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### ReStory Your Church

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:  
RESTORY YOUR CHURCH



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY  
PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:  
MARK YOUNGMAN

PROJECT FACULTY:  
PHIL NEWELL

PORTLAND, OREGON

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## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

Mark Youngman

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

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all the churches known and unknown whose legacy my faith owes a debt of gratitude. My family name will soon be all but lost from Park Place Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, First United Methodist Church of Evergreen Park in the Chicago suburbs, and University United Methodist Church in Wichita, Kansas, but the legacy of their faithfulness will live on through every ReStory to come.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for the support of many people over the last few years. Early investors in this work include Greg Bergquist at the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Tom Laney at the Turner Center, Bishop William McAlilly of the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church, Art and Linda Youngman, and Providence Church. My friends/mentors/co-conspirators Ingrid McIntyre and John Pearce kept me going and believing through the ups and downs of work within a large organization. My wife, Jenny, and our children, Gracie, Myles, Olivia, and Beckett, put up with late nights and early mornings, and they lifted me up in many moments of doubt. They are helping me to tell a better story.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	III
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	IV
LIST OF FIGURES .....	VI
RESEARCH METHOD .....	VII
ABSTRACT .....	VIII
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Discovery Phase.....	1
Design Phase.....	3
Delivery Phase .....	4
Evaluation and Experience Gained.....	5
PROJECT.....	8
NPO .....	8
Project Description .....	8
Project Scope .....	9
Benchmarks .....	9
Orient the Reader.....	9
Presentation/Documentation of Project .....	10
PROJECT LAUNCH PLAN .....	70
NPO .....	70
Audience .....	71
Development Timeline .....	72
Iteration Process.....	73
APPENDIX A—MILESTONE 1: THE NPO CHARTER.....	74
APPENDIX B—MILESTONE 2: NPO TOPIC EXPERTISE ESSAY .....	78
APPENDIX C—MILESTONE 3: DESIGN WORKSHOP REPORT .....	101
APPENDIX D—MILESTONE 4: PROTOTYPE ITERATION REPORT .....	107
APPENDIX E—SUPPLEMENTAL PROJECT DOCUMENTATION .....	116
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	129

## FIGURES

1.1	The Jackson Magnolia Tree.....	24
1.2	The Svalbard Seed Vault.....	26
1.3	The Organizational Life Cycle.....	29
1.4	The Grief Cycle.....	31
1.5	The Organization Life Cycle and Grief Cycle.....	31
3.1	ReStory Your Church Process Overview.....	48
3.2	How do we think about a ReStory?.....	48
3.3	What story have we been telling?.....	49
3.4	Legacy Points.....	51
4.1	The Story We Have Lived.....	52
4.2	Legacy Points.....	56
5.1	The Story God is Dreaming for You.....	57
5.2	Legacy Points.....	64
5.3	The Story Pitch.....	65



## 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

This project provides a framework for churches at a turning point or near closure to “ReStory” and consider legacy options for their future including a restart, repurpose, or reallocation of resources. This is the key insight of this project: Churches that tell their past and present stories are well positioned to stay connected to a future vision that meets the needs of the community through creative and innovative means.

I am a pastor in the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church. In this context, I have witnessed the closure of dozens of churches in both urban and rural settings. Denominational leaders hope to find an effective way to address this growing trend while still pursuing the mission of the Church.

For years, church revitalization has been centered on a model of learning and importing best practices. The thought has been that, if churches could simply be closed, sold and resources redirected, the mission of the Church might thrive. I have discovered that a story-based approach can guide those conversations in a less threatening, more legacy-affirming way.

We must talk about the reality of death and resurrection, legacy and purpose in ways that are informed by the hope we have in Christ. A ReStory asks three basic questions:

1. What story are we telling ourselves now?
2. What story did we live in the past?
3. What story does God dream for our future?

By involving the church in a process of storytelling, the ReStory project increases the level of buy-in and belief among church leaders and members. As this project has developed, it has become increasingly focused on helpful ways to adjust the language used to talk about

churches in decline. After a successful ReStory process, other ministry partners will be used to implement the ReStory.

## INTRODUCTION

This project has its origin in the days leading up to an event titled M-LAB held in Tampa, Florida, in 2018. M-LAB was a collaborative effort between three conferences of the United Methodist Church and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education. At the time, I had been lamenting what I perceived to be unutilized resources of church property in my home area of Nashville, Tennessee. At the request of my District Superintendent, I pored over the list of churches in my immediate area and noticed downward trends in many of the key metric areas.

Many of our churches that are in steep decline or near death have been in existence for several decades and some for over two hundred years. They exist in all demographic settings—rural, urban, and suburban. They represent areas of reduced population and areas of regentrification. Demographics have shifted in many of these locations, and the church has struggled to reach new neighbors.

At M-LAB, a colleague sent me an article about the Jackson magnolia tree that was being removed from the White House lawn. Sometimes a metaphor seems to knock you over the head. This was one of those times. I had already reached out to Portland Seminary of George Fox University to inquire about their Doctor of Ministry program in Semiotics. As I prepared for entry interviews into the program, I realized that the magnolia tree was more than a symbol; it was also a sign of the times. The church was meant to thrive, not to be artificially propped up like the historic tree on the White House lawn.

### Discovery Phase

The Discovery phase of my project began, and I continued to investigate the current situation in churches in decline. I focused on *legacy* language and began talking to church

leaders about what it meant for a church to leave a legacy. This was reflected in my early NPO: *Dying churches present an opportunity to inform and resource new life through a process of legacy planning.* I shared with my colleagues, and they gracefully told me that I seemed to be focused too much on death. That was a key turning moment; I realized that, along with the discovery session feedback, I needed to find helpful ways to talk about the current situation.

The Discovery session included key stakeholders. The group included three ordained elders in the United Methodist Church, one former supervisor of eighty churches and pastors, two young local pastors, and one member of a church that had recently merged with another congregation. The session served to narrow the focus to a few issues:

- Attachment to the past
- A lack of leadership for transition
- The requirement of new DNA

It was the third issue that got the most traction. How do we do something different with something old? This was a key discovery for the direction of this project. It set the course for something more creative and imaginative for the potential outcomes for churches seeking a different future.

I was pleased to discover that the stakeholders did not shy away from the topic of institutional death and even gave examples of new language, which proved to be helpful. One pastor related the story of a church member dying of cancer. After many months of fighting, the diagnosis became terminal, and she said, “I’ve spent so much time trying to stay alive, that I don’t know how to die.” Another pastor shared that his Mexican heritage has a completely different view of death that leads them to celebrate a *day of the dead*.

By the end of the discovery phase, the NPO had evolved into a much more pastoral and engaging approach to difficult conversations with churches in distress. The language of sharing stories became an undercurrent to the process going forward. This idea resonated with each of the one-on-one conversations with experts in the field. These experienced professionals have walked through similar processes with local churches and learned from the potential pitfalls.

### **Design Phase**

The Design phase began with a stakeholder session that took place via videoconferencing. The format allowed us to use collaboration tools like Mural. The Mural whiteboard allowed the participants to engage in the process in a quick and concise manner. We identified that the key audience was the surrounding community. It was to the community that the church was originally called.

We homed in on some potential pitfalls to the NPO. Those pitfalls include the loss of *pillar* churches in communities where the church has been an anchor for generations. Their role as a cornerstone for the larger community is perceived years after it has faded. Other pitfalls include a loss of power and voice for underrepresented groups.

The potential gains quickly mounted as the stakeholders shared dreams about ways underutilized resources could be used to meet urgent needs within communities. A lot of energy surrounded ideas about converting space into low-income housing, community centers, and other bold outreach initiatives. This discussion led to three *napkin pitches (descriptions of possible outcomes)* from subgroups of stakeholders. The first napkin pitch centered around mixed-use of church property. The idea here is that the church remains at the center of the activity, providing a grounding for all other activity. A major potential benefit is that the church is pulled out of its shell and interacts with the larger community.

The second napkin pitch was a straight, capital-freeing proposal with the sale of property. While this makes sense in some cases, it was deemed to be a risky proposition and could lead to regret and disconnect from the surrounding community.

The third napkin pitch was centered on affordable housing. One stakeholder has worked closely with the unhoused community and is aware of the unused and underused square footage in United Methodist churches in the Nashville area. The solution seems so obvious paper. People need square footage; the church has a major excess.

The MVP of this process turned out to be a combination of these pitches. We began to explore the root of the NPO, until we discovered that the approach was as important as the desired outcome. The desired outcome might flow from the process. While the energy resided around housing and other creative uses for church resources, the path to get there ended up being the MVP. This was the advent of the ReStory process. How do we invite churches to discover (through the story of their present and past) what God might have in store for their future? I set out to create a resource that makes the case for and facilitates a ReStory. The MVP became the creation of a book that outlines an argument for new language surrounding the stressful seasons of decline and death for any organization. Leaders work together towards a ReStorying of their organization.

### **Delivery Phase**

The Delivery stage was a season filled with activity. It involved an early attempt to implement the ReStory process in a church that was formed by a recent merger. Two properties still resided in fast-growing areas of town, but neither congregation was thriving. While the initial conversations with leadership were very promising and shining eyes pointed to a hopeful

outcome, the church ended up focusing their effort on a short-term solution, therefore delaying the work of a ReStory.

A list of potential projects was created, and conversations initiated by members of the ReStory team. A second church reached out with interest in learning more. This church with small numbers in worship is maintaining a property with thousands of underused square footage. They are in the second of three steps of a ReStory and have provided helpful feedback as I have been writing this project. They have helped to shape what you will read below.

My benchmarks for future success include completing the current ReStory, revising the project, and presenting a professionally designed and produced ReStory guide for church leaders to the General Board of Higher Education of the UMC and/or TWKC of the UMC by September 2022. This process will allow me to turn this project into an approachable and effective book for church and organization leadership teams by 2023.

### **Evaluation and Experience Gained**

When starting this project, I did not anticipate a global pandemic grabbing the headlines six months in. In response, I gained access to tools of communication and collaboration that will continue to aid the further development of the ReStory process. Gathering teams of people across multiple states in ways that could not have happened in the same room, I realized a new willingness to engage in hard topics. People who are invested in the church are willing to work under challenging circumstances!

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local churches has been varied. Some churches have turned inward to an even higher degree. Others have experienced a perspective shift that has allowed them to be honest about their current situations and more open to the drastic change a ReStory might represent. A shift in observable metrics has altered the landscape,



causing churches to wonder how to take *virtual* attendance. How do you count the number of viewers for each computer logged in to a streaming worship service?

I anticipated barriers to progress within the structure of the annual conference in which this project has been formed. While I received support from almost every direction, a point in the process arose when action would need to be taken to engage ministry partners discovered through the project. I learned that even through persistent communication, not all outcomes were in my hands. I now know why leaders within this large organization would long for a quick and easy solution to the problem of underutilized resources in the local church—the reason we sometimes sell buildings too quickly.

I studied grief as a part of understanding the importance of story in the local church. What I had not anticipated was the experience of *personal* grief in the loss of my mother-in-law during the delivery phase. The grief that my wife has endured during the final months of my project has taught me a new perspective on the unknown timelines of grief that individuals and organizations may experience.

Through the development of the project delivery, I discovered that my personal strengths lie in the beginning conversations of a ReStory. As a pastor, I enjoy the storytelling, listening, engaging, and providing feedback to a community that is hurting. Sustaining relationships with ministry partners that can carry a ReStory through implementation is a growth area for me.

Early on, I developed several strong relationships with ministries that are doing great work. I sustained these relationships and was given access to groups like Wesley Community Development and Dying to Restart, and the Community Housing Initiative before I had developed my process. I focused on developing ReStory, and now we have a tool to help connect the local church to these ministry partners. I need to rebuild some of those bridges.

There are not many alternative approaches to my NPO. Some groups offer steps to revitalization. Strength Finders, Natural Church Development and others can help local church leadership to find a path forward. These resources can lead to incremental change that largely remains internal. Other groups, like those mentioned above, are offering services that help to evaluate building usage and community engagement. Teams of brokers, developers, architects can bring dreams to life. They are excellent at their work. The gap I have noticed is the initial work that encourages churches to engage in the reality of their circumstances, as well as the healthy parts of their legacy, and allow a new story to be imagined.

The research journey has been encouraging as I have received the gift of time and honest engagement from a wide array of church members and leaders. I have also experienced disappointment when churches and denominational leaders were not ready to break cycles of short-term, inward thinking. But I have seen success among those who take the time to share and celebrate their story. Success looks like a church with a legacy of education and care for children that, upon its closure, leaves an endowment that funds low-income preschool students. The church building is no longer there, but its legacy remains.

I pray that God is preparing a ReStory for the way we guide churches that find themselves at a pivotal moment in their life cycle. If this project can be a part of that future reality, I will gladly continue the work of developing a book and a resource for its equipping.

## PROJECT

### NPO

This project is designed to provide a framework for churches at a crucial turning point or near closure to “ReStory” and consider legacy options for their future including a restart, repurpose, or reallocation of resources.

### Project Description

The ReStory project began as a kind of hospice program for dying churches. I am a pastor in the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church. For years, church revitalization has been centered on a model of learning and importing best practices. Under that model, denominational leaders have experienced frustration at their inability to prune what had been ineffective churches. The thought has been that, if churches could simply be closed, sold and resources redirected, the mission of the church might thrive. I have discovered that a story-based approach can guide those conversations in a less threatening, more legacy-affirming way.

We must talk about the reality of death and resurrection, legacy and purpose in ways that are informed by the hope we have in Christ. A ReStory asks three basic questions:

1. What is the story we are telling ourselves now?
2. What story did we live in the past?
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By involving the church in a process of storytelling, the ReStory project hopes to increase the level of buy-in and belief among church leaders and members. As this project has developed, it has become increasingly focused on helpful ways to adjust the language used to talk about churches in decline.

## **Project Scope**

The starting point for this project is within the Tennessee/Western Kentucky Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The bishop who presides over this region is invested in finding solutions for churches in decline. We have narrowed the desired outcomes to the three R's of restart, repurpose, and reallocation of resources. The potential fourth R of revitalization has been removed due to redundancy and semantic satiation.

I plan for this project to contain an introduction and the first two chapters of a longer book designed for church or organization leaders to reframe their situations and take initial steps towards ReStorying their church or organization. The project will also contain a three-chapter guide for leaders to engage in the ReStory process with their teams.

## **Benchmarks**

1. Completion of the Introduction, Theological Background and Semiotic Approach to the ReStory process including a guide for the three ReStory meetings for church leaders.
2. Test the ReStory process with 1-3 churches in the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference.
3. Develop a high quality and diverse team to promote the ReStory process and identify candidate churches or organizations

## **Orient the Reader**

The materials that follow consist of an early iteration of a book and guide designed to create a helpful shift in language that is used to talk to leadership teams of churches at a crucial turning point or crisis. I intentionally use first person language throughout in hopes of connecting with the intended reader. I come from and am a part of the Church I am writing to, and the style of this resource is designed to reduce any sense of threat or ulterior motives.

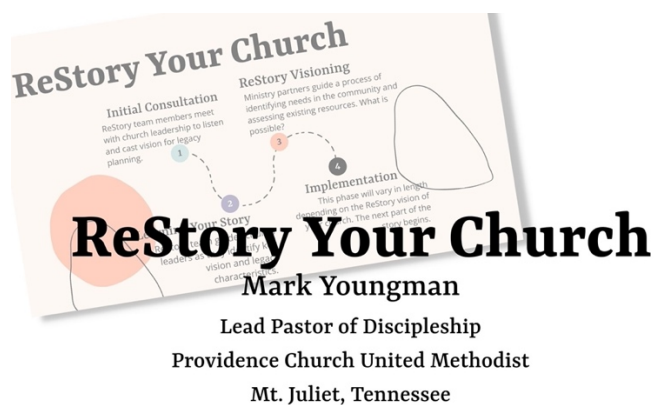
**Presentation/Documentation of Project**

ReStory Your Church

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

The ReStory Concept—How We Got Here.....	12
Introduction.....	13
Chapter 1: Looking for Signs.....	22
Chapter 2: The Theology of ReStory.....	36
The ReStory Process—A Guide for Teams .....	48
Chapter 3: The Story We Tell.....	49
Chapter 4: The Story We Lived.....	52
Chapter 5: The Story God Dreams for Us .....	58
Assessment.....	67

## The ReStory Concept—How We Got Here



The aim of this project is to provide a framework for churches at a crucial turning point or near closure to “ReStory” and consider legacy options for the future including a restart, repurpose, or reallocation of resources. The ReStory concept was designed first with local churches in mind but may have applications within a wide range of organizations.



The following sections outline the theological, biblical, and practical foundation for the ReStory concept.

## INTRODUCTION

I love the church. I can't get away from it—believe me, I've tried! From the start, I was surrounded by a particular story within the particular—yet all-encompassing—story of Jesus.

I was born in Wesley Hospital, which was emblazoned with the cross and flame, a symbol of my parents' United Methodist Church. I was raised in the Christian faith at University United Methodist Church, which sits in the shadow of Wichita State University's Cessna Stadium in the middle of Kansas. A powerful connection existed between the local church and the college campus. Future NBA players like Antoine Carr and Xavier McDaniel would come as guests to the Saturday morning men's breakfast. International students from countries like Lebanon, Iran, and India would visit the church as well as my childhood home. Aeronautical engineers taught Sunday school classes, and music school alumni played key roles in the church choir.

Within the church building, I was known and nurtured by a sweet mix of people throughout the first twenty years of my life. I will never forget Kay Crow, a grandmotherly figure who taught rascally preteens about the love of a God who can do miraculous things in our everyday lives. I learned the Lord's Prayer by studying a bookmark the church gave me. I served kids in the community at sports camps and Vacation Bible School. I went on mission trips and led youth retreats. After a session of my first adult Bible study class, a man who had watched me grow up said, "I can see that you have been called to ministry." Raised and called in the same place. All of this led to a deep love for God, the Church, and the various communities in which I've been planted.

As a boy I spent hours on the campus of Wichita State University where my father was a professor. I may have thought of myself as an honorary college student. I remember eating



peanuts and sipping Dr Pepper from a gold-and-black plastic cup in the bleachers while watching a football game with my family. Now, if you are an avid fan of college sports, you might be thinking, *Wichita State doesn't have a football team*. And you'd be right. But they used to. After many consistent, losing seasons, the nearly hundred-year-old program was ended.

More than just a lost future, the university risked losing a part of its legacy. The football team had been involved in the first game of American football that incorporated the forward pass. It had hosted the first football game held under lights west of the Mississippi River. WSU had hired the first African American head coach in Division 1 football, and it set the model for the modern, mobile quarterback position with a player named Prince McJunkins. But by the 1980s, all of that was history. Losing games and losing money, the program was shut down.<sup>1</sup>

In 1986 I was not yet aware of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's theory of the stages of grief.<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, one can easily see the classic stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance that took place within the community after the decision to end the football program. The university, city officials and alumni groups have made numerous attempts to revive the program over the years. Sadly, well-meaning people want to revive a program that, although it had had a great history, saw very few signs of life in its later years. To date, every effort has failed. The program is gone, but the stadium (despite being designated for demolition) still stands—a testament to what once was.

What about the church in the shadow of the stadium? Is it thriving or withering? These days, the church continues through ups and downs. The crowds aren't as large as they once were.

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<sup>1</sup> In a fun twist, Jason Sudeikis' fictional titular character in *Ted Lasso* hailed from the (imaginary) WSU football program before heading to the (imaginary) English soccer team AFC Richmond.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Ira Byock, 2014. *On Death & Dying : What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy & Their Own Families*. New York: Scribner, A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Rumors that the church will not be able to survive the changing times will swirl like the dusty Kansas wind, but the church still draws new people and serves the community. The leadership, from time to time, has had difficult conversations about the future of the church. Then someone has drawn them back to their mission—their purpose—and they adapt and do their best to share Jesus. I love the church.

The image of the church, in the shadow of a stadium near the end of its life, causes me to ask some probing questions:

- What are the things we are holding onto?
- What are those things costing us?
- What are the needs of the community?
- Is there a connection between what we are holding onto and the felt needs surrounding us?

These questions haunt me as I look at churches that feel stuck and frustrated in a changing environment.

Once I was asked to form groups of pastors based on their geography within a region of churches in Middle Tennessee. I was handed a seven-page document listing more than one hundred churches. Most of those churches were experiencing some level of decline, and the last several pages listed churches with very few in regular attendance. I asked the overseer of this region of churches where he spent most of his resources (time, finances, emotional energy). His answer was not surprising. He spent most of his resources on and with the churches that hadn't seen positive signs of life in the community of disciples for many years.

This begs the question, “Should some of these churches consider shutting their doors?” According to the Texas Methodist Foundation,

One of the significant issues surrounding the closing of churches is that the current process is energy-intensive and falls largely on the District Superintendent, who is

severely hampered from forward-looking, strategic action when their time and energy are being diverted, not to mission-focused purposes but rather to closing churches who are most often worshipping less than 20 and have given up on any engagement with their community and the mission of the church.<sup>3</sup>

Indicators of attendance, baptism, and financial giving have been the most consistent metrics of measuring church health for generations. Lyn Sorrells of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church, incorporates these key metrics in order to bring about a conversation regarding the long-term viability of a local church:

- Average attendance of fewer than fifty people, with a decade or more of decline
- Zero baptisms in the last five years
- Zero professions of faith in the last five years
- Declining financial contributions to the denomination<sup>4</sup>

In a pandemic-impacted culture, the metrics have changed. The new metrics are based on online presence, creative response to the COVID-19 pandemic, persistence in meeting the needs of the community, and financial giving. Churches that were merely surviving before are now pressed to double down on the mission or face closure.

There it is again . . . the dreaded “C” word. I’ve discovered that talking about closure (or worse yet, organizational death) is not always helpful. We have a deeply held belief that closure is failure. We operate out of an assumption that death is the worst thing that could happen to a person or an organization. And with good reason. A student of author Robert Quinn wrote,

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<sup>3</sup> “Texas Methodist Foundation,” Texas Methodist Foundation, accessed December 31, 2021. <https://tmf-fdn.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> Yonat Shimron. n.d. “Legacy Ministries to Dying Churches Give Congregations a Way to End Well.” Faith and Leadership. Accessed February 2019. <https://faithandleadership.com/legacy-ministries-dying-churches-give-congregations-way-end-well>.

Perhaps death is a much more constant companion than I realize. Organizational, professional, physical, and psychological death are similar in that they are hard to face. To choose death is to choose to cease to be. Such a choice is a horror to contemplate.<sup>5</sup>

Is there another way to face our reality and live into the mission of Jesus?

To have difficult conversations about the life and death of an organization, it is essential to consider that the mission must always be larger than one local embodiment. Author Leonard Sweet illuminates this perspective in the preface to his book, *Rings of Fire*: “God’s church will always have a future. It is God’s mission, not the church’s mission, and God’s mission will be carried out with or without our tribes and traditions.”<sup>6</sup> This is not intended to be a threat or a call to resignation (although it could be taken as both). Instead, it is a statement of the nature of the church. God has chosen the church to carry out God’s mission, but God’s mission will always be larger than any local church. The message is bigger than the medium.

Is there another way to face our reality and live into the mission of Jesus? I believe there is, and I take my cue from Jesus himself, the one who revealed that death is not final. Faced with the death of his friend Lazarus, Jesus spoke these words: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.”<sup>7</sup> After these words, his friend who was dead returned to life. Surely his life after death was not the same as his life before death. More widely, we can see that out of a kind of death can come *new* life. Even when we look death in the face and yet live, we will not return to the same life as before. What I am proposing in this project is that every person and organization has the potential to tell a different story.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Quinn, *Deep Change* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Sweet and Mark Chironna, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 2019), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> John 11:25 (NIV).

Do you ever feel caught between two realities? We have a *day-to-day reality* that we walk through. As individuals we complete various tasks: we pay the bills, we work, we take care of others, we eat, we sleep, and so forth. Hopefully, we find joy, we laugh, and we love. The *future reality* either drives us forward or weighs us down. As churches and organizations, we tend to do the same.

What do you think about the future? If you are part of a leadership team, consider how the conversation usually goes: Hope-filled dreams? Downward spiral? Is there an anxiousness about future survival? Are decisions being made in hopes of a future organization that lives into its mission, or in hopes of merely sticking around? If an outside person were to observe your decision-making, would they see you or your team as a maintenance operation or as an organization that is thriving and focused on future life? Are your decisions driven by an avoidance of institutional death or by a vision of God's Kingdom coming?

I pose these questions because I must ask them of myself on a regular basis. Like you, I feel compelled in a direction away from maintenance and towards life. I don't enjoy talking about closing churches or organizations; I'd rather talk about telling a different story than the one we've been telling. In other words, I'd like to *ReStory*.<sup>8</sup> Would you?

In every belief system (including no belief system), you will find an ultimate story. For followers of Jesus, the ultimate (literally—*the last thing*)<sup>9</sup> story is one of resurrection and new life. We want to tell a great story, and we really want to tell the ultimate story. We might ask, "If

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this project I will be using the word "ReStory" in reference to the basic process laid out in these pages.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Longenecker, *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998).

my little story does not point towards the ultimate story, what story am I telling?” You might be wondering that very thing.

What I mean by *ReStory* is a process of storytelling that is honest about and honoring the past and present, but one that moves towards the future. It focuses on key indicators (legacy points) that help the new story take shape with the old story at heart. In wide-ranging places like North Carolina, Texas, and Florida, some churches have given themselves to telling a different story and are seeing fruit and impacting their communities with holy gathering spaces, affordable housing, senior living options, and creative collaborations with business and civic organizations. God is moving in ways we can’t always see, but new stories are being told in old places.

I will approach the work of *ReStorying* your church or organization in three sections. First, we will explore the specific role we play in understanding the signs of the times. In Matthew 16:3, Jesus addressed his disciples with these hard and somewhat confusing words, “Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?” In other words, Jesus seems to be saying, “You can see that the sky before a storm points to rain, but you can’t see the storms and conditions in the human heart, in relationships, and in society that are pointing to new realities.”

What signs are we seeing today in our church or organization? Just as importantly, how do we reply? The activity of an individual or group that discerns the signs of the times is called *semiotics*. An effective semiotician not only sees the signs of the times, but also knows what to do about them. We will explore the various responses to the signs of the times for churches. While radical response to signs of decline is a relatively new phenomenon, several alternative solutions are in place today. We will explore those in chapter one.

In chapter two we will explore the theological and Biblical foundation for the ReStory process. Jesus was known as a storyteller. He often answered a direct (and often loaded with a hidden agenda) question with a story that invited the audience to engage in a deeper truth—a deeper reality than the one in which they had been operating. It could be said that Jesus was and is the Great ReStory Teller. We will look at our typical approaches to the idea of life and death and see how Jesus’ insistence on the Kingdom reality might inform the hope we have for the future of our church or organization.

In chapters three, four and five, we will begin the ReStory process by taking an honest look at the stories we tell ourselves and others about our own past, present and future. First, we’ll look at the current story we are telling. What story are we telling when we talk about finances? About attendance or age of attendees? When the team entrusted with the care of the facility does its work, what language is used around the table? And finally, what does the community say about the church?

Then we will look back into the origin story of the church or organization. To do this, we might ask who the people were who first communicated and responded to the vision that sparked the initial iteration of your church. Whose lives were impacted along the way? What did they learn from their own failures?

Thom Ranier has indicated that one of the signs of a church that may be closing soon is this: “The focus is on the past, not the future.”<sup>10</sup> So next, we will begin to examine the legacy points that have emerged and listen for the story God dreams for you. This is not about predicting the future, but rather moving into the future with our eyes open to what God might yet be doing. You will be invited to come together around the legacy points and dream about God’s

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<sup>10</sup> “Eight Signs A Church May Be Closing Soon” accessed December 8, 2021.  
<https://churchanswers.com/blog/eight-signs-church-may-closing-soon/>.

next story for the church and the community you serve. All of this will equip the church to be reoriented to Jesus' story of life, death and resurrection.

The church in the shadow of the empty football stadium is well positioned to shock the world with her ability to tell God's story of redemption and rescue even if the future looks very little like the past. Carrying healthy DNA forward into a ReStoried future, your church or organization might be well positioned to do the same.



## CHAPTER 1

### LOOKING FOR SIGNS

Once the Pharisees and the Sadducees were testing Jesus by asking him for a sign from heaven. He responded to them with these hard and somewhat confusing words: “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”<sup>11</sup> For those familiar with the teachings of Jesus, this may not seem to stand out from his other almost cryptic responses to questions and situations. In the context of reading the sky, Jesus might ask us, “Do you see the world around you? Do you know what is happening? Do you have a starting place for doing something about what you see?”

The word that Jesus used for “signs” is translated into Greek as *semeion*. From this word comes the term *semiotics*, the study of signs and their meaning. The world of semiotics identifies the indicators of our current reality and signs of what is to come. According to Leonard Sweet, “*Semiotics* is best defined as the ability to read and convey signs, where a sign (be it image, gesture, sound, object or word) is something that stands for something else.”<sup>12</sup> The appearance of the sky was a sign of the weather that was to come. The reason Jesus assumed that his antagonists knew what this image meant was because it had become an accepted sign. Often the

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<sup>11</sup> Matt. 16:3. NIV

<sup>12</sup> Leonard Sweet. *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2014), 22.

signs of the times may appear hidden by the prevailing understanding, the status quo, or the inertia of a culture that's just along for the ride.

Author and professor Crystal Downing has captured the development of Christian semiotics in her book, *Changing Signs of Truth*. She employs the helpful phrase, “(re)signing truth.”<sup>13</sup> As those who look to the signs of the times when it comes to our church or organization, we are invited to see what is happening around us (and in us) in a new way. As we look to the signs of the times for the church today, we will look to Downing's concept of finding new ways to look at the unchanging truth—to (re)sign or ReStory.

So I'll start with an assumption: If you have picked up this project—and you have!—you are someone who has hope for the future. You are someone who recognizes that there are signs of decline or danger ahead, but you want to be a part of something that lives on—not just for the sake of living on, but for the world-altering impact that your church or organization was designed for. For years we have used language and programs designed to help the church survive. We are eager to revitalize, redecorate, re-staff, and restore the local church, hoping to meet a metric or recreate a dynamic from ages past. What would it look like to move *past* maintenance and survival and risk a new story?

We are going to take an image-based approach to understanding our very real-world setting and potential. As Jesus encouraged his disciples to do, we will look for the signs of the times in the images we experience today. We'll practice with two current images.

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<sup>13</sup> Crystal Downing. *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 22.



Figure 1.1. Photo by Andrew Harnik, *The Jackson Magnolia Tree*, Associated Press, The Tennessean, accessed January 2018.

In 1829 Andrew Jackson was elected President of the United States. Sadly, his wife Rachel died soon after his victory, before he had moved to Washington, D.C. Upon his arrival at the capital and in memory of his deceased wife, Jackson planted a young sapling on the White House lawn. It was taken from Rachel's magnolia tree on their plantation, The Hermitage, just east of Nashville, Tennessee. It's been on the White House lawn ever since. For decades it stood as a sign for history, a connection with the past. Even opponents of Andrew Jackson could appreciate the historical significance of a tree that lives on beyond the life of a man. It was a connection to the past—a connection to “our” story.

Signs change, and in recent years, the magnolia tree that once stood for a historic moment so close to the birth of a young nation became overgrown and unwieldy. In any other environment, it would have collapsed under its own weight. But this tree, on the White House lawn, was propped up and held together by a series of cables and wires. If it were allowed to fall,

it would have been dead and gone years ago. Recently it was determined that it was time for the tree to be removed.<sup>14</sup>

While this initially caused great sadness at the loss of an historic tree, later it was revealed that various friends and foreign dignitaries had been recipients of seedlings of the tree over the years. Today, the greenhouse nursery on the White House grounds contains young saplings that came from the original tree. The Jackson magnolia lives on in places all around the world. Could Andrew Jackson have anticipated that kind of legacy born out of his grief for his dead wife?

Does the sign of the Jackson magnolia have anything to say to the Christian church today? Is it possible that the Jackson magnolia tree provides an effective metaphor—a warning and a hope—for the Christian church and any organization that sees itself in a time of transition?<sup>15</sup> It causes us to ask, “Are we propping up something that was actually meant to die or to become something new?”

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<sup>14</sup> Kate Bennett. “Exclusive: Iconic White House Tree to Be Cut down.” *CNN*, December 26, 2017, <https://www-m.cnn.com/2017/12/26/politics/white-house-jackson-magnolia-south-facade/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Hint: At the time of this writing (2021) we are all in a time of transition that may last for generations to come.



Figure 1.2: *The Svalbard Seed Vault*, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://en.visitsvalbard.com/inspiration/various/svalbard-global-seed-vault>, © NordGen Nordic Genetic Resource Center.

A seed vault exists on Svalbard, an archipelago halfway between Norway and the North Pole. The seed vault houses nearly a million seed samples in a facility built into the permafrost.<sup>16</sup> These are preserved with the unknown future of our planet in mind.<sup>17</sup> If we look at the seeds as signs of what could be ahead, they represent the potential survival of plant species' and possibly the organisms that depend on them. The presence of the seeds also represents underlying real or imaginary threats that would lead the planet to require their retrieval. All of this can be summed up in the claim that these seeds represent *stored life*.

While collectively we are storing life in the ground, we are also storing samples of deadly viruses in laboratories around the world. Viruses, bacteria, and diseases have been stored, collected, and manipulated for research purposes for at least two hundred years. These virus strands are *stored death* with the hope that one day they can be used to *restore life*. A semiotic approach to this effort (understanding these images and objects as signs) becomes even more

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<sup>16</sup> Bill McKibben. *Falter: Has the human game begun to play itself out?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ironically, as McKibben points out, the permafrost turns out to be less secure or permanent than we thought.

interesting when we consider that the seeds representing stored life are dead, and the viral strands representing stored death are alive. We are holding life and death quite literally in our hands.

Does the sign of a seed vault have anything to say to churches and organizations today? Are we storing seeds for the unknown future? Are we storing death in hopes of life? The signs of the times might be pointing to our growing sense (amidst strident denial) that life as we know it isn't guaranteed to last forever. It's one thing to know this fact; it's another thing to do something about it.

While we are not going to stay in the world of biology throughout this project, it is helpful to think of your church or organization as a living organism because, after all, the church has been called to be the body of Christ. The average leader is aware that organizations have life cycles. Life cycles can be responded to and planned for much like the seed and virus preservation projects and the seedlings of Jackson's magnolia that live on today. So, understanding the nature of birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth is vital to imagine "what's next" for the local church.

### **The Semiotics of Death and Resurrection**

As a pastor, I often hear the following sentiment from a Jesus follower who is going through something difficult: "I just don't know how anyone could survive this without the hope of Jesus Christ." This statement usually comes from a posture of empathy. They really can't imagine how someone faces something like death without the hope of resurrection.

People who have the hope of resurrection can approach difficult decisions in a different way. Jurgen Moltmann said,

Believing in the resurrection does not just mean assenting to a dogma and noting a historical fact. It means participating in this creative act of God's . . . Resurrection is not a consoling opium, soothing us with the promise of a better world in the hereafter. It is

the energy for a rebirth of this life. The hope doesn't point to another world. It is focused on the redemption of this one.<sup>18</sup>

If there is a redemption of this world, then there is a reason to look for resurrection here and now.

One pastor in Nashville, Tennessee, has said, "We lack a celebration of death." His Mexican culture has a way of doing this, and through movies and cultural sharing we are exposed to an expanded view of death. My children recently attended a party that was themed around the day of the dead. They loved it! They were a little frightened at the idea of such a party, but they left with a healthy familiarity with death that I hope will serve them well as they grow.

## **Why the Semiotics of Death and Resurrection Matter**

### **Life Cycle**

It is helpful to think of any organization as having a life cycle. The healthiest, strongest woman in the gym is still subject to a life cycle. The most powerful company on Wall Street knows that a constant upward trajectory is an illusion. The rhythms of life and death are deeply engrained in every organism. So as we look at the signs of our times, we must use a gauge: "Where do we see ourselves on this 'bell curve' of a life cycle?"

It is critically important to have a periodic assessment of the life-cycle status of your organization. Leaders are notoriously inclined to miss the signs of maturity and decline as well as opportunities for rebirth. The illustration below (fig. 1.3) can be a helpful starting place and frequent touchstone. Where do you see your church or organization in the life cycle?

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<sup>18</sup> Jürgen Moltmann. *Jesus Christ for Today's World*. (London: SCM Press, 1995).

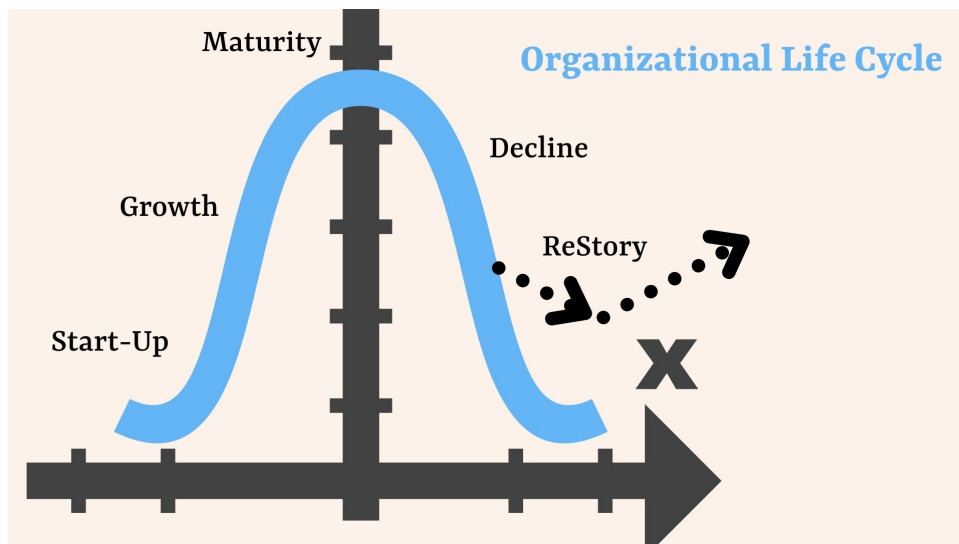


Figure 1.3. The Organizational Life Cycle. Created by author. Based on common organizational theory.

### Start-Up

There has been an allure to church planting, especially in the last thirty years. It is an understandable draw to be a part of something that is wild and unknown. The mystery—even “sexiness”—of a start-up ministry reminds participants that they are in a movement that can do something of significance. According to a study by the North American Mission Board, 68 percent of church plants are still meeting after four years.<sup>19</sup> Not all church plants see immediate growth, but of those that still exist after four years, most were supported with tools and resources that led to a quick launch.

For many of our churches, the start-up period was several decades ago and, therefore, more difficult to recall. A unifying, missional drive was at the heart of most successful start-ups. Uncovering and recovering that missional passion may be key for churches looking to ReStory.

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<sup>19</sup> Ed Stetzer and Phillip Connor. “Church Planting Survivability and Health Study.” *Center for Missional Research*, 2007, North American Mission Board.



## Growth

The growth stage is often the most exciting for an organization. The original missional impulse is still alive. Fruit is beginning to appear, and a majority of those involved are pulling together towards the vision. A sustained energy results in seemingly endless new markers of success met. Like a growing child, observers marvel at the rate of achievement. Growth is contagious, but its allure can lead to a disconnect from the vision that made it possible.

## Maturity

While organizations in this stage seem to obtain a certain stability and sustainability, maturity is where the plateau and early decline typically begin. Passion around the mission wanes. Just as with an aging building, maintenance becomes increasingly important.

## Decline

The stage of decline is sneaky. It begins somewhere in the maturity stage and is often undetected until the metrics drop rapidly. It is hard to pull out of decline without a drastic change of some kind. We'll call that drastic change our ReStory.

### Life Cycle of the Organization and the Cycle of Grief

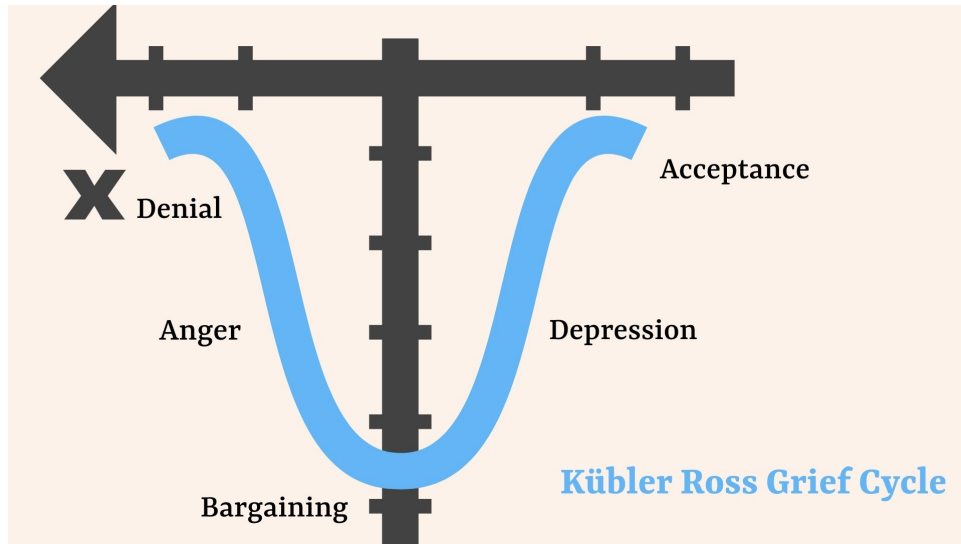


Figure 1.4. *The Grief Cycle*. Created by author. Based on Kubler Ross Grief Cycle.

When overlayed with the Kübler Ross model for the grieving process, the organizational life cycle seems to be about half a heartbeat ahead. The downward spiral of anger, bargaining, and depression can create a well of apathy and hopelessness. With parts of the organization moving towards acceptance, the chances of a ReStory increase significantly. Organizational grief, when appropriately identified, can lead the way towards a better, albeit different, future.

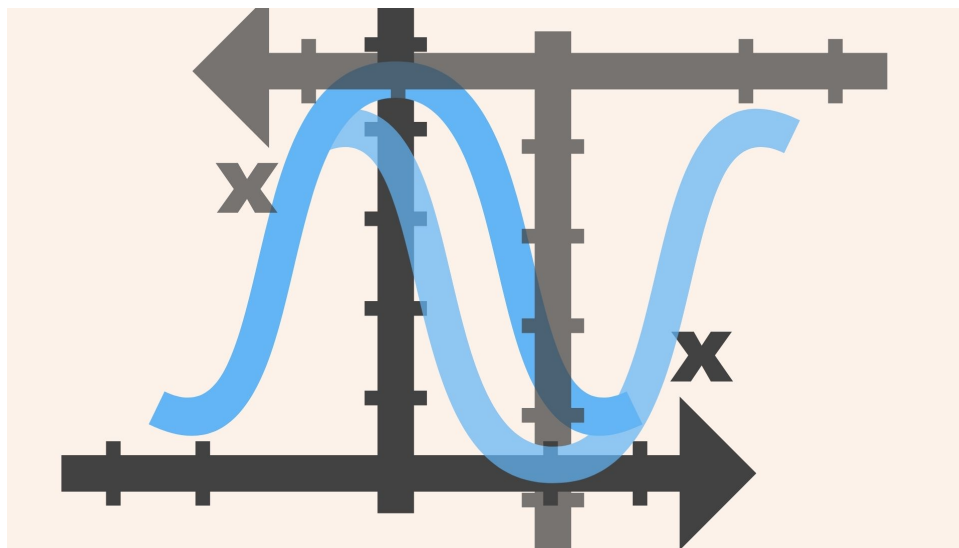


Figure 1.5. *The Organization Life Cycle and Grief Cycle*. Created by author.

Mourning begins when growth reaches a noticeable and uncomfortable level. Mourning through all levels of the process results from a loss of what once was. In their work “A Beginner’s Guide to the End,” Miller and Berger point out a beauty that exists when something is mourned. They say that mourning “is a beautiful word and connotes the process through which grief evolves from bottomless sorrow to newfound perspective. When the mourning period ends, your relationship to the lost one has not ended—it’s not something you ‘push through’—but has been transformed.”<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes the signs of the times seem elusive, hiding in the shadows or blending in with the status quo. Other times, the signs appear to overwhelm us with almost ridiculous relevancy. For instance, the sign of the Jackson magnolia has deep roots in the area of Tennessee I call home. The suburbs and streets that have grown up around Jackson’s Tennessee home called The Hermitage have taken on names drawn from the Jackson legacy<sup>21</sup>. It is common to see streets named after Jackson family members. Entire surrounding communities carry names like Hermitage and Old Hickory.<sup>22</sup>

What are the signs of thriving churches, and why are they so elusive? The signs of a thriving church appear as fruit in the areas that Jesus called them to. Are they living out the call to *go*? Do they appear to be *sent*? Are people learning about Jesus? Are some people coming to faith in Christ and being baptized? And the most difficult question to answer: Are they making disciples?

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce J. Miller and Shoshana Berger. *A Beginner’s Guide to the End: Practical Advice for Living Life and Facing Death*. (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020), 421.

<sup>21</sup> Currently, diverse neighborhoods exist on lands that were once worked by Jackson’s slaves.

<sup>22</sup> “Old Hickory” was Andrew Jackson’s nickname.

Indicators of decline and arguments for closure go hand in hand. In a study comparing closures of British Methodist Churches to closures in the Anglican Church, Carol Roberts and Leslie J Francis identified these five arguments for closure.

1. lack of clergy
2. lack of lay leadership
3. lack of worshippers
4. lack of desire to keep up the building
5. church buildings can easily be repurposed

The study also identified arguments that speak *against* closure. Roberts and Francis list arguments such as mission and historical significance of the building to the community. But one argument against closure stands out:

[It] is concerned with continuity and witness. The effect of a local church closing in any location is the same for all denominations. The physical presence of a church building is itself a witness to the Christian faith. However, if the building is obviously abandoned and remains in a dilapidated state there is an adverse witness. This abandonment of a church building is a strong disincentive to closure, especially in the urban situation, when the abandoned church only compounds the dilapidation of its neighbourhood.<sup>23</sup>

An abandoned church building is a sign to the world of the state of the church.

### Church Signs

We've all seen the cute sayings on church signs: "This church is prayer conditioned." "Welcome to our CHRCH. The only thing missing is U." "You think it's hot here! –God" Whatever our reaction to these messages, one thing is clear: they communicate something to their readers. Whether it is what was intended or not, they send a message. One rural church sign

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis Burton. "Church closure and membership statistics: a Methodist perspective," Rural Theology 5:2 (2007) 125-136.

read, “Your choice for eternity: WELL DONE! or EXTRA CRISPY.” You may not be the intended audience for that message, but are you likely to enter a church with that message outside? Why? Or why not? It communicates something. It is a sign (whether correct or wrong) of what appears to be inside.

A pastor in Kansas City uses her church sign to speak to current events impacting the community it serves. When the hometown football team was in the Super Bowl, they cheered the team on with clever messages. Those messages gained the attention of local and then national media. It said to the community, “We see what you are involved in and are willing to enter into that.”

In contrast, many church signs deliver messages to those who are already *in* or at least *in* on the language of the church. When we lose sight of what our signs are communicating, we would be better off with no sign at all! I generally prefer the non-message church sign, a sign that simply indicates where the church is and maybe how or when to connect. But even in the lack of a message there is a message.

A new restaurant opened near the office where I served as an intern many years ago. The restaurant had no sign. Nothing. It was in a row of connected buildings in the city. To enter, you went through a non-descript door. It sounds suspicious, I know, but it was a very popular restaurant.

What did the lack of a sign communicate to those who discovered this eatery? The message was, “Something here is intriguing.” It made us want to learn. We were afraid of missing out: “What they have must be really good.” On the other hand, the lack of outward information might have communicated exclusivity: “This place is probably not for you. You weren’t invited.”

Maybe the church sign is not the most effective tool of invitation, information and welcome. Maybe the members of the church or organization are themselves the best signs pointing others to a place to be well fed and transformed. What messages does your church sign send to the community? What are the signs that are pointing people to transformation? What we know for sure is that if we can't figure out what our church signs are saying, we won't be able to understand the signs of the times.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE THEOLOGY OF RESTORY

May this day bring Sabbath rest to my heart and my home. May God's image in me be restored, and my imagination in God be re-storied. May the gravity of material things be lightened, and the relativity of time slow down. May I know grace to embrace my own finite smallness in the arms of God's infinite greatness. May God's Word feed me and His Spirit lead me into the week and life to come. (Sabbath Blessing, Pete Grieg)<sup>24</sup>

#### **Jesus the Great ReStoryteller**

Jesus was a great storyteller. Even among those who disagree about the divinity of Jesus Christ, this label is almost universal. Whether the Sunday school paintings are accurate or not, it is easy to imagine a crowd gathered around Jesus as he told stories that pointed to truth. Of course, Jesus didn't invent this method. It is present throughout the Bible. In fact, the Bible itself has been described as a grand narrative.<sup>25</sup> The Bible tells the story of redemption. That grand story is told by little stories along the way.

In Jewish and Christian traditions, many stories are told about King David. The tales describe his great prowess with a slingshot and his leadership in battle. But the story which factors most in his redemption was told *to* him.

In 2 Kings, the prophet Nathan comes to King David at the lowest point of his life. Having committed adultery and murder, David's story had taken a turn for the worse. Nathan was sent to deliver the truth. He certainly could have put his finger in David's face and raised his voice with loud accusations of sin; he would not have been wrong in doing so. He could have

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<sup>24</sup> Pete Grieg. "A Sabbath Blessing." *Lectio 365 Podcast*, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> This term is based on the concept put forth and repudiated by French Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. He fought against the postmodern idea that there is such a thing as a metanarrative that is encompassing of a bunch of lesser stories. However, in the sense that the stories of the Bible point to the salvation story, it is indeed a "grand narrative."

protested outside of David's palace, carrying signs and chanting, "Adulterer! Murderer!" Instead, Nathan told a story—a story about a rich man who avoided sharing from his abundance by taking all his poor neighbor had.

Upon hearing this story, David was outraged. He couldn't stomach the thought of a man getting away with such behavior. Then Nathan looked at David and simply said, "You are that man." Through a story that paralleled his own, David was brought to a point of repentance and received forgiveness.

Jesus understood and was himself formed by this story-telling tradition. But Jesus didn't just tell stories; he reframed the story that was in front of him. The collection of stories he told led to an experience of death and resurrection. Jesus said to his disciples,

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.<sup>26</sup>

This requires that we let go of what we think we have created and that we allow new seeds to germinate and flourish. McKibben wrote, "A world without death is a world without time, and that in turn is a world without meaning, at least human meaning."<sup>27</sup> We measure time from the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That redemption of death is where we find our ultimate human meaning. Jesus *restories* death.

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<sup>26</sup> John 12:23–26. NIV.

<sup>27</sup> B. McKibben, *Falter: Has the human game begun to play itself out?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 188.



Jesus didn't just restory on a macro level. He brought his love of restorying into the dirt. The Gospel of Mark captures the moment when a woman was brought forward as one who had been caught in the act of adultery:

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."<sup>28</sup>

The typical story for a woman caught in adultery would end quickly. But Jesus saw the scene in its entirety. He saw the hearts of the accusers; he saw the heart of the woman; and he saw a different story for her. He proclaimed it so. She had been headed for death, and he called her back to life.

### **Themes of Death and Resurrection in the Bible**

The theme of death in the Bible is introduced in Genesis 2 and 3. The second creation narrative and the story of the fall are foundational in an understanding of our relationship with God. According to Genesis 2, Adam was created to till the soil and be fed: "The Lord God took

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<sup>28</sup> Mark 8:1–11.

the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden.’”<sup>29</sup>

The text describes a world where there is no fear of death. Often it is fear itself that holds humanity back from a healthy pursuit of God’s dream for us. In Genesis 2 we briefly see an environment where Adam is consumed by the idea of holy work and plentiful sustenance.

It is worth noting, then, that God speaks the first word of death. God spoke about the potential of death when God warned Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now that the idea of death had been introduced, the serpent could run with it. The idea of life and death was brought into question. The serpent picked up on this newly introduced fear: “You will not certainly die.”<sup>30</sup> And so begins the struggle of self-preservation in a world where death is now a possibility. But was death really a possibility?

Adam and Eve chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the consequences followed. Their pursuit of God-like knowledge inspired by the whisperings of the serpent led to the discovery that they were naked, not that they had become like gods.<sup>31</sup> With these consequences came blame. Was it the snake that was at fault? Eve? Adam? God? The initial finger-pointing may be the first example of an avoidance of the reality of death.

Ultimately, what was exposed was their dependency on God. After the “Fall,” Adam and Eve were sent out from the garden and kept from immortality (see Genesis 3:22–24). Death, then, was a result of sin and a condition that would only be remedied by humankind remaining in the garden and eating from the tree of life. The result of eating from the tree of the knowledge of

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<sup>29</sup> Gen. 2:15–16.

<sup>30</sup> Gen. 3:4.

<sup>31</sup> James L. Mays, *Harper Collins Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000), 87.

good and evil would be mortality that they would claim for themselves—not as a gift from their creator. Death was a result of sin, but this would not be the end of the story.

### A New Thing

Among the things redeemed throughout the Biblical narrative is death itself. In Romans 5:12, Paul writes about the origin of sin and death as laid out in Genesis: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.”

If we cut off Paul’s words here, we would have the prevailing view of death . . . that it is humankind’s fault and we are doomed . . . that we might as well “eat and drink for tomorrow we die.”<sup>32</sup> But Paul didn’t leave it there. He continued: “Just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>33</sup>

A new thing is taking place through Jesus, but that new thing echoes the old word of the prophet Isaiah:

Forget the former things;  
do not dwell on the past.  
See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland.<sup>34</sup>

The new thing Jesus is doing also foreshadows his own words in Revelation:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God

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<sup>32</sup> 1 Cor. 15:32, Isa. 22:13.

<sup>33</sup> Rom. 5:21.

<sup>34</sup> Isa. 43:18–19.

himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”<sup>35</sup>

### Resurrection

Resurrection is how God redeems death by restoring life. To the church in Corinth, Paul answered the questions that were coming his way:

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. . . . The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.<sup>36</sup>

In resurrection, the body continues to move on towards its true destination.

### Redeeming Death

The Epistle to the Romans is Paul’s only letter written to a community he did not form, yet in it we find some of the most essential Christian teachings. With personal distance from the audience, his writing is more easily applied. However, Paul was picturing a real community with a profound experience of Jesus. He longed to visit them and encourage them. Some topics are conspicuously omitted, but the letter to the Romans appears to be an attempt to capture the core of Christian teaching.

Chapter 5 falls amid a teaching on the role of faith in our salvation. This man, who knows the law as well as anyone, is sharing a new view of the life God desires for His people. It’s a

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<sup>35</sup> Rev. 21:1–5.

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:35–37, 42–44

view fixed in grace that leads to life. After reminding the church that all of them had sinned, Paul shares this hope: “Just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>37</sup>

### Resurrection and New Life: The Legacy of Christ

In a more intimate letter, Paul wrote to Timothy with hope that the true legacy of the Jesus movement might continue through him. He wrote, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (2 Timothy 1:1-2). Timothy was not a biological relative of Paul’s, but Paul thought of the future work that would outlast him as the seed of his work carrying on as a father to son.

It is part of the human condition to be concerned with the legacy we are leaving behind. We see that concern for legacy reach its rightful conclusion in Jesus. It is Jesus who will place the crown of righteousness on Paul’s head. The legacy neither starts nor ends with him. It neither starts nor ends with us.

Leonard Sweet says this about Jesus' legacy: “Jesus didn't leave us any writings, any organization, any structure, any icons. Jesus left us with one thing: himself in the form of his body, a community that shares stories of healing and love.”<sup>38</sup> The body that Jesus left us (the Church) is in transition from more closely resembling an earthly body to becoming his (Christ, our head) resurrected body. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, our personal resurrection highlights that nature of the church. Ultimately, the resurrection hope communicated by Paul leads to the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation 21.

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<sup>37</sup> Rom. 5:21.

<sup>38</sup> Leonard Sweet. *So Beautiful*. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2009), 14.

### **Implications for the Church Today**

The themes of life, death, and resurrection are at the center of God's love for creation. This pattern of grace and redemption is reflected in the life of the church. The church—as instituted by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit—was meant to have life; it was meant to thrive. Individual churches, and even denominations are susceptible to death. But through death, the Jesus movement will continue to experience resurrection.

To face the reality of death, the church may need to retrace some of the steps through the Eden narrative. Is death possible? Could it be that the denial of the possibility of death has become another kind of sin that prevents life in the garden? The knowledge of good and evil made us unfit for the garden, but is the tree of life still available to us?

The local church has been the primary mouthpiece of the resurrection message reflected across the whole spectrum of churches observing the seasons of Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. However, the Church proclaims this mystery through more than sermon and song. Resurrection is proclaimed in leadership decisions, and interaction with the community. It points to new life through building use, budgeting, and ministry to the poor.

Sometimes a church must find ways to proclaim resurrection even when there are signs of institutional decline and death. They are not mutually exclusive. Paul shared the story of his life being poured out and his experience of joy (based on hope) in the same telling. So also is story-sharing a key factor in addressing death and refocusing on new life. Most people in struggling churches are interested in sharing stories that took place inside and outside of the walls of the church. They are also interested in hearing stories that remind them of the vibrant promise of new life that drew them to the church in the first place.

According to Richard Longenecker, “The hope of the righteous in the religion of Israel was simply (1) for a long life, (2) for a good death, (3) for the continuance of one’s ideals in one’s posterity, and (4) for the continued welfare of the nation.”<sup>39</sup> The hope they have is through the continued existence of God’s people.

The first followers of the Christian movement were well acquainted with this view. But they were becoming aware of a new perspective in which Jesus Christ breaks through that which was thought to be the ultimate end and restores life. Suddenly life beyond death was more than an ancestral connection; it now had flesh and blood and the potential for miracles and wonders on earth.

To understand how this impacts a view of the health of the local church, we look at the accounts of the early Church in the book of the Acts. Before long, the movement was ready to enter new life cycles. In Acts 10, Peter received a vision in which God told him not to call anyone profane or unclean that was not so called by God. It compelled him to begin reaching out to the Gentiles with the peace of Christ. Upon returning to Jerusalem, Peter was heavily criticized. Those in the Jerusalem Church were not ready for the next stage of the Church. To start this new life cycle would require a kind of death for them. They had to give up the idea that they had exclusive claim of being God’s people. They had to consider that Jesus’ resurrection had far-reaching implications. Because of the faithfulness of early Christians willing to venture out, the multiplication project was well underway.

Eventually, Paul became the chief church planter and his role in establishing and discipling young faith communities gives us our best understanding of Church health in the first century. Consider the church founded in Ephesus. We know some of its history through the

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<sup>39</sup> Longenecker, *Life in the Face of Death*, 9.

writings of Paul and John. It was a major city set next to a river flowing into the sea. It was a desirable community that was well loved by its founders. After Paul died, John took over leadership, and later Polycarp took over for him. But the community had trouble staying on course. Regardless of exactly when the church ceased to exist, we know that it does not exist in Ephesus today. All that remains of the city are ruins. Does this indicate failure for the Church? No. We must simply look for the millions of other places where the movement has emerged and thrived since the days of the early Church planters.

Through this exploration of life, death and resurrection, we have seen that new life is more than an individual's ticket being punched for heaven. Salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the collection of Jesus' followers here and now. N. T. Wright says that ". . . living as a Christian . . . is a matter of glimpsing that in God's new creation, of which Jesus's resurrection is the start, all that was good in the original creation is reaffirmed."<sup>40</sup> These words offer hope beyond achievement, and root us in Jesus' promise that only in losing ourselves will we find ourselves. The success of the Church depends not on increased effort but a willingness to live into a new reality.

### **The Mandorla**

The mandorla is a symbol of a new reality. It is formed by two overlapping circles that create an almond shaped figure. It serves as a symbol of a new reality that comes from the overlapping (but not the reconciling) of the two shapes. I have long believed that the truest and best reality is rarely on either side, but somewhere in the midst. That has served me well as a

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<sup>40</sup> N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006), 223.



United Methodist,<sup>41</sup> but left me feeling a dis-ease with what feels like a “squishy” ground to stand on. The mandorla allows for a new reality that is formed in the overlapping—but not merging—of two perspectives. It is a symbol of the new ground Jesus gives us to stand on.

I read Luke 17:11–19 (the account of Jesus healing ten lepers) with this concept as a helpful lens. Before Jesus encounters these men, cast out of society on account of their skin condition, we learn about his location: “Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee.”<sup>42</sup>

I picture Jesus with one foot in each place; one foot in Samaria and one foot in Galilee. One foot in the land of the “others” and one in the land of the “insider.” One foot in the land of the unclean, and one in the land of those who thought of themselves as God’s faithful people. Here in the borderland, Jesus reaches into each; his right hand into Samaria and his left hand into Galilee. He crosses his arms, stretching the border of one on top of the other. Where he stands is the mandorla, liminal space, and paradox where change is happening—where passage to a new reality is created. I think this stands as a metaphor for all that Jesus did and taught, but also for who he is. He is a human/divine entry point into the Kingdom of God.

The biggest story Jesus came to set straight is the story of the Kingdom of God that has come near. It is the story of the incarnation. Jesus is with us, and the Kingdom of God is right here as well!

If that sounds a bit at odds with what you’ve learned, it’s because we have developed a simpler story—a story where you simply survive during this life so that later you can thrive in

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<sup>41</sup> United Methodists are known for following the middle way (*via media*) dating back to their Anglican roots. The middle way has “worked” to carry the denomination through years of stalemates, but has recently run into the well-curve of current culture.

<sup>42</sup> Luke 17:11.

the Kingdom of Heaven. That's not untrue, it's just not the whole truth that Jesus proclaimed.

The Kingdom is here, *and* it is coming. We can experience it now, but the fullness of it is yet to come. Why would we choose to merely survive if the Kingdom of God is right at hand?

Jesus was and is the Great ReStoryteller. He answered questions with story. He pointed to truth with story. He offered hope through story. He brought conviction through story. In so doing, Jesus turned assumptions on their head and created a new framework for telling the new story God dreamt for them. What story is God dreaming for you?

In the next section, we will explore what a ReStory process could look like for your church or organization.

## The ReStory Process—A Guide for Teams



Figure 3.1. *ReStory Your Church Process overview*. Created by author. These and the following images are part of the ReStory presentation used with each church or organization team.

Above is the overall process for ReStory. The goal is to get your team to the Implementation stage and connect you with resources to realize God’s dream for your church or organization.

The three-step leadership process below represents stages 2 and 3 above.

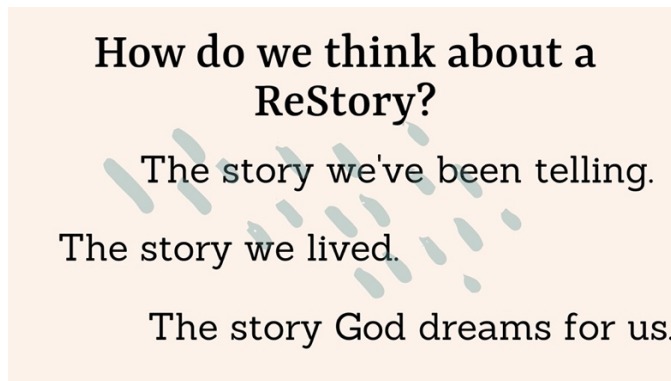


Figure 3.2. *How do we think about a ReStory?* Created by author.

In the following sections, you will be guided through a process that explores the present, past and potential future of your church. It’s time to learn your story, identify legacy points, and discover God’s dream for your church.

## Chapter 3

### The Story We Tell



Figure 3.3. *What story have we been telling?* Created by author.

A pastor was once challenged to answer the question, “What does the community say about your church?” To find an answer, he set out to inquire from random community members. He stood outside the large grocery store directly across the street from the historic church. He asked strangers, “What do you know about the church across the street? What do they do over there?”

The answers ranged from, “I really don’t know,” to, “I wasn’t aware there was a church across the street.”

While that was disheartening to the inquiring pastor, it was helpful to know what messaging (if any) was making its way across the street and how people’s lives in the community were being impacted by the church. The responses caused the leadership of the church to ask, “What are we doing here?” The same kinds of questions can be asked internally. What does our language and focus say about our presence in this community?

After exploring this question in a series of church leadership meetings, a voice spoke up from the back of the room. “I hate the fish fry!” Jimmy was a dedicated church member. He was

referring to the annual event that served as a fundraiser and community gathering every fall.

After exploring the mission of the church and analyzing the event's effectiveness, Jimmy (who spent numerous hours over a hot fryer every fall) realized it wasn't worth it. His honesty led to a great *new* ministry that kept the church on mission.

Why should we spend time on the present or the past when what we want to change is the future? In an age where traditions are diluted or lost on a regular basis, the church is in a unique position to hold and possibly (re)sign the stories of our present and our past.

When reflecting on the state of pastors in America, author Terry Wardle shared, "I don't think I can go into a room of pastors where I don't sense a high degree of ungrieved loss." He notes, "Every loss in life demands an appropriate season of grieving, whether you've lost your favorite person or you've lost your favorite pen. Grieving is a way in which we take the emotional upheaval and bring it up to the Lord."<sup>43</sup> Wherever you find the state of the church or organization you serve, consider lifting it up to the Lord.

A well-known story is told of the man we know as St. Francis of Assisi. He was born around AD 1181 in Italy. As he grew, he had big dreams for his life that left him feeling restless.

Once while wandering aimlessly near his hometown of Assisi, he found himself entering the San Damiano, a small church that desperately needed repair. According to tradition he bowed down before the cross that remained in the middle of a failing building. It was painted with an opened eyed Jesus who seemed to respond to the young man's cry of "Show me what to do with my life!"

The voice said to him, "Go and rebuild my church." And so he did.

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<sup>43</sup> "ChurchPulse Weekly Conversations: Terry Wardle on Facing Ungrieved Losses." n.d. Barna Group. Accessed January 12, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-wardle/>.

His legacy was more than a single rebuilt structure in the hills outside his hometown. His legacy was a movement of devoted Christ followers who brought a renewed energy and belief to the entire Christian Church in all its places and forms. In our churches and organizations, we too may find that sense of loss and even grief at the condition we find ourselves in. But what if God could meet us there and give us a dream?

Questions:

- What does the community say about your church?
- What is the story you are telling as a church?
- What is the tone of your administrative and vision meetings?
- Do you spend more time on conversations about *surviving* or *thriving*?
- What is God saying to you through this look at the stories you are telling today? Is there a spark of a call to rebuild?



Figure 3.4. *Legacy Points*. Created by author. Intended for group processing.

As you process the answers to these questions, we will move into the next part of the ReStory. To do this, we'll first look back and explore the story that you have lived.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE STORY WE LIVED

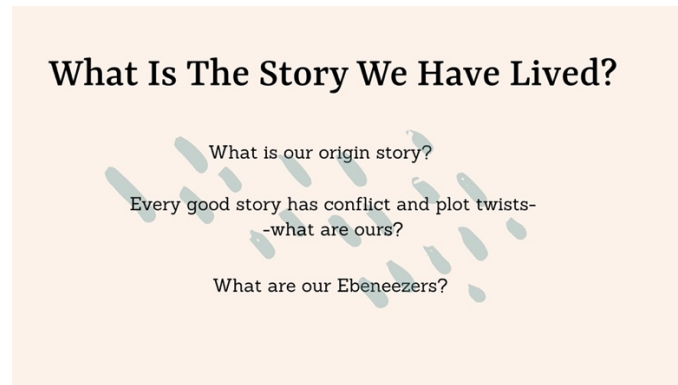


Figure 4.1. *The Story We Have Lived*. Created by author.

I recently inherited some fragments of pre-civil-war US currency that had once belonged to my grandmother. They are placed in-between pieces of paper and carefully stacked in a cigar box. I wasn't sure that they held any real value as tattered as they were. As I researched and discovered currency collectors and dealers, I was asked if there was a story attached to the items in the cigar box. It struck me that there must be more than one story. How many people had handled these bills? What parts of our country did they travel to? The possibilities were endless and exciting. However, I hold no record of their story. I just know they were my grandmothers for some portion of her ninety-five years. But I don't know their story, and because I don't know their story the things themselves appear to lose value.

The history of many churches is told through memorial plaques, photograph walls, and oral tradition. University Church in Wichita, Kansas, would tell the story of how the first gathering was in the living room of the Wentz family home less than a mile from the current location of the church building. The gathering emerged out of a sense of calling to reach the

college community, students, and staff, and to share the love of God in Jesus Christ. It was *for* the community in which it started.

The people of Antioch United Methodist Church in Tennessee found themselves on a road from one building to another. Literally. They had constructed a new facility up the hill from the original location. The members of the church carried historic items, Bibles and songbooks from the pews through middle class neighborhoods to the new location. The church was *for* the community they walked through. It was a hike, but they experienced something of what the ancient Jewish people might have felt as they ascended to Jerusalem and to the temple mount. They tell this story with fondness and pride.

The Glade Meeting House first formally gathered for worship in 1833. But years earlier, in 1810, the foundation was laid for the faith community with a regular prayer gathering in a cabin built on land purchased from Andrew Jackson. The descendants of the first preacher at The Glade Meeting House still reside in the area and participate in worship there. The story they lived as a gathering of believers for generations is a big part of their identity today. They were and are *for* the people of The Glade.

When we go back and explore the history of the church, we often get stuck. As a global movement, we trace the history back to an outbreak of the Holy Spirit in a house in Jerusalem—a story recorded in Acts, chapter 2. The result was an explosion of converts giving their lives to the cause of Christ, forming community, sharing all they had, living a pattern of worship and devotion. It was a beautiful expression of the body of Christ. It also didn't remain so simple. Because this was part of the redemption plan of God's creation, God chose humans to carry out the good news to the whole world. If you haven't noticed, people are not perfect. People develop plans, and their plans often fall apart.



Yet we trace our story back to a time when people dropped dead after they withheld resources from the church (Acts 5:1–10). We harken back to a time when fully devoted disciples of Jesus were stoned to death (Acts 7:54–60). Any look back at the more recent story we have lived will contain a complex array of truths and fables—the good, the bad, and the ugly. An understanding of our background is important though, because as we look back, we can begin to dig up the stories that teach us, remind us, of what God has done in the past, and we begin to look forward with hope and anticipation.

In 1 Samuel, chapter 7, the prophet set up a stone to remind the people of God and their enemies that the Lord had helped them all the way up to that point. He called it *Ebenezer* (“Stone of Help”). God had *just* helped them by confusing their enemies and giving them victory. But the stone was put in place to tell the story looking backwards. The Ebenezer stone of help was a marker of place and a marker of God’s faithfulness. It was a signpost that pointed to something beyond itself.

This might cause us to wonder what good the stone and the story would be to God’s people the next time they faced a terrible enemy if they didn’t also carry the knowledge of God’s faithfulness into the future. God did it once . . . God can do it again. It’s the song of the Psalmist and the Israelites as they climbed the mountain to Jerusalem,

It seemed like a dream, too good to be true,  
 when GOD returned Zion’s exiles.  
 We laughed, we sang,  
 we couldn’t believe our good fortune.  
 We were the talk of the nations—  
 “GOD was wonderful to them!”  
 GOD was wonderful to us;  
 we are one happy people.

And now, GOD, do it again—  
 bring rains to our drought-stricken lives

So those who planted their crops in despair  
 will shout hurrahs at the harvest,  
 So those who went off with heavy hearts  
 will come home laughing, with armloads of blessing.<sup>44</sup>

A modern-day Psalmist has put it like this:

The hour is dark  
 And it's hard to see  
 What You are doin' here in the ruins  
 And where this will lead  
 Oh, but I know  
 That down through the years  
 I'll look on this moment and see Your hand on it  
 And know You were here

Singing, my God did not fail  
 It's the story I'll tell  
 Singing, I know it is well  
 Oh, it's the story I'll tell<sup>45</sup>

A group of pastors who were considering what a knowledge of the past might mean for the future asked the important question: “What is the inheritance that equips new life?” That may be a question that guides us from the past into the future. We will call them “legacy points.”

What are the points in the story—the places where you stopped and remembered, “This far the Lord has helped us”? Is there a place in your story where you stopped remembering? The legacy points are vital—not because they remind you of the glory days in the past, but because they can point you to the glory days ahead. We do what we do as the Church not for ourselves, but for the glory of God.

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<sup>44</sup> Ps. 126 (The Message).

<sup>45</sup> Alton Eugene, Benji Cowart, Naomi Raine, “The Story I’ll Tell,” by. Track 4 on *Volume 3, Part 2* (Maverick City Music, 2020).

Leonard Sweet writes that "if you aren't on a pilgrimage, you're a settler..."<sup>46</sup> No one thinks that they are a settler. But if we spend all our time looking backward as well bemoaning the state of things today, we might find ourselves settling in. The people of God have been at their best when they recognize that the journey is ongoing. We are not experiencing the fullness of the Kingdom of God, so there must be more road ahead!

Here are some questions that we can ask to prepare ourselves to recall the story we lived.

Questions:

- What year did the Church first gather?
- Who were some of the first leaders and members of the Church?
- What did they envision for the life of the Church?
- Who was the Church originally *for*?
- What are the places, moments or words that serve as Ebenezers (legacy points) for your community?



Figure 4.2. Legacy Points. Created by author. Intended for group processing.

After identifying some of the key Legacy Points for your church, we'll listen for what's next on the journey for this expression of God's church.

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<sup>46</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful*. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2009), 72.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE STORY GOD DREAMS FOR US

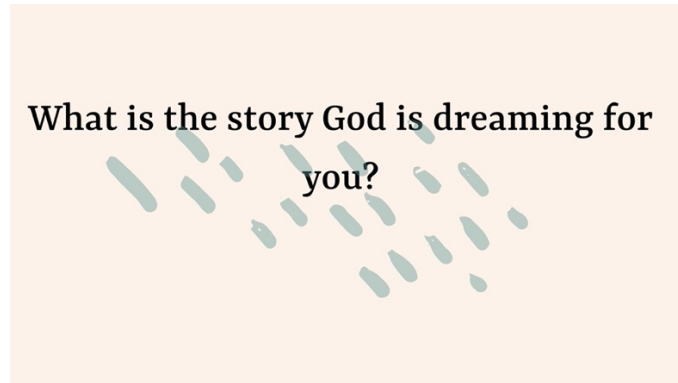


Figure 5.1. *The Story God is Dreaming for You*. Created by author.

“God’s dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.”—Desmond Tutu<sup>47</sup>

After following the ReStory path, there are a few options for what is next. What follows is not an exhaustive list but may provide a helpful starting place when listening and dreaming with each other and with God about the future of your church. What are the possible outcomes?

#### **Option 1: Nothing**

This is really a false option. We are in motion. A living thing is either advancing or retreating. However, to begin to choose between action and inaction, it is essential to notice the frame through which we see the church. Again, we hear the words of Sweet calling us to moving and not settling.

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<sup>47</sup> Desmond Tutu. *God Has a Dream*. (Thorndike, 2005).

Technically, doing nothing is an option. But having made it to the final portion of this process, you hopefully feel invested. It was a necessary journey, and nothing is wasted. It is crucial to know where you are before you set out for somewhere new. Today might not be the right day to take a big step; it might be a good day to hang tight. That's okay. Trust in God's timing. Choosing "nothing" does not have to be resignation. Just be certain this choice lines up with God's dream for you.

### **Option 2: Restart**

The idea of restarting is hardly foreign to us as we're living in a post-2020 world. The realities of this "new" world leveled the playing field in at least one sense. We all know what it means to restart: Restart to in-person worship. Restart to visiting the sick. Restart with online-only worship. Restart, restart, restart! Collectively, we know what it's like to pray for breath to come back to a place or ministry that appeared to be dead.

In their 2018 book, which records a church restart in Washington, DC, authors Dan Turner and Greg Wiens lay out an approach to what we are calling a ReStory. It involves the willing ending of one iteration of a church's life. To identify a church that may be a candidate for a restart, they use this metric: If a church has had seven years of decline, it needs some kind of death.

In their process, an outside board is brought in to effectively close the existing church and prepare for and execute a complete restart.<sup>48</sup> Turner and Wiens explain that a transfer of DNA

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<sup>48</sup> Greg Wiens and Dan Turner. 2018. *Dying to Restart: Churches Choosing a Strategic Death for a Resurrected Life* (Greg Wiens and Dan Turner, 2018).

from the old to the new could be devastating; a restart requires new life. So they ask, “Would you be willing to let someone else get in the driver’s seat?”

The restarts that the authors have led or observed have seen 60–80 percent of the members of the closed church remaining to be a part of the restart. While the approach is bold and may not work in every setting, the process does allow for questions of legacy and history. Still, the pastoral impact of a hard ending could potentially stunt the grief cycle mentioned in Chapter 1.

Home Church in East Nashville is another example of a restart that followed a slightly different path. It is a young community that has sprung to life in an empty United Methodist church building in East Nashville. Previously known as Inglewood UMC, the building sat vacant for one year after its closure. As a pastor, I was connected to Home Church when it moved into the building. I walked the halls and prayed in the early days. The old Inglewood office looked like a scene from the *Left Behind* book and film series. It was almost as if the people of Inglewood UMC had suddenly vanished, leaving behind staplers and Sunday school curriculum.

What had happened there? It would be easier to answer that question if the remnant members of Inglewood UMC could have shared their story so that some of their legacy points might have been identified to live on through Home Church. One or two members of the closed church came around initially to see this new thing that God was doing in the building that once housed their home church. They were happy for the new life in a place that had meant so much to them, but they understandably did not feel a part of it.

Prior to its closure, it was clear that Inglewood UMC could no longer represent the rapidly evolving community as many of its members drove in from another part of town to attend worship. Today, Home Church is reaching the spiritually homeless people in its community.

Young adults are a key demographic for this church that includes artists and other creatives who are the fastest growing demographic in the community. Home Church is *for* the community.

### **Option 3: Repurpose**

A repurpose recognizes the value in the assets, location, and history of a faith community. There are a handful of groups that have formed around the idea that resources of the local church are often underutilized. These groups are searching for a faithful response. Wesley Community Development (WCD),<sup>49</sup> located in North Carolina, is a shining example. In the Western part of the state, United Methodist churches occupy 14 million square feet of space on 7600 acres, all with a tax value near 1.5 billion dollars. WCD has developed a process for analyzing property usage and assembling highly qualified teams to reimagine the church's impact in the community. WCD dreams of creating areas of development that eliminate food deserts, meets the need for affordable housing, creates commercial space and the church remains at the center of it all.

Trinity Community Commons (TCC)<sup>50</sup> is another example. Nate Paulk was brought into Trinity UMC as a community development professional in 2013. In the years since, he has created an organization (TCC) that connects with the community and leverages the “sacred space” of the church to meet the needs of the surrounding community. Like much of Nashville,

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<sup>49</sup> “Wesley Community Development.” n.d. Wesley Community Development, accessed December 31, 2021, <https://wesleycdc.com>.

<sup>50</sup> “Trinity Community Commons.” n.d. Trinity Community Commons. Accessed December 31, 2021. <https://www.trinitycommunitycommons.org/>.

the neighborhoods around TCC are changing rapidly, sometimes creating greater hardships for the existing residents.

Trinity UMC officially ceased to exist as a church in 2020. Historically, it had been a place where neighbors would go to vote or get vaccines. There were many places where legacy could have been claimed within the church but, through a seven-year process, the church fell into survival mode and stayed separate from TCC. This may be a case where a ReStory narrative can be uncovered in hindsight but not with the members of the now defunct church. Today TCC is reengaging their plan to bolster outreach into the surrounding community.

You won't find West Nashville United Methodist Church (WNUMC) operating today, even though the building still sits on the north side of Charlotte Avenue in a rapidly developing area of West Nashville. The church dates back to 1888. As a commuting graduate student in 1999, I attended a worship service at West Nashville. I returned in 2021 to perform a wedding in the same space that is now an event center called Clementine. The church building was sold by the United Methodist Church in 2016. Since that time, property values and population numbers continue to rise in the area. A desire to reach that community continues to grow.

WNUMC no longer exists, but the spiritual needs of the community do. It is possible that an endless series of studies would have pointed to the same decision to sell the property—it might have been the best decision. But what if we had worked to ReStory the church's next chapter? What if the selling of the building was part of telling the next chapter of the legacy story of WNUMC? Could we have created affordable housing units with a chapel at its core? Could we have repurposed or restarted the church? Clearly these questions are an exercise in frustration; the building has been sold—it's done. But these questions might help us to learn



from the experience. When repurposing is an option, the possibilities to be the church and reach the community seem almost endless.

#### **Option 4: Reallocation of Resources**

Dodson Chapel was in the path of a deadly tornado that ripped through Nashville in March of 2020. The church had been in a period of decline and had recently sold some property in hopes of keeping the church afloat. Dodson Chapel was known in the community for its daycare/preschool program that met the childcare needs of lower income families. Supporting the school is what the church did best.

The 2020 tornado destroyed the buildings of Dodson Chapel. After a period of grief and discernment, a decision was made not to rebuild the church building but to sell the property. In a decision that honored the passion, calling, and legacy of Dodson Chapel, a one-million-dollar endowment was established to provide for the childcare costs of the community. Dodson Chapel was *for* its community.

Any of these options require a team of experts and consultants that might include contractors, real estate brokers, financial and legal professionals, architects, civic representatives, and so forth. For the average church or organization, that feels like a lot to manage. The good news is that there is a steady stream of church-related organizations that are ready to help and manage this process. The ReStory project is designed to help churches picture a future that is worth the effort.

### Other Available Resources

The work to address the needs of a church in decline is not a new field, but the varied approaches to beginning conversations of current reality and potential future vision have seen varied results. Here are two of those approaches.

#### Strength Finders

Adapted for faith communities in *Living your Strengths*,<sup>51</sup> Strength Finders identifies an organization's strengths and draws leadership around an increased focus of what the church does best. This resource can complement the legacy point discernment, but risks leading towards the old story and away from a ReStory.

#### Natural Church Development<sup>52</sup>

This approach employs a “minimum factor strategy” for church health. Working with the Natural Church Development process, leaders will focus on weakness and areas of growth to improve. If a church has seen great success in missional outreach to the community, but little fruit in evangelism, they would learn from what they do well and plan to improve on the areas of weakness.

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<sup>51</sup> Albert L. Winseman, Donald O Clifton, and Curt Liesveld. *Living Your Strength : Discover Your God-given Talents, and Inspire Your Community* (Washington, D.C.: Gallup Press, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Christian A. Schwarz. *The ABC's of Natural Church Development*. (Carol Stream, IL: Churchsmart Resources, 1998).

These and other tools tend to focus on current reality and can easily feed into the survival/preservation mentality of an organization. They may, however, be helpful tools within the ReStory process.

Question:

- Considering the Legacy Points identified in the first two steps of ReStorying, and the current needs of your community, what story can you imagine God might have in mind for your church or organization next?

### **What is Possible?**

Keep Track of all the ideas that emerge through prayer and conversation. As a group, select the top 3–5 possibilities.

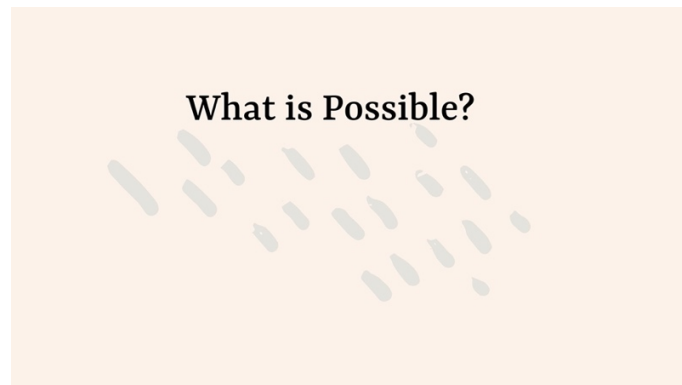


Figure 5.2. *Legacy Points*. Created by author. Intended for group processing.

### **Story Pitch**

As you imagine God's dream for your church or organization, break into smaller groups and use the form below to present the possibility to the whole team.

**STORY PITCH**

What is Possible? The Big Idea.

Who is it for?

What Need, Problem, or Opportunity does it Address?

How do we know it's working?

**STORY PITCH**

What does it look like? How does it work?

Figure 5.3. The Story Pitch. Created by author. Based on and adapted from LUMA Institute concepts. <https://www/luma-institute.com/>.

After each group has pitched, commit to pray over these possibilities. When the group has come to consensus around one or two of the stories, the ReStory team will help to connect you with appropriate partners for next steps. Congratulations! May the story that God dreams for your church or organization be fulfilled and bring God glory!

## ASSESSMENT

- Completion of the Introduction, Theological Background and Semiotic Approach to the ReStory process, including a guide for the three ReStory meetings for church leaders.

Each of these steps has been completed and reviewed by a professional editor. The introduction, theological background, and semiotic approach to the ReStory process have been heavily influenced by the coursework in pursuit of a DMin in Semiotics, Church and Culture at Portland Seminary of George Fox University.

The introduction is a response to the unfolding NPO. It has been met with a sense of grace and appreciation from church members and leaders alike. The initial consultation (Step 1)<sup>53</sup> at Connection UMC and Antioch UMC have produced positive feedback from tired church members. When communicated verbally, the tone of the introduction has received positive feedback like “relatable,” “hopeful,” and “non-threatening.” The introduction begins with a personal tone and is intentionally less academic in hopes of convincing the reader that the goal of the project is to see leaders make decisions for the future of the church or organization based on future hope rather than survival.

The theological background of life, death and resurrection is a natural connection for Christian churches—even those that may have drifted off course. One church leader even took a moment to celebrate death: “We need a way to celebrate death like you see in the Mexican culture. It’s not all doom and gloom among a people who believe in new life.”

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<sup>53</sup> See figure in Chapter 3 of the ReStory project.

The good news at the center of Christian teaching is the possibility of new life. When asked to apply that teaching to difficult conversations about institutional survival, church leaders have been able to engage in productive work.

In an early discovery session for the ReStory project, one participant identified the need for more helpful language when speaking to a church member who had been battling cancer for several years. At the point of a terminal diagnosis, she said, “I’ve been trying to figure out how to live for so long that I don’t know how to die.” Individuals and organizations alike face the need for a ReStory and through life, death and resurrection, God has provided that possibility.

Semiotics is best explained first through example. The image of the Jackson magnolia tree<sup>54</sup> has been a semiotic hook for audiences in each stage of the project’s development. As the story of an unwieldy tree—anchored in place by cables—is told, leaders begin to look for the signs of cables and wires that are “holding up” their church or organization. They experience a sense of recognition in the image of the tree, as well as an understanding of fatigue. One denominational leader in a design session for the ReStory project expressed that his churches often found catharsis in simply being able to say, “I’m tired.”

The guide for leaders will continue to go through revisions as the process is multiplied. To date, leaders have engaged in the storytelling process with a high level of honesty. The invitation to tell their story has proven to be both empowering and challenging.

- Test ReStory process with one to three churches in the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference.

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<sup>54</sup> See Chapter 1 of the ReStory Project.

We have engaged in the ReStory process with two churches with differing degrees of sustained engagement. The first test church is in the eastern portion of the Nashville Metro Area. It consists of members and property from two United Methodist churches that recently began to merge. The attendance numbers of both churches have seen decline in recent years, and they face financial difficulties. The properties of both churches are highly valued, and developers are eager to purchase all or some of the land.

These church members engaged in the initial consultation and individuals from the team were highly responsive. When a small team of outsiders walk into a church council meeting, they often face a sense of resistance and skepticism. Church members might think, “We’ve been here before!” But after sharing the image of the Jackson magnolia tree, the table was set for “What if...” conversations. Some division within church leadership stalled follow-up conversations.

The second test church is also located in Metropolitan Nashville area. This church is in an area where demographics have changed drastically in the last twenty-five years. The building facility has thousands of square feet, while the worshiping congregation continues to decline with less than fifty in attendance. The building is becoming a burden for them. A non-profit organization had inquired about purchasing the building, which led to a potential turning-point moment for the church.

This church is currently engaged in the second of the three conversations to prepare for a ReStory. Comments from the initial meeting revealed a gap of knowledge between the story the church tells itself and the story the community might see and understand to be true. It was a moment of reflection that set the stage to dig into the story of the church’s history and legacy points.

- Develop a team to promote the ReStory process and identify candidate churches or organizations.

The ReStory team consists of myself (a pastor in the Tennessee/Western Kentucky Conference of the UMC), the founder of a nationally recognized non-profit that builds tiny houses on church property to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness and in need of transitional housing after medical treatment, and the chairman of the Conference Finance and Administration for the TWK Conference. This team has met monthly since 2020 to navigate conversations on multiple levels in hopes of creating better stories for our churches. We have met with ministry leaders, real-estate brokers, conference administration staff, the bishop of the TWK Conference, and other interested parties.

We continue to engage with the test churches, we have developed a growing list of potential projects within the conference, and we advocate for conference involvement in the ReStory process. Engagement with those within the conference structure has created the biggest obstacle to swift and complete implementation of the ReStory project. It is evident, as we work to guide local churches in this process, all levels of the church organization are experiencing a need to reimagine God's future.



## PROJECT LAUNCH PLAN

### NPO

Provide a framework for churches at a crucial turning point or near closure to “ReStory” their church and consider legacy options for their future, including a restart, repurpose, or reallocation of resources.

The ReStory project began as a kind of hospice program for dying churches. My context is in the Tennessee Western Kentucky (TWK) Conference of the United Methodist Church. I am a pastor at a growing church that is often perceived as a sign of hope for struggling churches. The working model for revitalization has been centered on a learning and importing paradigm. Under that model, denominational leaders had been showing frustration at their inability to prune what had been ineffective churches. The thought was that if churches could simply be closed, sold and resources redirected, the mission of the church might thrive. What I discovered is that a story-based approach can guide those conversations in a less threatening, more legacy-affirming way.

We must talk about the reality of death and resurrection, legacy and purpose in ways that are informed by the hope that we have in Christ. A ReStory asks three basic questions: What story are we telling ourselves? What story did we live in the past? What story does God dream for our future? By involving the church in a process of storytelling, we can increase the level of buy-in and belief among church leaders and members. As the ReStory project has developed, it has become increasingly focused on adjusting the language used to talk about churches in decline.

## **Audience**

The audience for the ReStory project is the local church or organization that finds itself in a season of transition and possibly even facing closure. It is starting with churches within the Tennessee Western Kentucky (TWK) Conference of the UMC. A small team within the conference has been working to identify churches that are likely candidates for a ReStory and has been engaging these congregations in conversations. The team has built awareness among church leaders in a way that is steadily building the number of inquiries. The area bishop and two of five district superintendents are in close conversations with the team about the development of this process. Eventually, the entire cabinet will be the key source of referrals.

While the initial audience for the ReStory project is made up of churches within the TWK Conference, this process has potential for application in other settings, other denominations, and other Christian organizations.

### **Development Timeline**

1. Antioch Church will have completed the first three steps of the ReStory process by April of 2022, and will enter the implementation stage (restart, repurpose, reallocation of resources) with appropriate ministry partners.
2. Second and third churches will re-engage in the ReStory process by June of 2022.
3. Refinements to the process will begin in April of 2022 including feedback sought from stakeholders in the design stage and from early ReStory church leaders.
4. A report to representatives of the Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference of the United Methodist Church will be made by June of 2022.
5. A proven ReStory guide for church leaders will be professionally designed and produced for presentation to the General Board of Higher Education of the UMC and/or TWKC of the UMC by September 2022.
6. A proposal will be pitched to one or more publishers in hopes of expanding this project into an approachable and effective book for church and organization leadership teams. This will be done by Spring of 2023.

### **Iteration Process**

Due to the individual nature of each church, no two ReStory projects will look identical. We will continue the process of Reflect, Adjust, Do (RAD) after each contact with ReStory churches at a monthly check-in. At the end of each year, we will review the entire scope of the process and make adjustments that account for new knowledge.

I will continue to hone the language and images used in the Introduction, Theological Background and Semiotic Approach to the ReStory process. While the introduction and theological approach will remain consistent anchors for communicating the vision for this project, updated images, language and metaphors are a part of the semiotic approach. The project team will also need to pay attention to the signs of the times.

After the refinement of multiple iterations, I plan to expand this project into a book that can be used by leadership teams of churches and organizations to help them to ReStory.

## APPENDIX A—MILESTONE 1: THE NPO CHARTER

### **Personal Research Manifesto**

Research methods of the NPO will involve a process of inductive reasoning that requires a posture of openness to others and to the possibility of failure.

### **NPO Statement**

Dying churches present an opportunity to inform and resource new churches through a process of legacy planning.

### **NPO Scope**

Knowledge gained from a widespread audience will be applied to United Methodist Churches in Middle Tennessee. Churches demonstrating the characteristics of decline and death will be a focus. These characteristics include a lack of effective leadership, decline in congregational health, lack of financial resources and absence of community engagement.<sup>1</sup> I will not focus on church revitalization.

Costs will be managed by showing the potential application to the current ecclesial situation in Tennessee. This will require cooperation between existing leadership groups ranging from the local church to the bishop's leadership team.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Wiens and Dan Turner, *Dying to Restart: Churches Choosing a Strategic Death for a Resurrected Life* (Greg Wiens and Dan Turner, 2018).

## **NPO Context**

The NPO context includes the Tennessee Episcopal Area. This region covers the Western two-thirds of Tennessee and the extreme Western portion of Kentucky. A rich history of Methodism is found in this area, including visits from Frances Asbury and other prominent figures in the foundational work of what is now the UMC.

Many of our churches in steep decline or near death have been in existence for several decades and some for over one hundred or even two hundred years. They exist in all demographic settings. They are rural, urban and suburban. They represent areas of reduced population and areas of regentrification. Demographics have shifted in many of these locations, and the church has struggled to reach their new neighbors. The age of participants will likely skew towards seventy-plus but are not a monolithic group. The seventy-plus age group is generally less inclined to accept rapid change.

## **Root Causes**

Root causes reflect each angle of the NPO. Effective leadership is needed in times of great change; there is an unhealthy attachment to the past, and an opportunity for new life.

## **The Need to Lead Through Transition**

Leaders have been trained in an institutional survival environment. A change in leadership structure and philosophy would allow for permission giving and missional passion.

### Attachment to the Past

The stress of decline can lead to the glorification of the past. We become attached to things that are not at the heart of our original calling. The survival of buildings and traditions can trump outward focused discipleship.

### New Life Is Possible Through New DNA

Churches in decline within a denominational structure represent a hopeful future for the church of Jesus Christ. Through their legacy and other resources, new churches can be born. For new life to begin, something must die.

### Discovery Session Stakeholders

- Future campus pastor
- Pastoral Intern
- Pastor of church in decline
- Member of closed church
- Pastor of Hispanic/English speaking church
- Pastor of Suburban church forming new campus
- Pastor/former District Superintendent

### One-on-One Interviews

- Author on church restarts
- President of community development organization
- Director of a church leadership center

## **Academic Resources**

### **Church Restarts**

Others asking questions about church restarts and legacy planning:

- Dan Turner, Northwest Community Church and Author of Restart
- Lisa Greenwood, Texas Methodist Foundation
- Cate Nollert, Liminal Grace
- Joel Giland, Wesley Community Development
- Dan Jackson, Nehemiah Project, FL

### **Church Leadership and Higher Education**

Reevaluate how our leadership structures deter us from legacy planning and restarting.

- Greg Berquist, General Board of Higher Education, UMC
- Thom Ranier, Founder of Church Answers

### **Grief**

Grief is a part of the discussion about decline and death.

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Psychiatrist and Author
- Erik Ericson, Psychologist and Author



## APPENDIX B—MILESTONE 2: NPO TOPIC EXPERTISE ESSAY

### INTRODUCTION

#### SECTION 1: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The scripture is not abounding with examples of church closures. We do read about the struggles of early churches, but less about their ending. To get to a biblical understanding of endings, we need to look at the challenges that legacy churches are facing. Legacy churches are dealing with questions of life and death as they consider historical and future hope. These same themes of life, death, and resurrection reflect the scope of redemption history. The overarching story of the Bible has been formed to this rhythm. New Testament churches were shaped by various understandings of death and life after death.

#### **Themes of Death and Resurrection in the Biblical World**

##### Genesis 2 and 3

The theme of death is introduced in Genesis 2 and 3. God spoke a warning of impending death if Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent picks up on this recently introduced fear: “You will not certainly die” (Genesis 3:4). And so begins the struggle of self-preservation in a world where death is a possibility.

##### Romans 5:12

Among the things redeemed throughout the Biblical narrative is death itself. In Romans 5:12, Paul writes about the origin of sin and death as laid out in Genesis: “Therefore, just as sin

entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way, death came to all people, because all sinned.”

If we ended Paul’s words here, we would have the prevailing view of death. It is humankind’s fault, and we are doomed. We might as well “eat and drink for tomorrow we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32, Isaiah 22:13). But Paul didn’t leave it there, he continued: “Just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:21).

A new thing is taking place through Jesus, but that new thing echoes the prophet Isaiah<sup>1</sup> and foreshadows the words of the risen Christ in Revelation 21:1–5.

### 1 Corinthians 15

Resurrection is how God redeems death by restoring life. In resurrection, the body continues to move on towards its true destination. To the church in Corinth, Paul answered the questions that were coming his way:

“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:35–37, 42–44)

### Death Introduced

The second creation narrative and the story of the fall are foundational to an understanding of our relationship with God. According to Genesis 2, Adam was created to till the soil and be fed. “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 43:18-19 (NIV)

take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden” (Genesis 2:15–16).

The text describes a world where there is no fear of death. Often it is fear itself that separates humanity from a healthy pursuit of God’s purpose for us. In Genesis 2, we briefly see an environment where Adam is consumed by the idea of holy work and plentiful sustenance. It is worth noting that God speaks the first word of death.

God said, “But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Genesis 2:17). Now that the idea of death has been introduced, the serpent can run with it. The idea of life and death is brought into question: Is death really a possibility?

Adam and Eve chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the consequences followed. Their pursuit of God-like knowledge inspired by the whisperings of the serpent led to the discovery that they were naked, not that they had become like gods.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the truth exposed was their dependency on God. With these consequences came blame. Was it the snake’s fault? Eve’s? Adam’s? *God’s*? The initial finger pointing may be the first example of an avoidance of the reality of death.

After the Fall, Adam and Eve were sent away from the garden to keep them from immortality (Genesis 3:22–24). Death, then, was a result of sin and a condition that would only be remedied by humankind remaining in the garden and eating from the tree of life. The result of eating from the tree of life would be immortality that they would claim for themselves—not as a gift from their creator. We were meant to experience death resulting from sin, but this would not be the end of the story.

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<sup>2</sup> James L. Mays, *Harper Collins Bible Commentary* (Harper: San Francisco, 2000), 87.

### Redeeming Death in Romans 5:12

In Paul's only letter written to a community he did not create, we find the most essentially doctrinal teachings. With personal distance from the audience, his writing is more easily applied. However, Paul was addressing a real community with a profound experience of Jesus. He longed to visit them and encourage them. Some topics are conspicuously omitted, but the letter to the Romans appears to be an attempt to capture the core of Christian teaching. Chapter 5 is part of a lesson on the role of faith in our salvation. Paul—who knows the law as well as anyone—is sharing a new view of the life God desires for His people. It's a view fixed in grace that leads to life.

In Romans 5:12, Paul reminds his audience that the sin which was introduced through Adam is now the human condition “because all sinned,” and that death follows sin. Therefore, we will all experience death. What could sound like words of hopelessness are redeemed by faith through the grace of Jesus Christ: “Just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:21).

Paul writes of his own death in his letter to the Philippians: “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me” (Philippians 2:17–18). He is living out this belief that through death he will find life.

### Resurrection and New Life: The Legacy of Christ

In a more intimate letter, Paul wrote to Timothy with hope that the true legacy of the Jesus movement might continue through him. He wrote, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (2 Timothy 1:1–2).

Timothy was not a biological relative of Paul, but Paul thought of the future work that would outlast him as the seed of his work carrying on much like a father to a son.

Near the end of this same letter, Paul writes,

I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6–8)

It is part of the human condition to be concerned with the legacy we are leaving behind us and the legacy that will go before us. We see that concern for legacy reach its rightful conclusion in Jesus. It is Jesus who will place the crown of righteousness on Paul’s head. The legacy neither starts nor ends with Paul.

Leonard Sweet says this about Jesus' legacy: “Jesus didn't leave us any writings, any organization, any structure, any icons. Jesus left us with one thing: himself in the form of his body, a community that shares stories of healing and love.”<sup>3</sup> The body that Jesus left us (the Church) is in transition from more closely resembling an earthly body to becoming his (Christ’s, our head) resurrected body. Paul’s description of our personal resurrection highlights that nature of the body of the church.

“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. . . . The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:35–37, 42–44)

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2009), 14.

Resurrection is how God reverses death as first introduced in Genesis 3. Ultimately, the resurrection hope communicated by Paul leads to the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation 21. All elements of the fall—sin, death, and pain—are removed.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

### **Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments**

The themes of life, death, and resurrection are at the center of God’s *hesed* love for creation. This pattern of grace and redemption is reflected in the life of the church. The church as instituted by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit was meant to have life; it was meant to thrive. Individual churches—even entire denominations—are susceptible to death. But through death, the Jesus movement will continue to experience resurrection.

To face the reality of death, the church may need to retrace some of the steps through the Eden narrative. Is death possible? Could it be that the denial of the possibility of death has become yet another kind of sin that prevents life in the garden? The knowledge of good and evil made us unfit for the garden, but is the tree of life still available to us?

The local church has been the primary mouthpiece for the resurrection message reflected across the whole spectrum of churches observing the seasons of Advent, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. However, the church proclaims this mystery through more than sermon and song. Resurrection is proclaimed in leadership decisions and interaction with the community. It points to new life through building use and budgeting, and ministry to the poor.

Sometimes a church must find ways to proclaim resurrection even when they are experiencing the signs of institutional decline and death. They are not mutually exclusive. Paul

shared his own story of his life being poured out and his experience of joy based on hope in the same telling. Story-sharing is a key factor in addressing death and refocusing on new life. People in dying churches are interested in sharing stories that took place inside and outside the walls of the church. They are also interested in hearing stories that remind them of the vibrant promise of new life that drew them to the church in the first place. The resurrection in Christ as proclaimed by Paul is a possibility for individuals, the church, and the world. Legacy churches may be well positioned to point to life for generations to come.

## SECTION 2: TOPIC HISTORY AND KEY VOICES

### **Topic History**

When studying church history as it relates to descriptors like “closed,” one finds that this term is most often tied to a sense of establishment (as in “closed cannon”). Its use is almost more likely to describe completion (i.e., “This community is complete.”). Today, the phrase “closed church” invokes images of a church that is exclusive or shut-off from diverse views. So how do we talk about churches that have closed their doors for good? Business and leadership resources that address a failure to thrive or a waning life cycle are plentiful; however, sources that speak of churches near death are rare. This reality is reflected in conversations with Key Voices (see below). But first, we will dig into church health in the Biblical era and throughout church history.

### The Church in the Biblical Era

When it comes to debates about ecclesiology in the modern era, a standard view is that we should function more like the New Testament church. What was the New Testament church

like, and what was its context? The church grew out of and was influenced by Judaism. Judaism didn't include teachings on how to close a church, but it did have a particular view on *death* that is informative. Judaism viewed death through the lens of a future hope expressed in covenant to Abraham. They saw their salvation through the existence of offspring. Legacy was their approach to eternal life.<sup>4</sup> In this view, physical death is final. According to Richard Longenecker, "The hope of the righteous in the religion of Israel was simply (1) for a long life, (2) for a good death, (3) for the continuance of one's ideals in one's posterity, and (4) for the continued welfare of the nation."<sup>5</sup> The hope they have is through the continued existence of God's people.

The first followers of the Christian movement were well acquainted with this view of death. But they were becoming aware of a view of death in which Jesus Christ breaks through that which was thought to be the ultimate end and restores life. Suddenly, life beyond death was more than an ancestral connection; now they had flesh and blood and the potential for miracles and wonders on earth.

To understand how this impacts a view of life and death of the Church itself, we look at the accounts of the early Church in the book of the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of Paul. Clearly, the history of the Christian church goes back to Peter (the rock upon which Jesus said he'd build the church in Matthew 16:18). It was Peter who preached the first post-ascension sermon during a Pentecost whirlwind, as depicted in Acts 2. The movement quickly spread as numbers were added, communities were formed, and patterns of work and worship were established for this newly formed church.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Life in The Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Longenecker, 9.



Before long, the movement was ready to enter new life cycles. In Acts 10, Peter received a vision in which God told him not to call anyone profane or unclean. It compelled him to begin reaching out to the Gentiles with the peace of Christ.

Upon returning to Jerusalem, Peter was heavily criticized. Those in the Jerusalem church were not ready for the next stage of the Church. To start this new life cycle would require a kind of death for them. They had to give up the idea that they had an exclusive claim of being God's people. They had to consider that Jesus' resurrection had far-reaching implications. Because of the faithfulness of early Christians, willing to venture out, the multiplication project was well under way.

Eventually, Paul became the chief church planter and his role in establishing and discipling young faith communities gives us our best understanding of church health in the first century. Consider the church founded in Ephesus. We know some of its history through the writings of Paul and John. It was a major city set next to a river flowing into the sea. It was a desirable community that was well loved by its founders. After Paul died, John took over leadership, and then Polycarp took over for him. But the community had trouble staying on course. Regardless of exactly when the church ceased to exist, we know that it does not exist in Ephesus today. All that remains of the city are ruins. Does this indicate failure for the church planter? As far as we know, none of the early church plants are still around today.

### Death and the Church Throughout Church History

After centuries of growth and power struggles, the church entered an era of increased schism, which has carried through to this day. The Reformation set into motion an instability in the highly structured Catholic Church. If new things can come from old things, what does that

say about control and survival of the entrenched church? During the Reformation, where the unified church was once thought to be too big to fail, schism created an environment for decentralized power, opening the door for local churches to experience death.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, is known more for starting churches than closing them. He is well known for having claimed that the world was his parish, meaning that he would preach out in the fields and streets. Surely some other Anglican priests felt that the movement started by John and his brother Charles had a negative effect on the Church of England (if not numerically, then in terms of morale). He had many faults, but he was adamant that, although he earned money for his writings during his lifetime, he wanted to die penniless. He wrote these words in his journal: “If I leave behind me ten pounds . . . you and all mankind bear witness against me, that I have lived and died a thief and a robber.”<sup>6</sup> It is reported that when he died, he had only a few coins in his pocket and on his nightstand.

He loved the Church wherever it may be found, and although he was not keen on failure, it would bear to reason that he would ask the Church to die without wealth. Like other reformers, Wesley spoke harshly about the practices of the Church, but he still believed that the Church was God’s instrument to bring life and hope to the world. However, he did not seem to want to speak of a Church that could die.

This reality has been confirmed through the modern existence of liturgies for the closing of a local church. For instance, the United Methodist denomination uses the language of *leave taking* as opposed to closure or death when it comes to locking the doors of the building.<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 422.

<sup>7</sup> “An Order for the Leave-Taking of a Church Building and An Order for Disbanding a Congregation” accessed January 2020, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/an-order-for-the-leavetaking-of-a-church-building>.

language appears at once a denial about the current reality and a hopeful message about the future.

What bridges the world of the Bible and Church history up to today is a wide range of views on death that become jumbled in our practical theology. Again, Longenecker lays out five attitudes towards death which come out of the historical traditions:

1. Death is an illusion—a form of dualism that denies death as a reality.
2. Death is a perfectly natural phenomenon—giving in to the inevitable. Future hope is in making the most of this life working towards a legacy.
3. Death is the release of one's immortal soul—stems from Plato's dualism with a continued hope in some sort of reincarnation.
4. Death ends human existence, yet there is hope in God—Death is the end, yet there is a God who may oversee the continuation of things that were important to the deceased and a general hope of restoration in the future.
5. Death is the last enemy, but the resurrection of Christ provides Life—recognizes the reality of death but connects hope of resurrection with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

### **Key Voices**

The key voices in this specific field of study are less established than in other areas of ecclesiology. The people below are current figures who have all witnessed the church revitalization efforts that chased at the heels of the church growth movement of the 1990s. Each of them has practical experience on the local level that informs their efforts on a systems level.

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<sup>8</sup> Longenecker, *Life in The Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, 16.

They each have financial backing from interested parties. One is still pastoring a restart church, two are working on the regional level to impact the stewardship of church resources, one is the vice president of a leading seminary, and the other is a church consultant on the international level.

### Dan Turner

Dan Turner is co-author of a book called *Dying to Restart*. The book chronicles a unique approach to bridging the gap between death and resurrection for a local church. The church was National Memorial Church of God, which opened in 1942 just three miles north of the White House. The setting may have been a challenge for the church. Sometime in the 1970s, the National Memorial fund began to slip. For so many churches, decline is a long, almost imperceptible, road. This church was no different. Turner and his partner Greg Wiens set out to offer another trajectory, another life for the church.

In a sense, the work pursued by Turner seems to shorten the time a church is likely to spend in purgatory on the brink of death. The centerpiece of his work is revealed through first-hand experience with a church in Washington, DC. There, Turner guided the remnant of an existing congregation through the process of assessment, discernment, and ultimately a death/restart. The assessment approach employed by Turner looked for these key indicators of whether a church was a candidate for revitalization or restart: “Churches that have effective leadership, congregational health, financial resources and community engagement should engage in a revitalization rather than restarting in order to bring renewed health and multiplication to the

church.”<sup>9</sup> These areas of effective leadership—congregational health, financial resources and community engagement—would all have to be present for Turner to recommend revitalization.

A key benefit of Turner’s work is that hope is placed before the dying congregation from the very beginning of the process. When a restart is chosen as the direction for the existing church, an outside board takes over ownership and decision making. Some key markers of Turner’s work are:

- Story telling—listening and sharing stories of hope
- Crafting the church’s history through the lens of the life cycle
- In a restart, leadership of the church must be given over to an outside body
- A kind of death required in a church that has experienced seven years of decline
- Asking, “What can we save of the culture of the dying church?”—identifying the legacy
- The experience of institutional death deterring the church from allowing the same circumstance to evolve the same way—pointing to a future of restarts and multiplication
- 60–80 percent of former members staying for the new work

These elements reinforce the idea that “the goal of a restart is not to replace the old version with an updated version of the previous church. Rather, the goal of a restart is to create a wholly different body with holy different DNA.”<sup>10</sup>

Turner highlights the stark reality that churches tend to hold on for many years past their effectiveness. It caused him to ask, “Without a catastrophic financial crisis, would this church

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<sup>9</sup> Greg Wiens and Dan Turner, *Dying to Restart: Churches Choosing a Strategic Death for a Resurrected Life* (Greg Wiens and Dan Turner, 2018), 120.

<sup>10</sup> Wiens and Turner, *Dying to Restart*, 113.

really be willing to change?”<sup>11</sup> Instead of stress and anxiety driving the discussion, what if there was a vision for Kingdom vitality beyond the current reality?

### Lyn Sorrels and Joel Gilland

Rev. Lyn Sorrels is the team leader of the Church Legacy Initiative (CLI) in the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. CLI receives funding through the Duke Endowment. Rev. Sorrels’ role is to help assess the health of congregations and guide them through conversations that articulate the hoped-for legacy of the Church. The assessment leads to a decision point of revitalization versus death and restart.

Initially this program asked churches to self-refer. The services of CLI were offered to churches that were struggling to thrive. In recent years, the conference has begun to initiate these conversations in ways that cultivates a greater sense of urgency. They have gone from a soft approach to a harder approach deemed necessary by the rapidly changing culture and the call to stewardship.

According to Sorrels, CLI compiles data from agencies of the United Methodist Church to assess church health and vitality. From this data, they form a list of churches that are likely candidates for legacy conversations. They use the following markers to identify legacy churches:

1. Churches with an average worship attendance of thirty or less. (This number could be higher based on the size and cost of building upkeep.)
2. Churches whose average worship attendance has declined by fifty percent or more during the previous ten years.
3. Churches whose offerings do not cover their expenses. This is a key indicator of financial distress.

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<sup>11</sup> Wiens and Turner, *Dying to Restart*, 233.

Sorrels says, “These data points help to provide quantitative analysis about the health (or lack thereof) of the churches and are what we rely on to identify our initial list of possible legacy churches.”<sup>12</sup>

After the CLI has assessed that a church is ready to be a part of a major change, a non-profit called Wesley Community Development (WCD), led by President Joel Gilland, meets with them and develops a plan for the future of the property. This can result in a wide range of outcomes including the repurposing of part or all of the building, the outright sale of the building, or a closure followed by a restart. The stated mission of WCD encapsulates this:

Wesley Community Development is a nonprofit that helps North Carolina churches develop or repurpose real estate to best meet church and community needs. Wesley helps congregations re-think how property that is not being fully used can better be deployed—or how new property can be developed—to serve church and community purposes.”<sup>13</sup>

Gilland has researched the amount of square footage owned and operated by the United Methodist Church in Western North Carolina. He found that 12 percent of square footage is being used in the average church. In his conference, this equates to fourteen-million square feet and 7600 acres of unused or underused property with a tax value of \$1.5 billion. This vast resource, coupled with great need in the many communities surrounding them, has led to a creative approach to stewardship that has resulted in low-income housing, new church plants, and congregational revisioning.

The most recent efforts of Gilland and WCD are perhaps the most exciting. Government requirements for low-income housing include that a property must be within one mile of a grocery store. WCD overlaid maps of existing low-income areas and grocery store locations

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<sup>12</sup> Lyn Sorrels. email message to author, April 8, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> “Home”, Wesley Community Development, accessed April 2020, <https://wesleycdc.com>,

revealing wide gaps—essentially food deserts. The result is a planned effort to build community hubs to house medical and counseling professionals, along with required food retailers. Surrounding that they would build needed low-income housing and a sustainable environment in which resurrection can be the result of repurposed or sold church properties.

With board members who are leaders in finance, construction, ministry, and real estate, WCD is providing kingdom-focused opportunities for churches to reimagine their legacy. It is easy to imagine a hopeful conversation with a church that was planted several decades ago with a mission of caring for the hurting people in the community. After years of decline in attendance and outreach, that original mission could be a seed of exponential future impact.

#### Thom Rainer

Thom Rainer was the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism. He has served as CEO at Lifeway and currently runs his own consulting firm. He has consistently been one of the leading voices in church health. In an era when most attention was placed on propping up the church at all costs, Rainer was willing to ask difficult questions about church health. Paving the way for new life necessitates a kind of death. About this, he said, “It’s not a pleasant topic. But if we don’t talk about dying churches, we will act like there are no problems.”<sup>14</sup>

In this work, he has identified what he calls the “six stages of a dying church.” According to Rainer, these stages used to take thirty years to progress through, but now takes ten years or less.

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<sup>14</sup>“Six Stages of a Dying Church,” Thom Rainer, accessed 2020, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/06/six-stages-dying-church/>.



1. Denial. There are signs of decline all around, but the church operates as if everything is fine.
2. Recalibration. This stage involves awareness, resulting in either doubling down on existing strategies or making adjustment that don't require real change.
3. Anger. Typically (and ironically) an outward focused blame. "*They* are the reason we are not able to turn this around."
4. Exodus. This can be a physical withdrawal or an emotional one.
5. Desperation. Begin to see the downward trajectory of the church and lose hope.
6. Death. Closure or turning the building over to another ministry.

A key contribution of Rainer's work is his direct approach to current realities, considering the hope for new life that the church receives and offers a hurting world. This approach has led many churches to come to terms with the emotions and traps of inward-focused congregational life. In many ways he has opened the door for others who are eager to see a radical return to the church's mission of making disciples of all the world. But this process brings pain that forces members to examine their own grief. His recent publication, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, is a post-mortem on a closed congregation. There is a prevailing sadness and a word of warning from a coroner who loves the patient.

Churches that are in steep decline often have trouble seeing the true nature of their situation. *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* serves as a mirror. Rainer writes, "...dying churches as some point in their history, forgot their purpose. Rarely could anyone point to a single event or historical moment where the purpose was forgotten. It was a deadly and slow process. Attitudes shifted from gospel-centered and other-centered to self-centered."<sup>15</sup> As difficult as it may be, a hard look at the erosion of purpose can inspire life, even if it's life after death.

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<sup>15</sup> Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2014).

### Tod Bolsinger

Tod Bolsinger is the vice-president for vocation and formation and assistant professor of practical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Prior to that, he served as pastor of San Clemente Presbyterian Church in San Clemente, California. He is the author of the popular *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. In the book he weaves the story of Lewis and Clark's adventures in pursuit of the Northwest Passage (waterway to the Pacific Ocean). Once they and their team (the Corps of Discovery) reached the Lemhi Pass, they expected to see a downward route towards the sea. Instead, they were the first Americans to lay eyes on this stretch of the Rocky Mountains. It was at that point that one historical geographer said, "'The geography of hope' gave way to the 'geography of reality.'"<sup>16</sup>

Bolsinger's work in highlighting the reality of uncharted territory serves as a helpful metaphor for the current reality and an overview of leadership theory (adaptive leadership, vision and values, systems and strategy). His work applies to the legacy conversation in that it takes some of the experience and conviction of other key voices and gives a framework for a paradigm shift in the world of the church. How would someone lead a group of former adventurers to move into new places? Bolsinger writes, "Leadership isn't so much skillfully helping a group accomplish what they want to do (that is management). Leadership is taking people where they need to go and yet resist going. Leadership . . . is energizing a community of people toward their own transformation to accomplish a shared mission in the face of a changing world."<sup>17</sup>

Bolsinger is writing to serve as a guide to the guides but also to the entire corps of discovery. The relationship between the visionary leaders and the team of adventurers is key to

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<sup>16</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 88.

<sup>17</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 124.

seeing a course to a hoped-for future for the church. In bringing together the elements of practical discovery and current/future reality, Bolsinger provides a framework for leading through a dynamic season of self-awareness and vision for the church.

### SECTION 3: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

The biblical text and church history provide us with a long-term view of an aversion to endings. Although the lifecycle of individual churches has clearly made a full journey from birth to death since the early centuries, this fact has not often been recognized. The biblical narrative lays out the introduction to sin and death; it is something that humankind wanted to avoid from the beginning. The progression of the meaning of the word *closed* from a sense of completion to a sense of exclusion or ultimate death offers a clue as to why a church would think of closing its doors as failure.

This impulse is also true of business. If you close the doors, you have failed. And so many fail. One study showed that the US small business success rate is 50 percent after four years.<sup>18</sup> In the cases of those who fail to remain in business, there is a loss of income for owners and employees as well as a loss of a dream. New ventures in church planting have returned a success rate of 68 percent within four years. What does this mean? It means that organizations have an inherent risk of closing. The Church of Jesus Christ will never fail; a local church may indeed close its doors.

The deep history of a church which can never fail can be traced all the way back to Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16:18. He stated that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. It seems that Jesus was pointing out that the church could not be kept out of redemptive work of those who are living in hell. The gates could not hold back the Church. This is not the typical interpretation though. For centuries, the church has read this to say that hell can't reach the church. That's how the church has operated for centuries now. Therefore, a church could

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<sup>18</sup>Georgia McIntyre, "What Percentage of Small Businesses Fail?" accessed April 2020, <https://www.fundera.com/blog/what-percentage-of-small-businesses-fail>.

never close because that would be to admit defeat to the powers of hell. Instead, a global vision of the church would indicate that, while communities will ebb and flow, the church will continue to storm into hell to reach the broken and the lost.

A culture of truth-telling in the context of Christian hope is needed. Each of the key voices listed above have experienced the difficult conversations of financial reality, numerical decline, and loss of purpose. Making these conversations even more urgent is the global pandemic of 2020–2021 that will precipitate many unknown consequences in our culture. We have seen a shift from rural to urban communities over the last few decades. Cities have been filling up, and opportunity and convenience have eaten away at the numbers of farmers and small-town professionals. That trend is open to question now that proximity increases the likelihood of the spread of illnesses like Covid-19. It causes one to wonder if a swing in the other direction is looming. Are people equipped to live apart? Is it in our nature? Either way, coming to terms with the health and trajectory of both rural and urban churches will better prepare us for the years ahead.

Turner, Sorrels and Rainer all seem to be navigating around the question of whether a struggling church is positioned well for revitalization or a restart. This is a key tension and pressure point in the work of addressing declining churches. A combination of metrics from Turner, Sorrels and Rainer might have success in celebrating the growth spots for a church that may be able to thrive and guiding a dying church to prepare its legacy. For much of the last few decades, the church has spent most of its energy and resources trying to prop up failing institutions. Through more and more honest conversations, a shift must take place from survival-driven desperation to a desperation for a Kingdom purpose and legacy.

The work of Sorrels and Gilland is reminiscent of the activity of early Methodism in the United States. The Methodist movement was essential to the founding of numerous hospitals and institutions of higher learning in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As those institutions of health and learning have been acquired by corporations, large segments of the Church have lost vision for ways in which they are called to usher in the Kingdom of God by representing it on earth. When corporations and government take over responsibility for the poor and hungry, the church loses focus. The model for a church-partnered town center that anchors housing for those who are housing insecure feels like a return to the heart of a movement that is resurrected in a new age.

The landscape for local church ministry has and is changing drastically. The church in Ephesus, which once sat on the land where a river flowed into the sea, is now six kilometers away from the water. Apparently, sediment from the river has built up since ancient times creating a space away from the water. It's possible that the church in Ephesus closed long before the city was left for ruins. It's possible that the changing landscape made it difficult for business or church as usual. Bolsinger's metaphor and leadership lessons from the Lewis and Clark expedition sound strangely familiar to the new landscape the Church is in today. The key question is whether we will ditch our canoes for mountain-climbing gear and pursue the purpose of Jesus' Church.

A key factor that ties this all together is the human experience. As we go through shifts in environment and changing culture, we learn that we are more alike than different. We ought to be always working towards the same set of goals. If nothing else, survival is a goal of the majority. The global pandemic of 2020–2021 has given us a season of reset. Our priorities are reset. Our perspective is reset. Our view of death has come into focus. As I write this, funerals

and other typical avenues for grief are limited as large-scale public funerals are not possible. As the coronavirus pandemic puts a halt to nonessential gatherings, we are moving from funerals in the same room where baptisms take place to graveside services where ten or less people may gather. We are coming to terms with death as a reality like Adam and Eve. We are clinging to the hope of resurrection like Paul. We are looking for new life. We are looking to the Church.

## APPENDIX C—MILESTONE 3: DESIGN WORKSHOP REPORT

### **NPO Statement**

Develop a process for churches in steep decline to consider legacy options for their future including rebirth, repurposing, and reallocation of resources.

### **NPO Scope and Constraints**

The scope of the NPO has fluctuated throughout the discovery and design phases of this project. The possible outcomes of legacy planning are numerous, and necessarily so. Context, history, denominational structure, and so forth will influence the potential outcomes. Therefore, the NPO is shaping up to be more of a gateway or clearinghouse that connects with existing or fledgling operations to take the hand-off. I have remained focused on the central metaphor of a tree that was propped up for too long. That recurring image has steered me away from the concept of revitalization in the scope of this project. The primary initial costs of this NPO are cultural and emotional.

### **NPO Context**

The immediately identifiable context is the Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC), an area in the Southern United States that is a mix of urban and rural. The Tennessee Conference has 588 churches with an average attendance of 75. A total of 156 of these churches average less than 20 in attendance. The average age of church attendees is increasing across the board as churches in all regions are struggling to expand the reach of the mission. The context will likely expand to include the 410 churches (average attendance of 66,



120 churches less than 20 in worship) of the Memphis Conference which is slated to merge with the Tennessee Conference in 2021.

While the trends are similar between rural and urban churches, the size and dynamics are very different. Many rural churches consist of one or two main families and function almost like a family chapel. Urban and suburban churches, as well as many county-seat churches, while often still contracting, have a broader sense of the mission field of the surrounding community.

## **Root Causes**

### **General Conference**

The UMC is facing schism in the coming year(s). Local churches are likely to separate from the denomination. The building and property will either be given or sold to the separating church body or remain property of the UMC. In the balance, greater amounts of property and assets need to be assessed.

### **Declining Attendance**

The UMC has been in decline for decades. Some local churches are growing, but the overall trend indicates that one third of all UM churches could be closed by 2030. The Church has also grown older and failed to reflect the average age and growth of the population. As church attendance declines, a natural response is to turn inward and hold on to what remains.

## Missional Erosion

The inward focus that grows out of scarcity (decline) is typically at odds with the original mission of the church. Most churches were started with a passion for reaching their community and beyond.

## Definition of “Done”

The goal is to see less church property going unused and a refocus on mission for the local church. This includes seeing everyone housed and everyone safe.

## Three Big Ideas

1. Repurposing unused or underused property for mixed-use operations.
2. Reallocating resources through the sale of church property.
3. Providing affordable housing for all (individuals, families, elderly).

## Three Napkin Pitches

1. Repurposing unused or underused property for mixed use operations.
  - *Audience:* The church and the community.
  - *NPO:* Develop a process for churches in steep decline to consider legacy options for their future, including rebirth, repurposing and reallocation of resources.
  - *Benefit:* Resources for church mission. Connection to the church. Providing long range sustainability for the church. Increased trust from community. Pulling the church out of its shell.
  - *Approach:* Develop model for oversight and administration, or partner with existing ventures. Create resources to spark imagination within existing churches.
  - *Risks.* Further mission leak/loss for the church, making way for a slow takeover from the business sector.

- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* Millions of square feet plus acreage are available for repurposing. Some churches are ready to begin the conversation. Churches can stay on mission while adding partners.
- *Benchmarks of success:* A survey through the Conference Finance and Administration office will help to measure available space as well as provide an early indicator of potential interest. Five to ten churches ready to engage by the fall of 2021.
- *Other Approaches:* New ventures are looking to capitalize on church space. Some areas are consolidating regional offices, etc. We offer a wholistic and missional approach to discerning how space is to be used.

## 2. Reallocating resources through the sale of church property.

- *Audience:* The remnant members of the closing (or downsizing) church. The community surrounding the church. The connectional church.
- *NPO:* Develop a process for churches in steep decline to consider legacy options for their future including rebirth, repurposing and reallocation of resources.
- *Benefit:* The connectional church benefits through a freeing up of resources that can go towards social justice initiatives, new church starts, new ventures, etc.
- *Approach:* This approach takes place within a connectional denomination that has structures in place potentially allowing for reallocation for the sake of overall health.
- *Risks:* “We have never operated this way.” The church could fail and test the patience of the system. It could lose trust and credibility.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* Someone would be interested in purchasing property. We are willing to view property as an asset. Survival is not the mission. The mission trumps tradition.
- *Benchmarks of success:* We need a real estate evaluation of a sampling of properties. We need a plan for the funds generated from a potential sale (no terminal savings account).
- *Other Approaches:* The Tennessee Annual Conference has sold multiple properties without having a plan, which has led to regret and a higher cost of ministry in the areas we have left. This approach would require an evaluation and plan for reaching the area of the sale and use of the resources after the sale.

## 3. Provide affordable housing for all (individuals, families, elderly).

- *Audience:* People experiencing homelessness. People who are underhoused. Elderly on fixed income and limited resources. The local church. The local government.
- *NPO:* Develop a process for churches in steep decline to consider legacy options for their future including rebirth, repurposing and reallocation of resources.
- *Benefit:* Those experiencing homelessness have homes. Civic resources and tax dollars would be freed up for other services or improvements. The mission field of the local church would move into the backyard.
- *Approach:* Invite churches to allot space and support for housing initiatives. Develop capital stacks of grants, tax breaks, etc. Work with local government to meet the needs of our neighbors experiencing homelessness.
- *Risks.* Rejection from neighborhoods and communities (Not in My Backyard). Small churches could become overwhelmed by the scope of ministry.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* Healthy community could be created through affordable housing. United Methodist Churches feel a burden for the wellbeing of those in the unhoused community.
- *Benchmarks of success:* Identify multiple models for building or converting space. A decrease in unused space within church buildings.
- *Other Approaches:* The Village at Glencliff UMC has created tiny homes on church property in the middle of a Nashville neighborhood. The Legacy Planning model includes the use of existing building space for affordable housing.

### **Design Workshop Stakeholders**

- Founder of Open Table Nashville
- Team Leader of the Church Legacy Initiative
- Executive Director of Compassionate Hands
- Pastor and College Professor at historically black college
- Director of Creating Homes Initiative
- District Superintendent of Stones River District, UMC

### **One-on-One Interviews**

- Bishop of the Tennessee and Memphis Conferences (Future Tennessee Western Kentucky Conference), UMC
- President of the Board of Trustees for Virginia Diocesan Homes
- Housing Facilitator for State of Tennessee

## APPENDIX D—MILESTONE 4: PROTOTYPE ITERATION REPORT

This report documents the evolution of a concept through two prototypes. The overall opportunity being addressed is the increased missional impact of local churches in overall decline. Through the course of many conversations with local and regional church leaders, as well as successful entities that helped reimagine missional impact for dozens of churches, a pattern of engagement led to the idea of re-storying the church.

### **Prototype #1: Summary and Findings**

#### Prototype description

A process for repurposing (re-storying) space in local churches.

#### Goldilocks Quality Strategy

As a process prototype, we will use sketches, words, and timelines to help visualize something that is not yet materialized.

*Research question:* How can space and property be used differently to achieve the mission?

*Assessment benchmark:*

- Subjects are aware of gaps between the mission and current reality.
- Subjects ask “what if” questions.
- Subjects request engagement with a full team.

*Prototype participant demographic description:*

- Meeting 1: 44-year-old social activist/55-year-old CEO of nonprofit property development company
- Meeting 2: 55-year-old CEO/40-year-old VP of finance

- Meeting 3: 60-year-old United Methodist bishop/40-year-old male /40-year-old female VP/44-year-old female housing advocate/60-year-old conference treasurer/65-year-old chair of conference finance and administration

*What was your important discovery?* While this prototype may be an essential part of the overall work of re-storying churches, it does not inspire engagement on its own.

## **Prototype #2: Summary and Findings**

### **Prototype Description**

A resource designed to encourage churches to plan for their legacy through a process of re-storying.

### **Goldilocks Quality Strategy**

The resource leads to “what if?” conversations and not a predetermined outcome. The immediate goal of the resource is to reflect on a church’s past story and dream about “what’s next?”

*Research question:* How can churches talk about the next chapter of their existence in ways that strengthen the mission?

*Assessment benchmarks:*

- Participants can identify the path of mission engagement for the church.
- Participants can identify signs of their current reality.
- Participants begin to imagine the future for the mission of the church.

*Prototype participant demographic description:* 48-year-old superintendent of one hundred churches, 60-year-old pastor of tornado-damaged church, 35-year-old director of community center in former UM church, 25-year-old pastor of declining and recently merged church.

*Summarize what you learned: What worked? What could be improved? What matters to the participants?* Through discussion, it became clear that there are many churches eager to reimagine their future. Instead of approaching the issues surrounding decline in missional impact, people are connecting to stories. Participants value relationship over process. I will need to improve the connection between the desired re-story and the action steps to come.

*What was your important discovery?* The season of disruption that the world has been through has led churches to be more willing and even eager to think about a different future.

### **Most Viable Prototype**

The most viable prototype is Prototype #2. While elements of Prototype #1 will likely give shape to next steps, creating a resource for church leaders is a key first step. I plan to develop this resource based on the outline below. This plan lays out an awareness of current reality, starting first with the Biblical practices of reading signs (semiotics) and storytelling rather than data and trends. It invites church leaders to consider what sign and story mean for the Church and includes an assessment tool for church leaders to decide if it is time to re-story their church.

The resource/book will provide the necessary tools for creating environments among church leadership where honest assessment of mission effectiveness (over attendance and financial trends) can lead to re-storying the local church.



## RE-STORY YOUR CHURCH

### I. Story Through Signs

- Semiotics: reading the signs of the times (and discerning what to do about it)
- Signs and story: storytelling in scripture

### II. Signs and Story: What does it mean for your church?

- The message of church signs
- Jackson magnolia tree and other metaphors
- Legacy planning
- Trends in church life cycles

### III. Re-Story

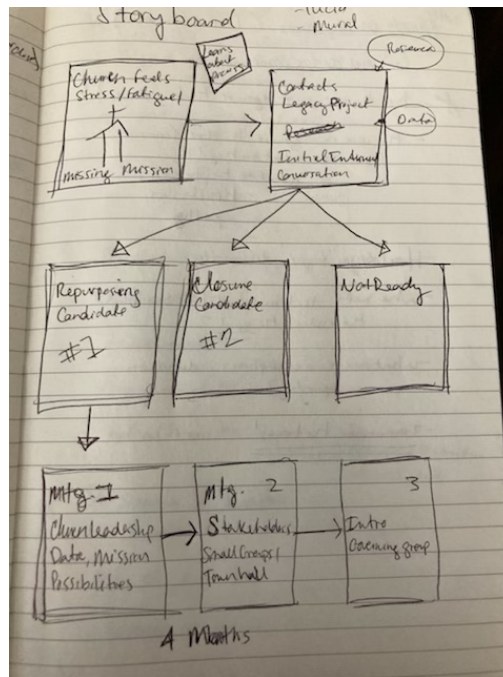
- Repurpose: Case studies
- Restart: Case studies
- Reallocate: Case studies

### IV. Appendix: Church Assessment Tool

- What's our story?
- What story do we want future generations to tell?

## APPENDICES

### STORYBOARDS



Re-story your church

- ① Story through Signs
  - Sermonettes
  - Reading the signs of the times (and what to do)
  - Signs and story
  - Storytelling in scripture
- ② Signs + Story: what does it mean for your church?
  - The message of church signs
  - Magna Carta and other metaphors
  - Legacy planning
  - Trends in church life cycles
- ③ Re-Story
  - Repurpose Case Studies
  - Restart Case Studies
  - Re allocate

Church Leadership Assessment Tool: What's our story?  
What story do we want future generations to tell?

Glossary

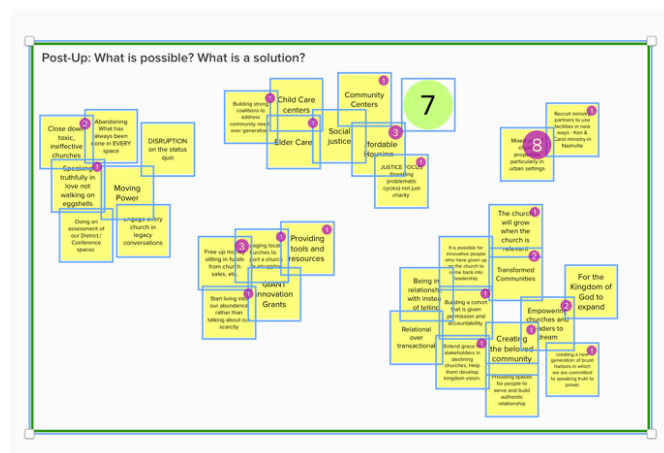
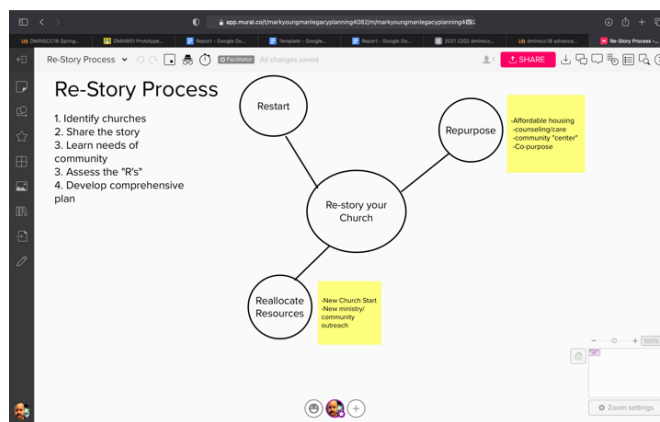
## INTERVIEW SCRIPT

What is your response to the following terms as they relate to the local church?

- Closure/Death
- Lifecycle
- Resurrection
- Legacy

What was the original vision and mission of the church? How was that lived out in the past? How is it lived out today? How could it be lived out in the future?

## DOCUMENTATION OF PROTOTYPE



## ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW NOTES

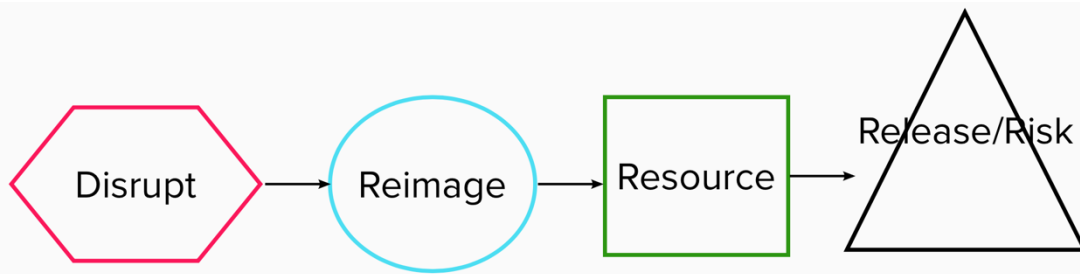
What is your response to the following terms as they relate to the local church?

- *Closure/Death*—fear, failure, endings
- *Lifecycle*—beginning and end, threat to existence
- *Resurrection*—hopeful, new life, eternity
- *Legacy*—story, how life continues

## OBSERVATION NOTES

Participants representing local churches expressed a willingness to engage in conversations about legacy and re-storying. The feedback was forward-directed and positive when telling stories about the mission of the Church being lived out. There is also a weariness when it comes to conference and district representatives leading the conversations about a process to discern revitalization or closure. A third party seems to be the best approach.

## APPENDIX E—SUPPLEMENTAL PROJECT DOCUMENTATION



*Disrupt:* requires a willingness to stop doing some things.

*Reimage:* an invitation to assess and to dream

*Resource:* investment in the reimagined

*Release/Risk:* all change involves risk, letting go.

## Sample ReStory Proposal

# ReStory Your Church

## Project Proposal Antioch UMC

### Scope of Project:

I will engage with the leadership of Antioch UMC in a series of three conversations around the concept of ReStorying towards the possible outcomes of restarting, repurposing, or reallocating the resources of the church.

The 30,000-foot-view of the entire process is laid out in the graphic below; however, my work will lead them to the beginning stages of Step #3. At that point, the leadership of Antioch UMC may choose whether to continue to explore options and possibilities for Implementation.



### Gathering #1 (2 hours, date):

#### *Topics:*

- Introduction to the ReStory concept, process, and possible outcomes.
- Jesus as the Great ReStory Teller.
- Signs of the times for Antioch Church.



- Life cycle.
- Begin to explore the stories we tell.

*Desired Outcomes:*

- Common language and invitation to share and re-imagine together.
- Understanding of the ReStory concept.

**Gathering #2: (2-3 hours, Date)**

*Topics:*

- Review the Stories We Tell.
- Begin to explore the Stories we Lived.
- Learning your story.
- Looking back and learning about the journey of Antioch UMC (i.e., walking items up the hill from the former location).
- Identify Legacy Points.

*Desired Outcome:*

- Leaders have an opportunity to solidify the stories that are true about Antioch UMC.
- Identify Legacy Points.
- Begin to imagine ReStory for Antioch UMC—what's next?

**Gathering #3 (2-3 hours, Date)**

*Topics:*

- Identifying needs of community.
- Identifying resources of the church.
- Story pitch for ReStory possibilities.

*Desired Outcomes:*

- Leaders are looking ahead to what is next.
- Making decisions about connecting with ministry partners for next steps.

## RE STORY PRESENTATION FOR USE WITH ORGANIZATION LEADERS

# ReStory Your Church



# ReStory Your Church

## Initial Consultation

ReStory team members meet with church leadership to listen and cast vision for legacy planning.

1

## ReStory Visioning

Ministry partners guide a process of identifying needs in the community and assessing existing resources. What is possible?

3

2

## Learning Your Story

ReStory team guides church leaders as they identify key vision and legacy characteristics.

4

## Implementation

This phase will vary in length depending on the ReStory vision of your church. The next part of the story begins.

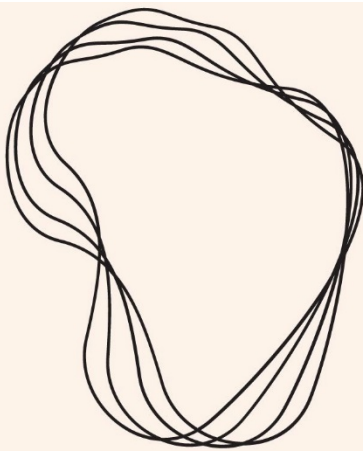
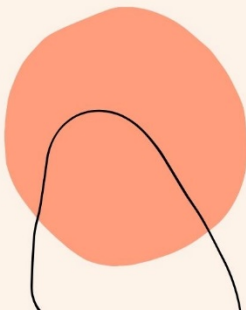
## Possible Outcomes

Nothing

Re-Start

Repurpose

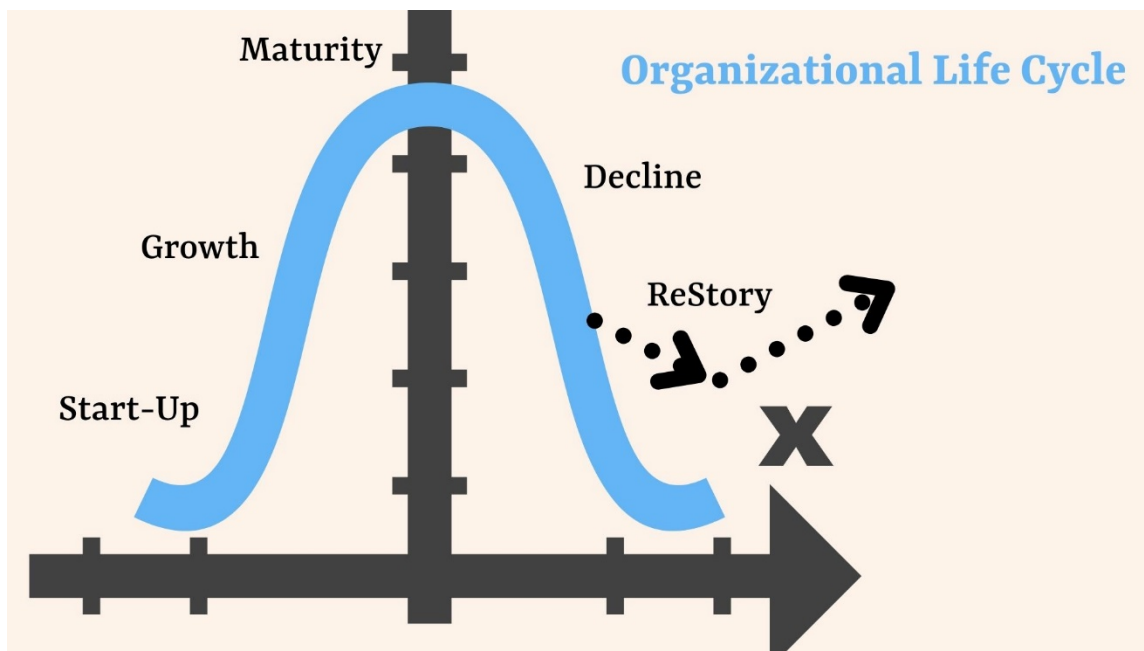
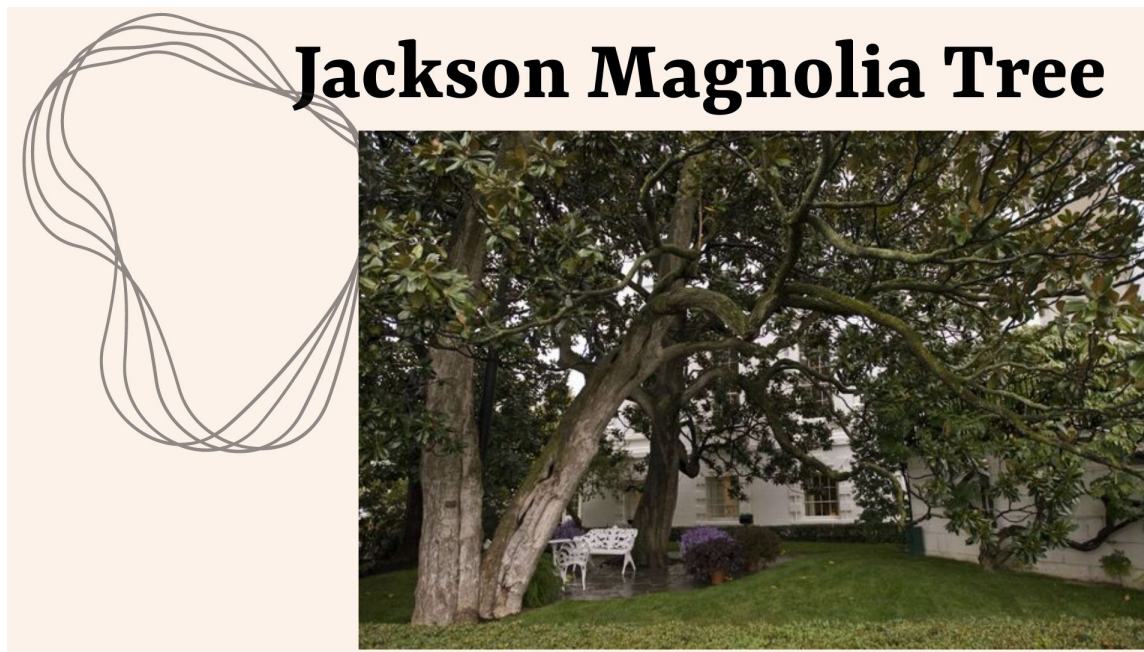
Reallocation of Resources

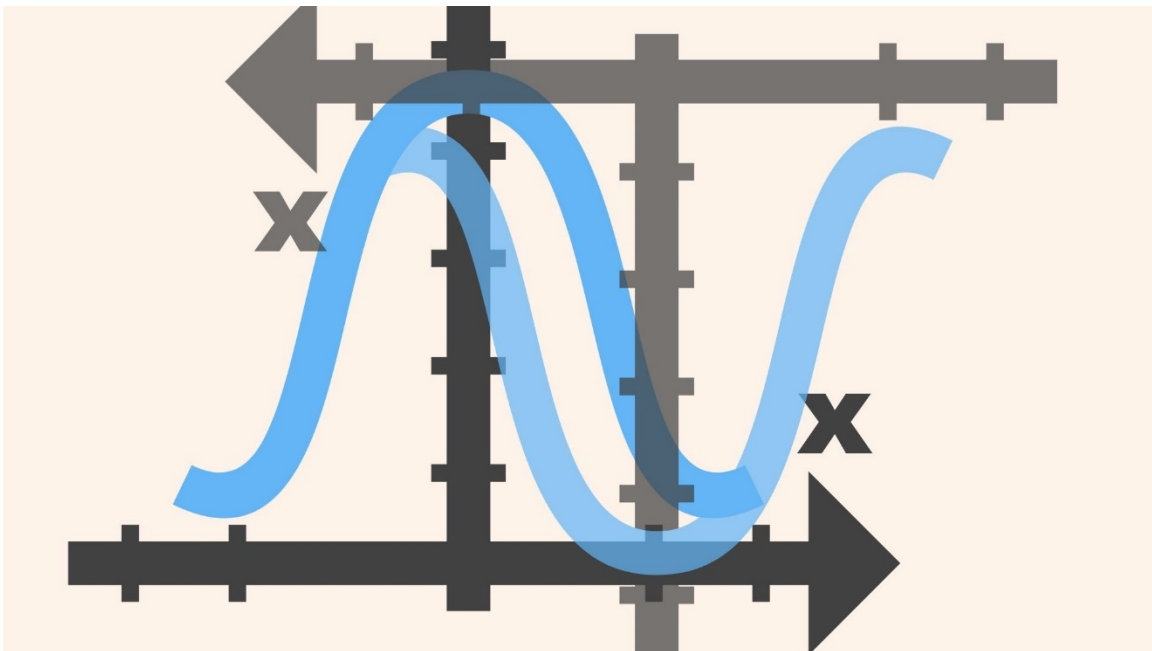
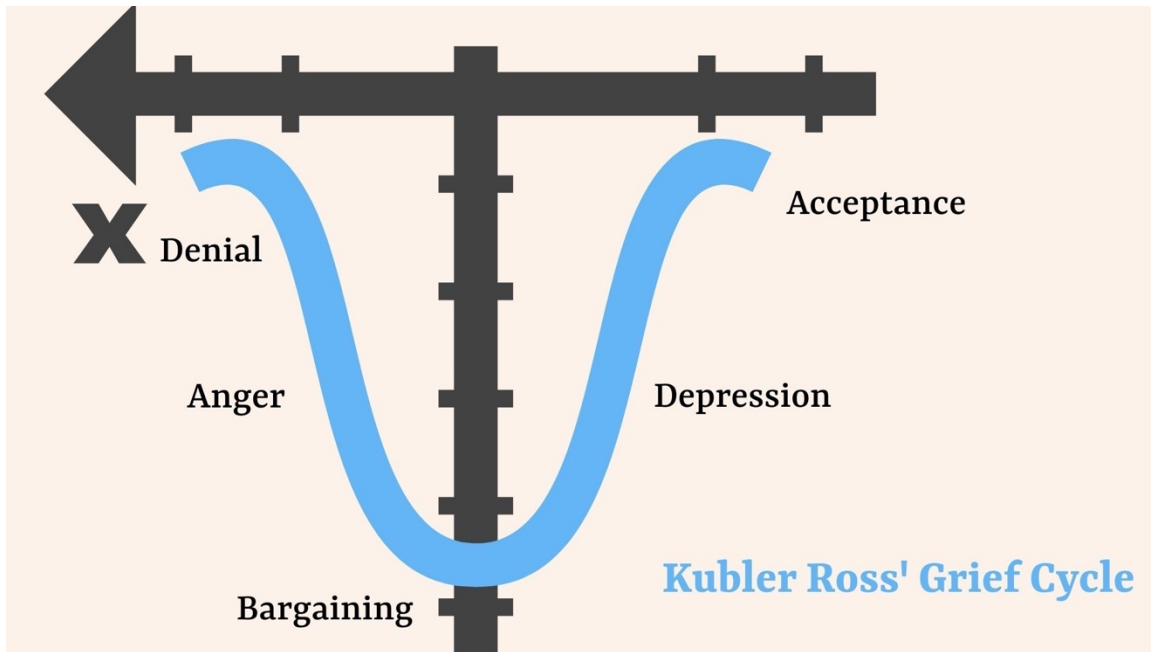


## What does it mean to ReStory?

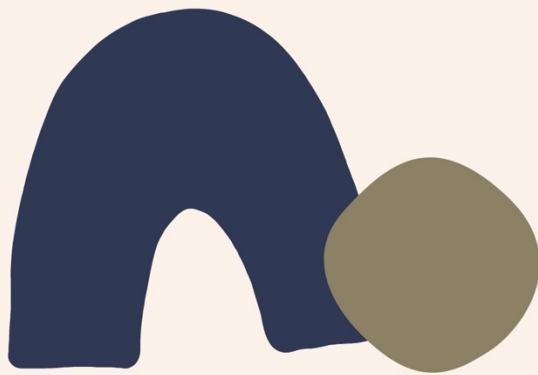
Instead of talking about closing churches or organizations, why not talk about telling a different story than the one we've been telling.

In other words, what about a ReStory?





## Jesus the Great ReStory Teller



## How do we think about a ReStory?

The story we've been telling.  
The story we lived.  
The story God dreams for us.

## What Story Have We Been Telling?

What does the community say?

What are the conversations internally?

## What Is The Story We Have Lived?

What is our origin story?

Every good story has conflict and plot twists-  
-what are ours?

What are our Ebenezers?



What is the story God is dreaming for  
you?

A decorative pattern of teal-colored brushstrokes, consisting of numerous short, diagonal strokes of varying lengths, arranged in a roughly rectangular shape.

Legacy Points

A decorative pattern of teal-colored brushstrokes, consisting of numerous short, diagonal strokes of varying lengths, arranged in a roughly rectangular shape.

## What is Possible?



### STORY PITCH

What is Possible? The Big Idea.

Who is it for?

What Need, Problem, or  
Opportunity does it Address?

How do we know  
it's working?

## STORY PITCH

What does it look like? How does it work?

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