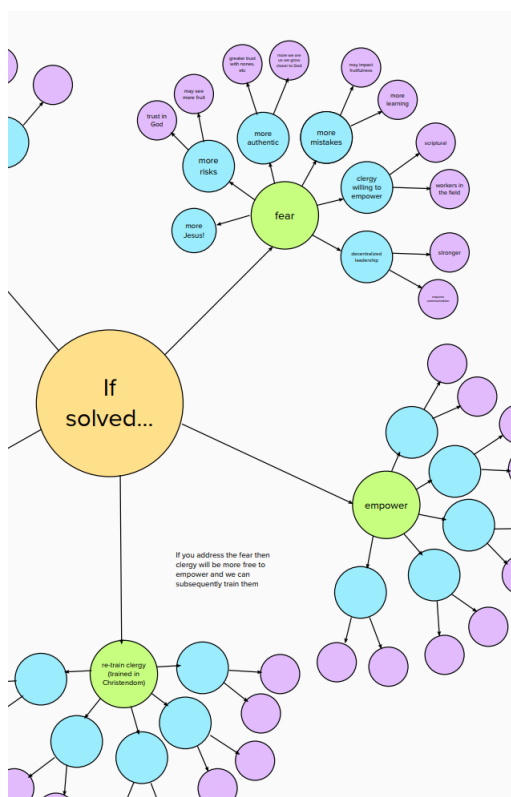
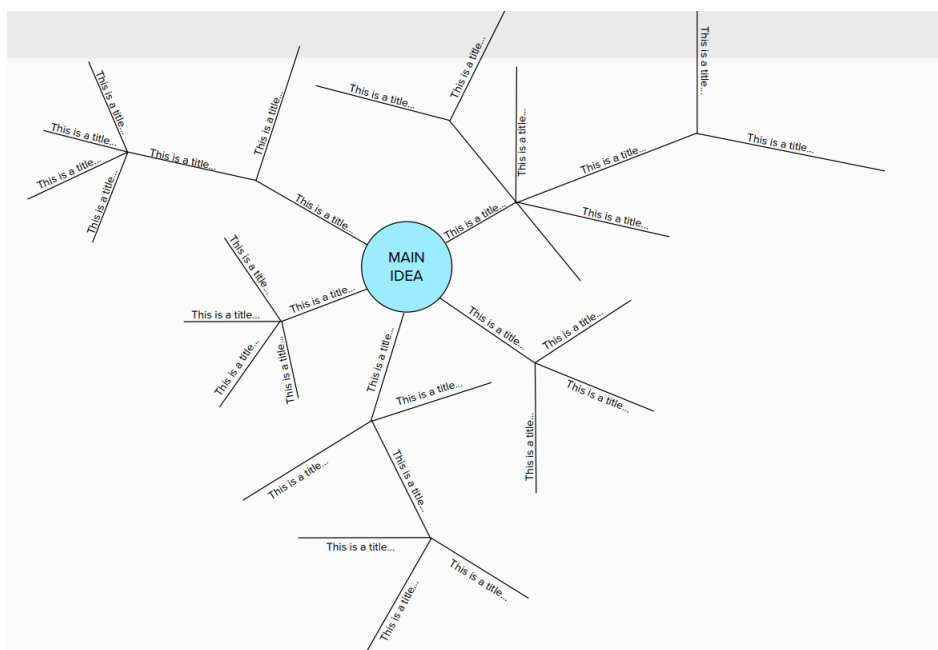
- Moving beyond excellence to fruitfulness
- Flipping the switch MIGHT kill the church
- Both / and is scary
- Shadow side of experiential things (disconnected from risk)
- TIME
- Lack of reflection / busyness / over programmed
- Lost out – examen and lectio
- Need for accountability
- Different expectations of congregations verses professional
- Things we don't know we don't know:
  - How to train and mentor without duplication of personality of trainer (allow for others to have incarnational ministries / their voice)
  - How to do it without school
  - Differentiate between clergy and laity / balance of clergy vs priesthood of believers – what is in bounds?

## 7. Impact / Effect Matrix



## 8. Mind Map (beginning work on napkin pitches with group.





## ONE-PAGE POST-WORKSHOP MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

Friends, thank you for the time you shared with me through the Design Workshop process. I appreciate your willingness to help and the spirit with which you embraced this process. Here is a summary of our work together.

We discussed the starting need/problem/opportunity (NPO): The declining UMC needs re-missioning, re-traditioning, and

retooling, focused on the laity. This may be accomplished through Fresh Expressions and similar incarnational, contextual, and formational ministries. We then considered audiences and causes and determined that the audience should primarily be the laity, though the clergy and institutional level of the church should also be addressed. Several causes were determined. The top of the list included a consumer mindset within the church, lack of empowerment, and fear of the laity and clergy. In the course of our work together the NPO shifted to: The declining United Methodist Church needs to address fear and embrace a theology of risk, thereby enabling greater empowerment of laity, and ultimately embracing missional theology.

After ideation and working to narrow the scope, the three big ideas we came up with were: 1) A multi-vehicle teaching on the theology of risk with book, workbook, leader's guide, and videos. 2) A lab that encourages embracing risk that is replicable. 3) Rebuilding existing platforms to train laity and clergy. We know we are done with our design work not because we have sketched out every detail, but because the goals have become less broad and less fuzzy. Benchmarks of success for these ideas will be evidenced through an increase in lay involvement as measured by local churches and reported to the Annual Conference through Vital Sign Reporting and Year End Statistical Reports. My research will continue around the areas of vulnerability, the theology of risk, and the psychology of fear.

As you have read this summary, I hope you found it to be accurate. If you see anything missing or inaccurate, please let me know. I appreciate again your ongoing support!



## ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS DOCUMENTATION

### Interview one: District Superintendent / Director of Fresh Expressions Florida

- Agrees and sees the fear especially around survival of the local church. There is also a fear of the uncertainty and unknown.
- Mentioned Gil Rendle's book Quietly Courageous (already on my bibliography) for naming the context of aberrant to divergent culture.
- Naming the context allows for naming the reality.
- There is healthy fear, need to focus in on irrational fear.
- Once audience is aware of context and culture they can create strategies to address it [I offered push back citing statistics around those who have had a heart attack but do not make necessary changes to address the causes.]
- Fear is often caused by misinformation which is exacerbated by the crumbling of trust in the institutions.
- With addressing fear comes the need for resilience. Bishop Janice Huey did work on resilience and would be a good source.
- 2020 offers a chance for people to see the resilience that churches have gained, now doing things they never thought possible or needed before.
- What is fear factor?
- When discussing using missional theology and the theology of Fresh Expressions within the inherited church she
- Fx and inherited church – she offered push back about the ability to revitalize the local church citing the most churches who go through a revitalization process do not actually revitalize. She suggested reading Margaret Wheatley's Who Do You Choose To Be.

- My pushback: Is the issues that churches cannot be revitalized or that the techniques that have been utilized do not work?
- What's okay to get rid of? How does avoidance function in a local church? We avoid the things that are hard – conflict, change.
- She suggested that I explore the renewal leave and what it was like to come back. Pastors tend to hold things in stasis and many others, when they return, return to churches in trouble because of the lack of stasis. What does that represent?
- Abundance information lack of transformation – might have to risk something – costs in money or time.
- Those places where there is not an abundance of things the gospel thrives.
- In the theology of risk there is an acceptance of death while embracing resurrection. It needs to be reframed (see Richard Rohr).
- Need a robust recovery of pneumatology and an embracing trinitarian theology, not just “Jesus-ology”.

#### Interview with Director of Connectional Ministries for the Florida Annual Conference

- Work is very thoughtful
- Challenge is we can think of people who will learn better based on each model based on who they are; so each of the three models will speak to different people.
- Anything that helps move into the future is met with suspicion, anxiety are we changing who we are as people of faith.
- Likened to Apple vs Android. Apple spends time and money designing attractive packaging and have a support system behind it. But it doesn't spend time and money on printed instruction – different way of engaging something new – no instruction manual –

apple care instead – just engage by trial and error – if you mess up just go back to the beginning. Faced with this in generational differences and labels we put on things.

Reviews can be sharp around poorly written instructions – not effectively laid out on the diagram – is as if the instructions written for a different system. That’s what happens in the church – people expect that it’s not a walk of faith; it’s a walk of a proven track record. i.e. Matthew 28 – want/need more! So clear that it’s frightening; if not time honored approach – would doubt it’s efficacy

- Option 2 where you get to engage in trial and error but is more a faith journey together; and that we appropriately infuse leader’s guide, etc when appropriate – but is not be-all and end-all – still a place for Spirit. Take sanctification more seriously than we do.
- People are looking for predictable approach – need to walk the path that is expanded that includes people who were once on the shoulder / marginalized – and now expanded but still on the same road.
- There’s been a sense that it has to hurt to have value.
- Crave information not transformation. If we don’t crave transformation then we get colonialism. More in love with the method and not the experience. How do we embrace the “others”? Cannot be too rigid or it sucks the life blood out of this
- How we got into this mess is helpful (context) – same clergy who wanted security of professionals are wondering why the laity are not more fervent. Women working – changed the volunteer pool in churches
- Be willing to be learners in our church because new people have new things to teach us

Interview with Pastor / Adjunct Professor / Director of Re-Missioning for Fresh Expressions US

- Premise is right – fear and loss / problem will be how to you get people to acknowledge and confess – how do you get them to access. Helping them see that they need it.
- Unlearning – see his book on Abingdon
- Help by not tying in to the FX wording because of associations and presumptions
- Create an assessment for the congregation- -these indicators show that you may be operating out of a fear or risk averse
- Will able to get information on congregations from Conference and can identify which congregations are operating out of risk aversion
- Contextual – or simple kit – anything digital
- Graphic novel – may be able to acknowledge fear if done in a playful way
- In his new book there is 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian – image to open each chapter – stick figure – never use Fresh Expressions language in the book
- Kit could be used as a Rorschach test– show some kind of graphic novel imagery – what emotions do you think are expressed – tell stories to bring out stories – what makes you feel that - tie into enneagram? / lead through kit to work through kit / so that they realize
- Contextual Intelligence as a building block: people don't understand your context so here's a framework
- Bolsinger's new book – tempered resilience – work on spiritual resilience

#### Interview with Bishop of the Florida Annual Conference

- Ronald Heifetz - people don't fear change they fear loss; the question is what do they feel that they will lose;
  - Ties in Kubler Ross and liminality

- Fear associated with all these things – innovative clergy and then they are moved the congregation does not continue.
- Fear of failure – Robert Schnase - image of coach doesn't say "win", teaches them how to win; many clergy are good at conceptual macro-visioning but how do we deconstruct it to help people take small steps; early Methodist class and band meetings helped people to learn that they could watch over each other and support each other and take small steps; fear of failure
- Vulnerability – why do people crave listening to Brené Brown talk about racism while thinking they would fail like that; her conversation with Ibram X Kendi – really vulnerable – and makes you feel that "I can get started with this"
- Webinar on mentoring – scientist speaking acknowledges that any great scientist knows you fail 9 nine times - need to recover the art and science of ministry within the laity
- Culture of permission giving and experimentation in FL conference but has been majority focused on clergy.
- Not sure where it comes from when laity – some are willing but requires the ability to not be universally liked. There is a polarity between empathy and purpose. Churches are not often willing to identify unhealth, instead they tolerate it, especially because they do not want to push boundaries with their "family" of faith. There is a desire to leave the church as a sanctuary – it's the one place that will give me grace and especially in unhealthy ones in healthy ones you see people who do courageous things;
- Many churches fear decline
- Fear manifested as anger – fear is the ancestor of anger – displaced anger is often routed in fear

- How to motivate people to explore that?

## APPENDIX D—MILESTONE 4 PROTOTYPE ITERATION REPORT

### PROTOTYPE #1 SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

#### PROTOTYPE DESCRIPTION:

Three storylines were tested. Each one was written to address to encourage the reader to embrace a theology of risk.

#### GOLDILOCKS QUALITY STRATEGY:

The storylines were presented as book jackets. Each one had cover art and a back with copy describing the book.

#### RESEARCH QUESTION:

Does the user have interest in embracing risk and addressing fear?

#### ASSESSMENT BENCHMARKS:

The interviewees will show interest in the material and desire to purchase a full book.

#### PROTOTYPE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DESIGN:

Participants needed to be Christians, United Methodist and either Clergy or Laity. Any age or stage of life would be appropriate.

SUMMARIZE WHAT YOU LEARNED: WHAT WORKED? WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED? WHAT MATTERS TO THE PARTICIPANTS?

Through the process I learned that the participants are enthusiastic about this subject matter. I was surprised by the participant's focus on cover art and font. This seemed to matter more than copy content on the jacket.

WHAT WAS YOUR IMPORTANT DISCOVERY?

The subject was relevant. The material needs to be accessible to readers. Some found the history challenging; therefore, it should not be the main focus.

PROTOTYPE #2 SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

PROTOTYPE DESCRIPTION:

A sample workbook was provided to participants. This is a sample of the full workbook that would be created.

GOLDILOCKS QUALITY STRATEGY:

The workbook was labeled sample yet contained the format that the workshop would follow including the integration of other disciplines such as art and science.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Is there interest in participating in a guided lab addressing risk and fear?



ASSESSMENT BENCHMARKS:

The participants would express an interest in participating in a full lab experience.

PROTOTYPE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DESIGN:

Participants needed to be Christians, United Methodist and either Clergy or Laity.

SUMMARIZE WHAT YOU LEARNED: WHAT WORKED? WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED? WHAT MATTERS TO THE PARTICIPANTS?

I varied from the original storyboard and plan and did not provide materials to the participants due to time constraints. In the full lab experience materials would be provided. The participants only had the sample workbook to go through. A sample of the lab would have been helpful so that they could have been guided.

WHAT WAS YOUR IMPORTANT DISCOVERY?

This prototype would require me to lead the workshops and or train leaders for the workshops. It is not something that could be easily mass produced. Overall participants appreciated the sample but the full workshop would be more demanding on my time and budget.

MOST VIABLE PROTOTYPE

The most viable prototype would be to write a book. This is the result of prototype one. Various storylines were created and there was a winner by a slim margin of one, Old Faith New.

This prototype is the most viable because lends itself better to my schedule and budget.

Prototype two would require a larger outlay of funds in developing kits and searching out participants in local churches and beyond. Prototype one will require me to build my audience and to write a book but my writing style had been praised in the past, so I feel this option plays the most to my strengths. I will need to adapt the original storyline of Old Faith New. I would like to capture some of the grit that early American Christians had in their fervor for the gospel, yet not bore the reader with a mere historical recounting of the past. Instead, I hope to inspire the reader to embrace their God-given call to be a part of the priesthood of all believers and to say yes to the adventure of faith God sets before them. This will require setting aside time in my schedule to build an audience, to write, and to seek out editors. I plan to create a website, increase my social media presence. I will also be researching more on the subject matter and audience building.

## APPENDICES

## STORYBOARDS

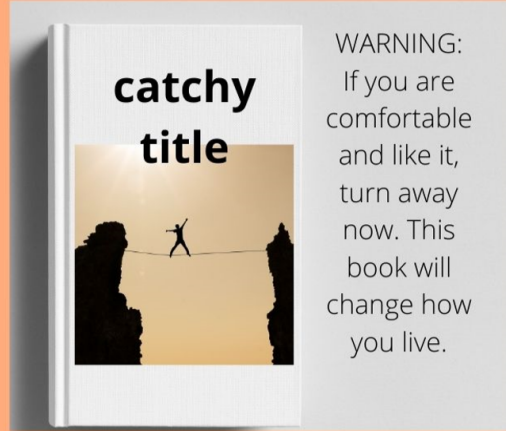
## PROTOTYPE 1:

## PROTOTYPE 1: MULTI-PLATFORM BOOK



### 1. TEST-GROUP RECEIVES EMAIL

The test group will receive an email to invite them to read a sample of the book



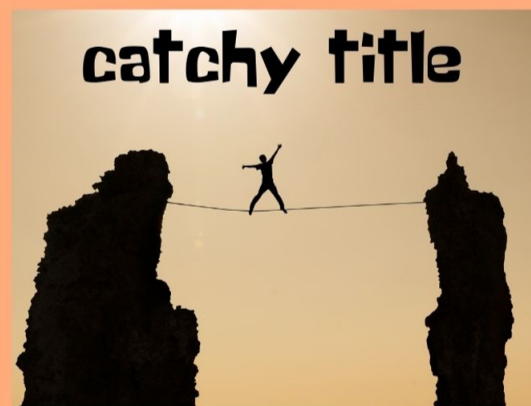
### 2. ABSTRACT IN THE EMAIL

The test group is provided a short abstract of the book that is meant to hook them into wanting to read a sample.



### 3. TEST GROUP DOWNLOADS BOOK

The test group will be able to download the book into their favorite e-reader, or read on their computer (pdf format)



### 4. TEST GROUP BEGINS WITH COVER

The cover of the book will be designed to look like an actual book



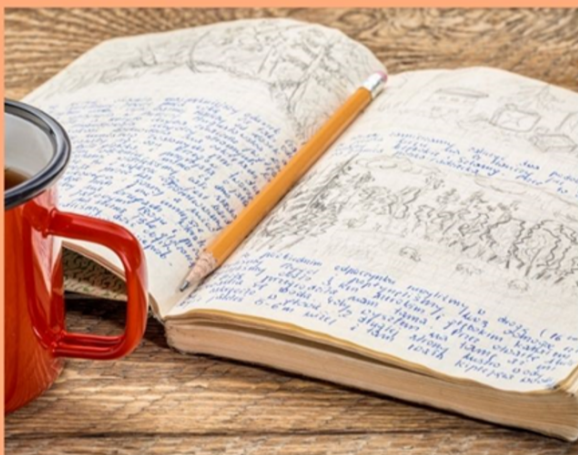
#### 5. TEST GROUP READS SAMPLE

Sample includes: preface, introduction, table of contents, and sample chapter



#### 6. TEST GROUP SAMPLES VIDEO

Within the book there will be a workable link to a video to watch that connects with the material



#### 7. TEST GROUP SAMPLE WORKBOOK

Along with the sample of the book, the test group will receive a sample of the workbook



#### 8. TEST GROUP IS INTERVIEWED

An interviewer will interview members of the test group one-on-one with scripted questions.

**Prototype 2:**

## PROTOTYPE 2: LAB KIT



### 1. TEST-GROUP RECEIVES EMAIL

Email invites them to participate in a special lab.



### 2. GROUP AGREES TO LAB DEMO

The test group will be encouraged to participate because it will be part of their regularly scheduled meeting

### 1. TEST-GROUP RECEIVES EMAIL

Email invites them to participate in a special lab.



### 2. GROUP AGRESS TO LAB DEMO

The test group will be encouraged to participate because it will be part of their regularly scheduled meeting

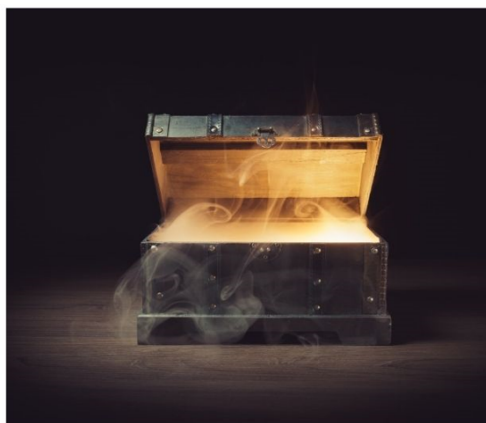


### 3. EMAIL BEFORE MEETING

Before the meeting the group will receive an email that will prepare them for what to expect and what they might need to bring/wear.

### 4. GROUP GATHERS

Group gathers for their meeting, prepared by email



### 5. KIT IS PRESENTED IN PACKAGE

A sample kit is given to participants in eye catching packaging

### 6. GROUP OPENS KIT

Participants are encouraged to open the kit and are then instructed step by step





#### 7. GROUP WORKS IN A WORKBOOK

The workbook functions like a guided journal to help them connect activities to scripture and experience.



#### 8. GROUP PARTICIPATES IN EXPERIMENTS

The kit contains some science experiment that helps them begin to feel comfortable with risk.



#### 9. KIT ALSO CONTAINS ART SUPPLIES

Art is a natural place to encourage risk, participants can reflect in their workbook/journals with art materials



#### 10. GROUP ENGAGES SCRIPTURE & RISK

Through the workbook group engages scripture and sees biblical examples of risk



### 11. GROUP IS GUIDED TO CONNECT

Group is guided to connect all ideas together; all the while working through workbook



### 12. GROUP IS GIVEN SAMPLE

the full kit will contains "continuing the thought" options that allow participants to continue to explore - there will be a sample in the prototype



### 13. LAB LEADER CLEANS UP

The lab leader will clean up



### 14. PARTICIPANTS INTERVIEWED

While leader cleans, an interviewer will interview participants with scripted questions.



## RECRUITING SCREENER

<b>Who I want to talk to:</b>	<b>What exact criteria will identify the people you want to talk to?</b>	<b>What questions will you ask?</b>
Christians	Active Christians involved in a church	What church do you attend? How often do you serve?
United Methodist	Member or regular attender of a United Methodist Church	When did you join your church?
Laity	Must be a lay person	Have you served as a pastor before?
Clergy	Must be a clergy person	Are you a clergy person? Are you interested in equipping laity?

## INTERVIEW SCRIPT

The two prototypes were tested together. This is the script used:

1. What church do you attend?
2. In what ways do you serve in your church? Beyond your church?
3. How long have you been a part of your church?
4. For Prototype 1 - the storylines:
  - a. Did you have a chance to read the three story jackets front and back?
  - b. What was your overall impression of the jackets?

- c. Was one more interesting or intriguing to you than the others?
  - d. Is there one you would want to pick up and read or purchase and read?
  - e. Was there one you thought you'd never want to read?
  - f. Do you have any other feedback you'd like to offer on these?
5. For Prototype 2 - the workshop:
- a. Have you participated in workshops to engage your faith before?
  - b. Did you find the sample workbook accessible?
  - c. Did you find the workbook helpful?
  - d. Did you find the art studio and science lab helpful?
  - e. Were you able to connect with the material?
  - f. Would you want to participate in a full workshop?
  - g. Is there anything you would add to or take away from the workshop?
  - h. Is there any other feedback you'd like to offer?

## DOCUMENTATION OF PROTOTYPE

Four samples are attached in pdf format. Three are storylines, one is a sample of the workbook for prototype 2.

## ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW NOTES

Prototype 1:

Old Faith New: This cover was well liked but beginning with history didn't engage all. The points were timely and engaging. The symbol on the cover spoke of eternity and timelessness. This is very current, but how will it be applicable in five years?

Now & Then: Needed to help connect to the history. Question of why Now and Then and not Then and Now. Feels more geared towards those in ministry.

Hometown Missionary: The cover appealed to some and not others. It was a good concept but needed clarity. Another said that it drew them right in. Use of word "missionary" felt antiquated. The last question on the copy felt negative.

Prototype 2:

Some were not into the art and science. Others were not sure how the science connected. Another was concerned that participants wouldn't have all the materials. Many of the comments reflected the goldilocks nature of the prototype (needed more information, would be better in a group, etc.). On the positive side, nearly all connected to the idea of embracing risk and found it exciting. One participant said, "It gives you a different, concrete way to see faith and fear." Four of six participants were interested in the full experience and two said maybe.

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