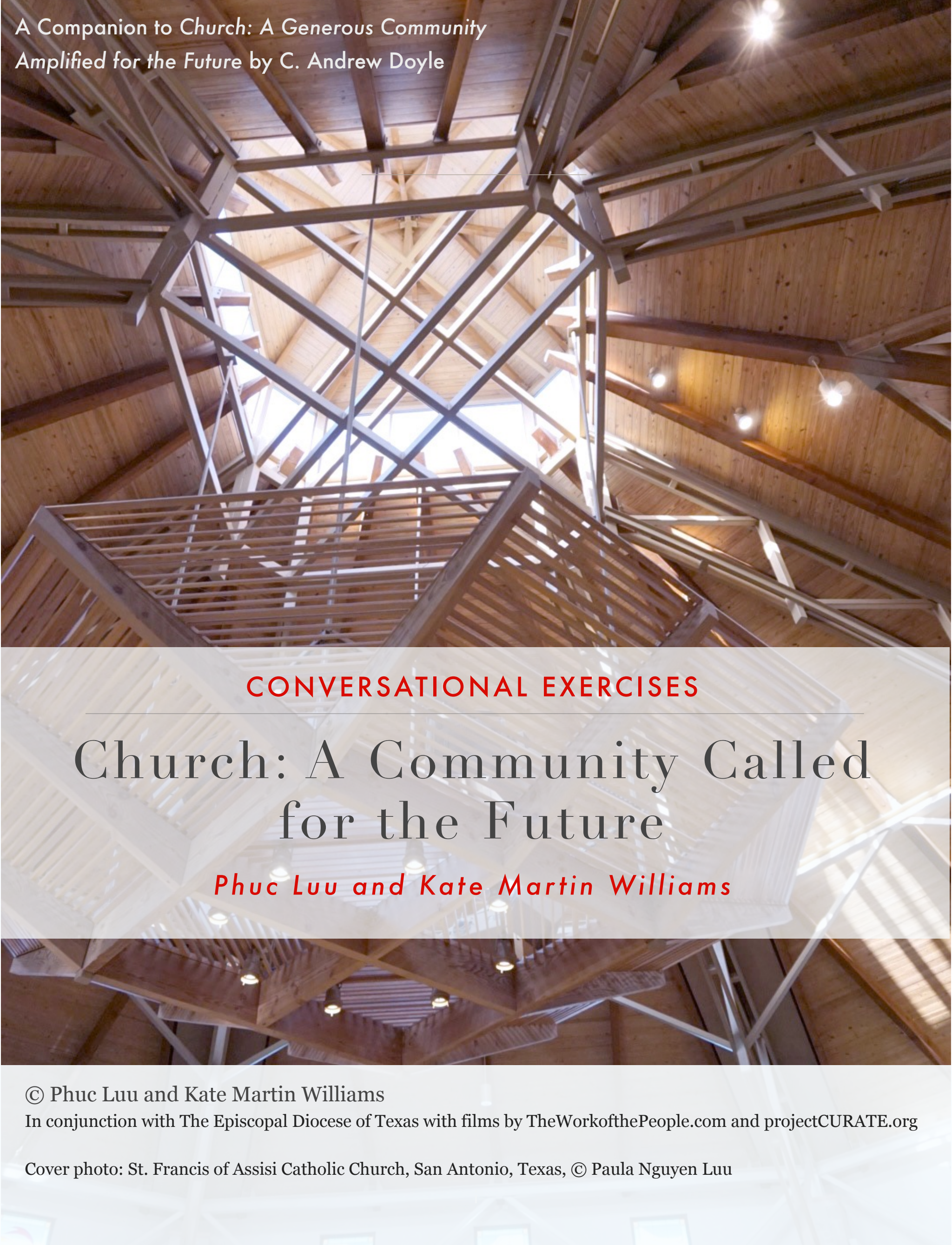
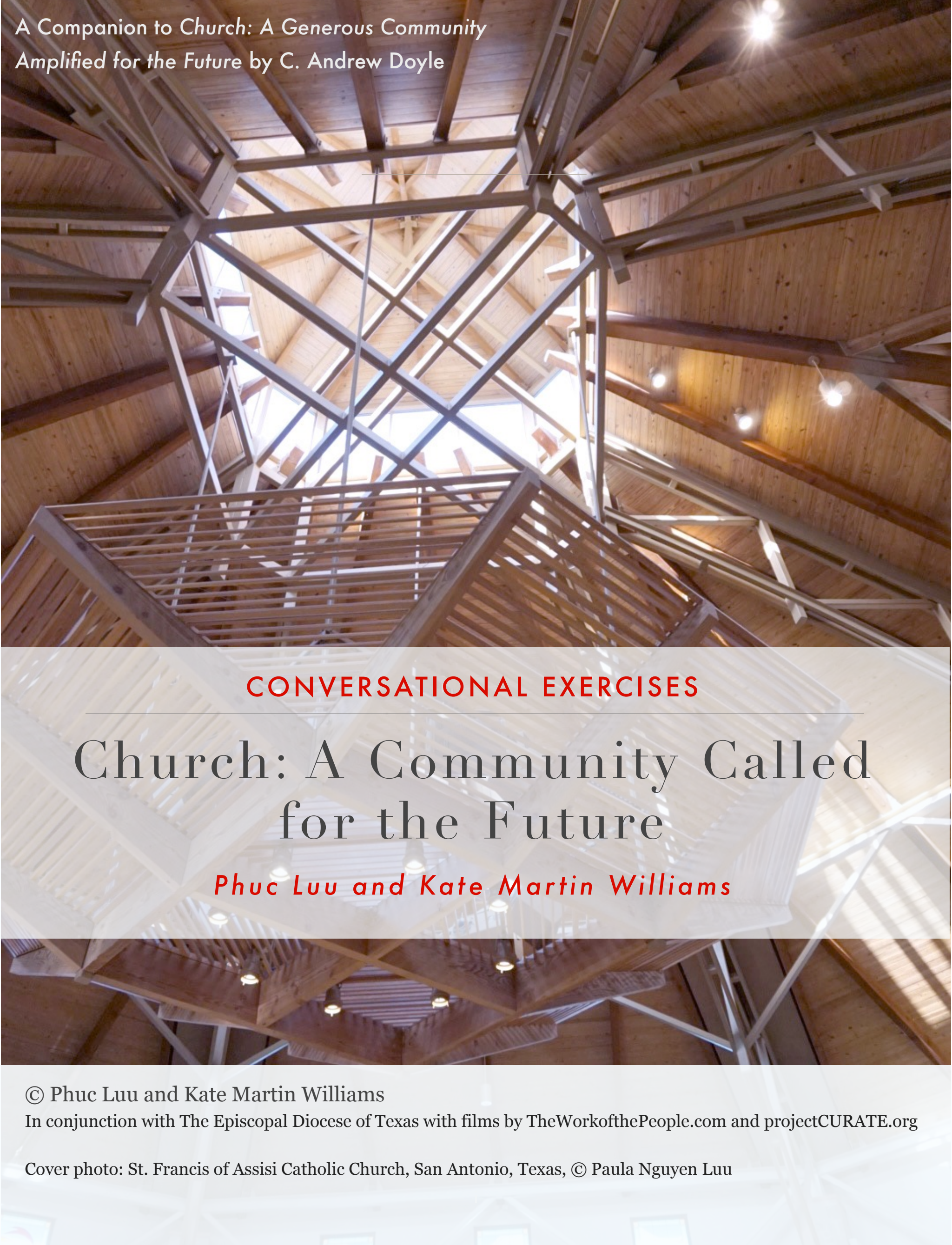


*A Companion to Church: A Generous Community
Amplified for the Future by C. Andrew Doyle*

CONVERSATIONAL EXERCISES

Church: A Community Called for the Future

Phuc Luu and Kate Martin Williams



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In conjunction with The Episcopal Diocese of Texas with films by TheWorkofthePeople.com and projectCURATE.org

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INTRODUCTION

Is the church dead or is the church alive? It depends on how you look at it, observes Bishop C. Andrew Doyle. For some churches, attendance is on the decline and dying, especially in transitional areas. But in other congregations, church is a living breathing organism. As the body of Christ, the church lives and breathes not through self-survival and protection, but through self-giving and connection to the web of life that exists in the world. This is how Christ continues to be incarnate in the world, through the assembly of Christ's followers who are called to live out their lives in generosity and grace. As a priest and now Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, Doyle has closely observed the organism of the church and seeks to help the body continue to be a life-giving organism in the world. Its survival depends on God's tenacious love and those who seek to share this love.

This curriculum is crafted from Doyle's book *Church: A Generous Community Amplified for the Future*, written specifically for the Episcopal Church. Here we seek to take important aspects of Doyle's work and share it with the church universal in order to show how the life-giving and life-sustaining work of the Spirit can spark and ignite churches across denominations. In order to see the possibilities for the future, the church needs to assess what it has done in the past, grieve, and move forward, keeping what is essential and leaving behind what is detrimental. Only then will the church be able to capture the vision of a life that awaits it and a people who are called to become it.

This work is intended for both individual and group study in conjunction with videos hosted on AmplifiedChurch.com and TheWorkofthePeople.com. The study questions, liturgy, and additional resources serve to enrich the reader's experience of the study and to encourage compelling conversation. Throughout this work, we will make reference to Doyle's book, *Church: A Generous Community Amplified for the Future* and its key ideas. This study is more than just a way to gain insight, but aims to help deepen faith and promote conversation. To get the most out of this study, we invite the viewer and reader to enter into conversation with both God and community.

Prayer, meditation, and dialogue are all integral exercises in becoming a faithful person and a faithful church. We hope that you join us in the conversation.

C. Andrew Doyle is the ninth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. His books include *Unabashedly Episcopalian: Proclaiming the Good News of the Episcopal Church*, *Church: A Generous Community Amplified for the Future*, and the companion book, *A Generous Community: Being the Church in a New Missionary Age*.

This work is created in collaboration with the Episcopal Church of Texas (www.epicenter.org and www.AmplifiedChurch.com), The Work of the People (TheWorkofthePeople.com), and The Center for Urban Reconciliation and Theological Education (projectCURATE.org), and written by Phuc Luu and Kate Martin Williams.

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The Church of Possibilities: The Church That We See, Past and Future

In this film Doyle speaks about what is possible when we, as a church community, leave unhealthy and destructive traditions in order to join God in God's mission. In this way we enter into the gift of possibility that God has for the church and the world.

Questions for Conversation

1. Doyle comments, “We believe that the church is dying because it is really hard to see where the church is living.” Where do you see that the church is dying? Where do you see signs that the church is living?
2. Doyle remarks, “We all confess that this is God’s work that we are undertaking.” He implies that this is God’s mission that God is seeking to accomplish. What does this say about our role in God’s mission and the success and/or failure of our work?
3. What does it mean to say, “God is the God of community”?
4. What does reconciliation mean? What does reconciliation have to do with community? What would a “holy commons” look like in your neighborhood and context?
5. What is the difference between trying to figure out who my neighbor is and being a neighbor to someone?
6. “There are many ways (kinds of communities) that Christianity spread,” comments Doyle. What kinds of communities do you see possibly emerging out of your neighborhood?
7. How has the movement from homegrown community to corporate community been detrimental to the church? How can tradition be helpful for the church? If we are not careful, how can it become a way to “drive [the church] into the ground”?
8. Doyle refers to Bob Johansen’s formulation of the world in which we live as VUCA: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. How does the church tend to react in unhealthy ways to the VUCA world?
9. What does it mean to leave the “Moses generation”? What are the things that we need “to leave behind to join this journey [of God’s]”? How might this help us “get to the Promised Land”?
10. Doyle says that ministers often have a sense of “Are you talking to me?” when

they are interpreting God's call. What is underneath this doubt about our vocations, whatever this vocation might be? How does God call us "in the not enough"?

11. How can we help others to say "yes" to God's call and free them from destructive behaviors that might impede this call?

Scripture: Acts 2:17–18

Becoming the Church of Possibilities

The Fifth Ward in Houston can be described as a landscape of deserts: food deserts, educational deserts, housing deserts, and city services deserts. When Houston was founded in 1836, it was divided into six "wards." Emancipated slaves settled the third, fourth, and fifth wards. Even though many of these wards underwent redevelopment in the last part of the twentieth century, the fifth ward remains a place where the boundary between wasteland and resources is still clearly evident. For example, while the fourth and six wards share a newly built Whole Foods Market (2011), there is no such place in the fifth ward.

In the Fifth Ward Pleasant Hill Baptist Church witnessed the changes that took place among one of Houston's once segregated communities. Its 90 years of presence attest to the strength of this congregation. Pleasant Hill's long life is sustained by its leadership and members who see the church as more than the walls of a sanctuary. In the 1970s middle class African-Americans moved to the suburbs and abandoned the ward. When the present pastor, Rev. Harvey Clemons, Jr., was appointed, he sought to "explore ways for Pleasant Hill to become a beacon light and an oasis in the midst of a desert of economic and spiritual poverty."¹

Instead of seeing this ward as an area of impoverishment and despair, Pleasant Hill sought to re-imagine what ministry would be like in the twentieth century and on into the next millennium. Clemons applied his architectural background in exploring ways in which the faith community could see the neighborhood as a place of growth instead of death. Instead of reaching inward and struggling to stop congregational flight, Clemons led his congregation to serve the social needs of the community. The Pleasant Hill Community Development Corporation (PHCDC) was formed in 1995 to rebuild

and “restore the beauty and dignity of the Pleasant Hill campus and areas across the City of Houston.” Since then PHCDC has developed and managed the Pleasant Hill Village Retirement Community, 167 units of senior independent living; The Victual Restaurant, a full-service dining venue; and the Brittons Place Apartments, a multi-family complex unit with 48 units.

Committed to making more than just financial investments, Pleasant Hill has made investments into the spiritual and intellectual welfare of the community. Pleasant Hill employs a graduate of the Duke Divinity School and two college students studying biblical languages. With the establishment of Healing the Brokenness, a program of educational support, pastors from the surrounding neighborhoods share in the scholarship of renowned academics. It is not uncommon to sit with a member of Pleasant Hill and share in a lively dialogue about theology or the Hebrew language. This community has become an oasis in an otherwise deserted place.

How is this possible? It is not without God’s Spirit that new life is being breathed into this seemingly abandoned community. It also comes from courageous individuals opened to the possibility of being alive. Doyle describes the ability to see the world this way in terms of “Schrödinger’s church.”² Erwin Schrödinger, an Austrian theoretical physicist, developed a thought experiment (also known as “**Schrödinger’s cat**”) that sought to critique the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics that states that an object can exist in all possible configurations in a physical system.

Schrödinger’s thought experiment involved a cat, a radioactive isotope at a slow decay rate, a glass vial of cyanide, a Geiger counter, and a hammer, all placed in a sealed box. The hammer, attached to the Geiger counter, would release at the detection of the radioactive decay of the material, onto the vial of cyanide, effectively killing the cat. Schrödinger was not promoting the wanton killing of cats; rather, if his hypothetical scenario was allowed to play out, then the cat would *neither* be dead nor alive, but *both* dead and alive. It would exist in both states at the same time. Only when the observer of the experiment opened the box, would she know if the cat was dead or alive.

Schrödinger’s point is that on a subatomic level we might not know whether particles are in one state or another, but this proposition cannot stand on the level of cats. Cats cannot be “both/and,” they are always “either/or.” Doyle likens the Schrödinger’s cat thought experiment to the church to declare that merely observing and concluding

that the church is dead is not enough. We could look at our churches and communities and see them as “dead,” but this does not fully describe the possible states in which the church could exist. Rather, Schrödinger’s church is about being involved in a work that mines the possibility of an alive church, rather than just assuming the church is dead.

There are churches that are dying and dead, and perhaps eulogies need to be said to encourage those congregations to move on to the next stage of their existence. Sometimes these churches are entrenched in a particular culture and tradition that will not allow them to move forward. This is often the case with churches that have seen sudden changes in demographics. Many congregations in the inner city of Houston have experienced “white flight” to the suburbs and have not weathered the trauma well. Unable to keep pace with influxes caused by both immigration and urban revitalization, they did not understand how to minister to the new surrounding population. Perhaps these congregations need to end their life cycles to make way for others.

There are a few congregations who are moving into the future with courage, despite the ever-changing world in which they exist. Growing a church is easy in booming suburbs with high economic growth rates. Clemons could have easily become pastor of a church in Fort Bend County, presently the fastest growing county in the Houston area, but he chose to go where he was called – the inner city of Houston, where growing a church community is not as easy. He chooses to see the world as *possible*.³ Theologically speaking, the resurrection is what enables the possible. The crucifixion closed the possibility of life, but the resurrection opened the possibility of life. In the resurrection, we orient ourselves away from the tomb and toward the future of the church.

In the early conceptions of the church, the word that was used to describe the body of Christ was the Greek word ***ekklesia***. This term was adopted from the political arena and referred to the assembly of free, male citizens who were able to vote because of their status in the city. The root word of *ekklesia* is *kaleo*, or “to call.” The church had the sense that they were called to the mission to become the new “political” center in the world.⁴ The Christians of the first century reimagined the term *ekklesia* to include men and women, slaves and free, rich and poor, citizens and non-citizens. They reimagined political life based on the calling of Jesus Christ. They were Kingdom

citizens living in in the world as they found it.

This idea of the church did not come from a committee of intellectuals imposing their idea of church on the early Christians. Rather, this new imagination of the church came from the movement of the Spirit of God that is recounted in the book of Acts.⁵ The early church took shape through the gathering of what was considered the “diaspora,” those Jews who were scattered because of the Assyrian exile in 733 BCE. They had gathered at the festival of Pentecost to worship in Jerusalem when God’s Spirit took hold of them, and they heard the Gospel preached in their own languages. The apostle Peter interpreted this experience as connected to what Joel had prophesied. Peter, the same disciple who denied association with the Christ, was able to boldly proclaim the reality of the resurrection experience. It was life that he saw, rather than death, being poured out in front of his very eyes:

‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.’⁶

The world of the early church was in uncertain flux, just like the world of today and the world of the future. It was a world of persecution, political volatility, economic instability, and religious and ideological plurality. Bob Johansen, distinguished fellow at the Institute for the Future (IFF), uses the acronym VUCA to describe the world in which we live: “Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.”⁷ The early church was able to thrive in this kind of world because it did not see itself as removed from the world, but rather situated in the world.

Doyle points out that in the VUCA world, the church will thrive as she learns to adapt. These adaptive traits are described as antifragility, resiliency, tenacity, and *autopoiesis*. We must recognize that in this VUCA world, the church exists in a kind of

paradox of fragility: the more the church seeks to keep itself from breaking down, the more fragile it becomes. But at the same time, the more it becomes vulnerable to the world, the more it becomes “antifragile.”

How can the church respond to a VUCA world? One way is to build its walls taller and stronger, and wage war against the world. In many cases, churches and denominations have created dogmas and systems that only succeed in promoting reactions to change, rather than adaptations to change. It is like a person who has a tough exterior—always stern and irascible—but who adopts this affect in order to protect something very vulnerable. Conversely, those who are meek and mild mannered are often more secure with who they are. They feel secure because they feel they have nothing they need to protect. The same can be said for churches and organizations. In order for churches to move into the world with a sense of mission, they must become organisms of adaptation. They need not mimic the world, but they must be willing to move with the world in an intentional and reflective way.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb writes in his book *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder*:

The antifragile loves randomness and uncertainty, which also means—crucially—a love of errors, a certain class of errors. Antifragility has a singular property of allowing us to deal with the unknown, to do things without understanding them—and do them well.⁸

How can we incorporate this element of “antifragile” into the life of the Church to produce a healthy response to VUCA? How can the Church work through these emotions and embrace the unknown rather than rejecting and trying to control the unknown. Doyle comments:

We must also realize that we are going to have emotions of anger about these changes and that we need to capture and harness that energy into action and invest in good works. As the author of Hebrews writes: “Do not neglect to do good and share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (Hebrews 13:16)⁹

To tend to these emotions by entering into the world with love and generosity rather than retreating to woundedness and defensiveness requires creativity. It is this creative ability to see the world differently that allows communities like the 5th Ward

to flourish as a flower, even in the desert.

Often church communities hold the traditions of their past in an emotional chokehold. Beliefs about certain practices and ideologies of the church become dogma, the established teachings of the church, but there is often no foundational basis for this certainty. In other words, people often believe what they believe because they have always believed them. In practice, it is encapsulated in this statement: “We’ve always done it this way.” Traditions of the past are not things we should make into idols, whether beliefs or practices, sacraments or icons. They are traditions that have been “passed down” to us as gifts, not chains.

The word “tradition” comes from a Latin word (*tradere*), which has two meanings. On the one hand, it means, “to deliver.” In this understanding, traditions are like family recipes that are valued and shared. They are tried, tested, and true. On the other hand, *tradere* means “to betray,” as in the word “traitor.” Traditions can betray us if we place too much trust in them. They can entrap us and lead us astray. When we become locked into established norms and thinking, without right reason, traditions can prevent us from moving forward. How can you help your community let go of unhealthy traditions and move forward into what God is doing in the world? How can you help them grieve, release, and celebrate new happenings?

How can your community reach out for possibilities that are seemingly not present? How can you look at the world in ways that others have not seen and imagine possibilities where things seem impossible? Perhaps this starts with having conversations in and among the members of your community, with civic leaders and neighbors, with clergy and council members. Finding the pulse of the community and understanding the needs and fears of its people helps you truly inhabit the place where you live. Being able to see well starts with being able to listen intently.

Freedom Benediction

May the God of freedom liberate us from the binding past,
Those things that hinder us from moving on
To the places promised us, to the places made for our being, our living, our
flourishing
To move from the deserts, where we often return, to the places of thirst-

quenching waters and nourishing food
May we be called out and into a world, where the future awaits
With new possibilities and encounters
With new ways to see and believe

Amen

For Further Study

Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012).

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012).

Endnotes

¹ http://www.pleasanthillministries.org/about/history_of_church (accessed 6-23-2015).

² C. Andrew Doyle, *Church: A Generous Community Amplified for the Future* (Alexandria: VTS Press, 2015), 1.

³ <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/neighborhood/fortbend/real-estate/article/Growth-is-the-word-in-Fort-Bend-County-6203902.php>.

⁴ Wayne A. Meeks, *First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), 79, compares Pauline church communities of the first century to the voluntary association of the Greco-Roman culture: “On the other hand, the Christian groups were much more inclusive in terms of social stratification and other social categories than were the other voluntary associations.”

⁵ Acts 2.

⁶ Acts 2:17–18 also ff. (NRSV).

⁷ Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012), 6.

⁸ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012), 4.

⁹ Doyle, *Church*, 41.



2

Flourishing in Babylon: How We Will Show Up in the Crowd

It is not in tranquil times that the church flourishes, but in a VUCA world. When the Hebrews were exiled to Babylon, they existed in this kind of world. The choice was to either turn in on itself or move into the world with courage and trust. As the church today, we face the same choice. Doyle challenges the church to embrace the discomfort and vulnerability of living in an uncertain world.

Questions for Conversation

1. How do we as a church become easily frustrated when encountering a VUCA world? Doyle cites **Brené Brown**'s work on vulnerability.¹ What does vulnerability have to do with engagement in this kind of world?

2. Doyle likens our time now to the image of Babylon and the diaspora. In Babylon, the Hebrews struggled for existence in a foreign land and among foreign peoples. How is what we are experiencing now similar to the dispersion of the Jews after their land was taken from them by the Babylonian Empire? How are we “in the middle of Babylon”?

3. Doyle comments, “Your work is to be involved in the world and not be successful.” What is the difference between popular notions of success and “doing God’s work in the world”? How can we “free ourselves up to truly allow ourselves to be comfortable in the discomfort of following Jesus in the world”? Doyle refers to Matthew 11:30, saying, “His yolk is light.” Why do we often confuse the burden that God asks for us to bear with the work that is required?

4. So often we give up on carrying out our vocations because of the burdensome baggage of previous failures. Western notions of success often mean the denial of failure or a projection that our current failures are indications of future failures. What does failure mean in light of the Gospel?

5. Doyle tells the story of a woman who is critical of how another woman dresses in church. Doyle comments, “I don’t think salvation is in the church.” How might this view of the church be offensive to some Christians? Doyle adds, “For the church to be a healthy diaspora is to say I believe in a God who chooses us in our brokenness and not our perfection, which is a countercultural value.” What might it mean to become a vulnerable and broken church and also to be involved in the lives of vulnerable and broken people?

6. Doyle speaks about God’s call to be in the world and do God’s work in the world. Where is God working in the world and in your community? How can salvation be found in the church, i.e. within your particular community? How can salvation be found in bringing the church into the world?

7. Doyle reflects, “God has constantly chosen people and sent them into the world to be about God’s work in the world... To answer the call [with the word] ‘yes’ is to be part of the diaspora.” Doyle cites Bishop Michael Curry, “The diaspora is called to share God’s dream with the world that is experiencing a nightmare.”² How can your church community respond to God’s call to be a diaspora in the world? What might this mean?

8. How do we “unlock the Babylonian captivity” among our communities and in the world? How does the “church on wheels” serve as an example of entering the world rather than retreating from it?

Scripture: Psalm 137

Becoming the Church That Flourishes

“You’re not bringing those kids here!”³ With fists clenched, the man in the audience was clearly not going to listen any further to Charles Rotramel’s talk. Rotramel, director of reVision, was speaking with members of St. Martin’s Episcopal Church and Gethsemane United Methodist Church to advocate for a new partnership with at-risk and incarcerated youth. “We know who those kids are, and you’re not bringing them here. We’ve spent the last forty years keeping exactly those kids out of this church.” Rotramel, for his part, was flummoxed by the interruption. On the spot, and with little faith that he might actually show up, Rotramel did the only thing that came to mind: he invited the outraged man to meet some of the kids in the program the very next day. That was four years ago and Lewis Gammon is now a 92-year-old devoted volunteer and one of reVision’s fiercest advocates. A World War II veteran, he has been doing as much sharing as listening as a mentor with the ever-expanding reVision program⁴ once a week, every week, since that angry exchange in 2009.

On Sunday mornings, St. Martin’s Episcopal Church celebrates high liturgical service, with all the pomp and circumstance of a formal church. But on Thursday evenings, cardboard is laid down. Hip-hop music blasts. Young people break dance. This is what happens when a congregation seeks to move their ministry beyond the million dollar homes of Uptown, Houston, towards at-risk teens who need sanctuary and

mentorship. ReVision is not simply a place for young people to dance and have an evening meal; it is an environment for flourishing. The teens are given an opportunity for education, mentoring, and counseling, all things these young people need but to which they have very little access.

For some congregations, growing is easy. For those planted in burgeoning suburban areas, taking root and flourishing is the natural order of things. Families are attracted to their programs and services, schools and social activities. But for other congregations, especially inside the city, churches are struggling to survive. As was the experience of Gammon, their neighborhoods have changed many times over and their members struggle to keep pace with the demographics of their communities. They simply do not know how to reach the communities in which they are nestled.

Rotramel sees his work at reVision as a way to transform both churchgoers and the people who languish on the margins. What Rotramel has learned from his time building relationships with these kids is that it is not just about the kids. The church members serving as mentors, as well as the youth, are being transformed. “This is not about delivering services to kids,” Rotramel explains. “This is about being in relationship with them.”

He has found that people inside the walls of the church are just as hungry for these types of relationships. “They’re starved for that. They’ve read the Bible. They’ve read the Gospels. They know what Jesus wants them to do. They just need the opportunity to do it.”⁵ Rotramel believes everyone is transformed in a relationship of kinship because Jesus stands in the space where they come together. Many volunteers come into the experience with their own firmly established paradigms of how the world works. But when their own paradigms bump up against someone who has had an experience of the world in direct opposition to their own, the foundations of that worldview tend to get shaken up. “It’s a spiritual experience,” Rotramel explains. Deeply informed by the work of Father Gregory Boyle with gang members of Los Angeles, Rotramel says, “It’s just like Fr. Boyle says, ‘There is no us and them, only us.’”⁶

At last month’s Board of Stewards committee meeting for St. Martin’s and Gethsemane, Gammon, the red-faced skeptic Rotramel encountered at his introductory meeting, stood up and gave a statement to the board: “I’ve been a church member for 72 years, and this is the best thing I’ve ever seen the church do.”

The image of **diaspora** is the image of dispersion, a church dispersed to the ends of the earth. After the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE, the Hebrews were deported to Babylon where they struggled to find an identity as a foreign people in a foreign land. Psalm 137 laments the destruction of the City of David and describes a longing to return.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.⁷

This song sets deep vulnerability, open wounds, and painful failure on display for all to see. The Hebrews lamented being unable to defend their tribes and land. Where was God? What sin did we commit? What did we do? These are often the questions asked of by a people of faith who are in turmoil and distress. Nevertheless, after their grieving the Hebrews built a life and entered into relationship with those around them. A vast majority not only survived but also thrived in this land. After 70 years of

captivity, the Persian Empire, led by Cyrus the Great, defeated the Babylonians and freed the Hebrews. The vast majority of Hebrews remained in Babylon.⁸ Only the poorest returned to Jerusalem to rebuild their homeland.

Doyle describes the church as this kind of “diaspora,” scattered all over the world, among foreign peoples and cultures. Some churches choose to deal with their alienation by attempting to retreat within their own communities, building a sub-culture away from the culture, and existing within themselves. They have their own language (church speak), culture, and exclusionary practices. Fear governs how they have chosen to deal with the world. When churches become insular, they become kingdoms to themselves. But Doyle cautions, “No longer does the Church corner the market on community life, networking, social services, weddings, funerals, or healthcare.”⁹ If they are to continue to flourish and carry out their callings, they can no longer exist in isolation.

Like reVision’s work with the juvenile gang population of Houston, there are signs that the church is moving out into the world. These groups can embrace both the pain of being a diaspora community and the hope of making a life in a land that is not their own. After a long career in the oil and gas industry, Barbara Goodson began a ministry cutting hair for those who could not afford to go to a salon.¹⁰ When the oil industry in Houston began to be affected by falling oil prices, the company for which Goodson was working went under and left Goodson without a job. She saw this as an opportunity to respond to God’s calling that had been swelling up inside of her for many years: *Have Shears Will Travel*. Now Goodson takes her mobile hair salon to the homeless and elderly, to the sick and newly released from jail. For Goodson, and many others in the church body, a volatile world is not cause for retreat, but an opportunity to enter into the pain and suffering of life in order to bring the presence of grace, mercy, hope, and love.

For Goodson, cutting hair is feeling the scalp of the tired and desperate, the lonely and the poor. It is reaching into the soil of humanity and touching her own deep need. As a church we are called to move forward in this way. It is only after we lose ourselves that we are truly found.

Calling Prayer

You meet us where we are
In all our doubts and fears
In what we see of ourselves and what we do not
The gap between our being and not being
Between our becoming and the many dead ends we've run across
God, we see ourselves in these places of promise and joy
Places where there is little certainty, always open-ended questions
But where you are,
Among those who long, those who weep,
Those who ache, and those who feel the Kingdom pressing onto this world
Help us move closer to that place

Amen

For Further Study

Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Avery, 2012) and *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015). Brown's videos are also available on www.TheWorkofthePeople.com.

Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

Endnotes

¹ See Brené Brown's *Daring Greatly* (New York: Avery, 2012) and *Rising Strong* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) on vulnerability and shame.

² Rt. Rev. Michael Bruce Curry, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, was elected the 27th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church.

³ For further reading on Boyle's work with the gang members of Los Angeles, see *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

⁴ ReVision plans to double their reach by July 2016 from an existing 13 church partners and 250 volunteers to 30 church partners and 500 volunteers.

⁵ From an interview with Charles Rotramel of reVision.

⁶ Rotramel references Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press), 188. Full quotation: "No daylight to separate—just 'us'... Often we strike the high moral distance that separates 'us' from 'them,' and yet it is God's dream come true when we recognize that there exists no daylight between us."

⁷ vv. 1–6, NRSV.

⁸ Rainer Albertz, David Green trans., *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 127.

⁹ *Church*, 17.

¹⁰ <http://www.epicenter.org/article/career-shift-puts-stylists-art-on-the-road/> (accessed September 20).



3

The I AM of the Church: How We Will “Do” Evangelism

Human identity and the identity of the church are found in the name of God as “I AM.” This is an expression of God’s existence, God’s essential being. In this film, Doyle speaks about how the church can engage in “generous evangelism” in order to fulfill its calling and identity as “I AM.” Here we see that when the church gives itself away, it will find itself and its mission in the world.

Questions for Conversation

1. Doyle describes the two ways in which people take “the mission of God, the mission of reconciliation”: through service and through evangelism. He says he comes to understand evangelism as “generous evangelism.” How is this kind of evangelism truer?

2. Doyle sees the Gospel, or “good news,” as expressed in the relationship between God and humanity: “I am” and “we are.” He references Moses’s encounter with God as the angel and burning bush in Exodus (3:1-15?). This is where God reveals God’s name to Moses as “I am.”¹ How is the identity of the church found in God’s existence as “I AM”?

3. How can the church live into “generous evangelism”?

4. Doyle speaks about the “**attractional church**,” i.e. the church that attempts to draw people into the church building.² Why do church congregations need to be generous and hospitable to the person “who shows up at church”? Doyle observes that churches often communicate the message “but” to these visitors. What message should the church be communicating? How is this more consistent with how Jesus offered himself?

5. Doyle reflects, “The reality is that part of that unhealthy living inside of ourselves is we like to set the boundaries pretty high, so that [we] are not paying attention to what is going on in [our lives].” How do we often set these high boundaries for ourselves? What does that say about our view of grace, love, and mercy?

6. How is the church sometimes not clear about what we are sharing? What does it mean for a church to “give it away”? What often prevents churches from doing this? Doyle refers to Jesus’ encounter with the “Rich Young Ruler.”³ This is often interpreted as a message about “stewardship and money... [but] Jesus is constantly talking about giving away your religiosity in terms of a true faith, in terms of a living faith.” How is this a more difficult and yet more fruitful conversation than simply talking about stewardship?

7. Doyle shares the example of a community that works with young men who are in prison as those who are giving away their religion. How does this speak to the “I AM,” or the essential identity of the church?

8. Doyle speaks about Bishop John Elbridge Hines, tireless race relations reformer in Houston, who said that the Episcopal Church would be faithful if they gave away all and closed the doors of the Church.⁴ As a young bishop, Doyle said that he found this to be the opposite of what the Church should do, but later realized that Hines was correct. How is this attitude appropriate and faithful to the identity of the Church?

Scripture: Exodus 3:13–16; Mark 10:17–27 (Matthew 19:16–26)

Becoming the I AM of the Church

Churchgoers often criticize, “I wish the church would do this or that?” The response to these people should be, “But you are the church.” Congregants who are quick to criticize the actions of the church do not realize that they make up the “body,” i.e., the organic structure of the church, without which the church cannot function. These people often interfere with the church functioning by blaming others for what they are commissioned to do as the church itself.

Reverend Jenni Fairbanks started a congregation out of the Disciples of Christ Church that she was serving. The vision for this group was to include those who do not normally make their way into a church sanctuary on Sunday morning. The very definition of the word “sanctuary” notwithstanding, these are people who feel out of place, who are disabled, who are down and out, and who are part of the LGBT community. Fairbanks created this place not to make a political statement, but to meet people where they were, to fulfill her own sense of “I AM” through her calling. She saw that there were churches of two types who were “welcoming” these groups. There are the churches that are wholly inclusive and welcoming, but often end up preaching about LGBT issues every Sunday. On Sunday mornings, some Christians in the LGBT community do not want to hear about LGBT issues to the exclusion of everything else. They want to find connection with God and others, like many other Christians who worship on Sunday mornings. The other kind of church is the “emergent” church that attracts people with multiple body piercings, tattoos, and

colored hair. Many Christians who are LGBT come to these services because they feel that they fit in among all those who do not conform to the mold of mainstream popular culture. But many of these emergent churches are governed by a very conservative, even ultra-reformed theology, so their sense of “fitting in” expires as soon as the veil around the church’s conservative roots is lifted. A person once shared to a pastor of one of these emergent churches, “I want to fall in love with this church, but I know it will never accept me for who I am.” The overt message is ‘Come as you are,’ but, in practice, what they mean is ‘Come as you are, as long as you become something else later.’

Fairbanks would not describe herself as a progressive, or edgy, hipster type. She identifies as a mother of two, living near the Meyerland area of Houston, who is simply responding to the calling she has heard for her life. Her church community has responded by supporting her ministry, providing her space for worship and financial support. Faithfulness has been met with faithfulness.

As Christians, we are becoming who we are through an engagement with the “I AM.” Only the “I AM” dictates this kind of transformation. We, as a community, cannot create this transformation, but rather we are present with, support, and help to nurture it. This image of “I AM” is drawn by the biblical narrative of Moses and his encounter with the theophany, the burning bush and the angel, on Mt. Sinai.⁵ After God calls Moses to free the Hebrew captives, Moses asks God what name should Moses say sends him. The voice reveals the name, but the problem is that the name is given three times:

I am who I am.

I am.

The LORD, (YHWH) the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.⁶

These various meanings of the name of God reveal that the essence of God cannot be captured in one meaning. In the mythology of the Near and Middle East, to know the name of a god is to be able to capture that god, to control that god. The message of the name YHWH shows that God cannot be controlled, much like the difficulty in trying to describe the verb of being, “to be.” It is an easy task to define the verbs “to run,” “to walk,” “to write,” but an easy definition of the verb “to be” eludes us.

When we encounter God, we are encountering God's existence on God's terms. Our own existence is shaped by God's own existence. We are called by God, this "I am," to encounter our own sense of "I am." In other words, Moses could not understand who he was and his own calling until he came face to face with the fiery messenger. This is God's act of being in the world, to help us comprehend our own act of being in the world. But Moses could not grasp this. He insists that he is unworthy and incapable of carrying out God's mission. Yet YHWH seeks to meet Moses even in Moses's own misgivings. We might have ideas about what we should be and what we should be doing, but it is not for us to decide. Being a part of a community means helping one another to hear God's calling for us more clearly and to support each other in carrying out our callings.

Doyle often speaks of how relationships are not a part of our church and mission. They *are* our church and mission. He says, "In point of fact, the very health of the whole organization rests upon the health and vitality of the smallest relationships. It is out of these micro relationships that creativity and innovation spring, giving life to the whole."⁷

It is in relationship that we nurture our own "I am" and our response to God's calling. People of all different backgrounds need a place "to be" and to grow in this "being." They need a place, both welcoming and challenging, both nurturing and constructive. They do not need places of shame, condemnation, judgment, and discouragement. In the latter environment, relationships are often authoritarian and controlling. Just like a plant cannot be ordered to sprout from the ground, the sense of "I am" is not something we get to control. It can only be nurtured. It is instead a relationship, a dance, a back and forth. It is like the reading of the psalms, an engagement and a response.

The word "evangelism" is anglicized from the Greek word *euangelion* meaning, "good message" or "good news." And yet, in its efforts to spread this "good message," many times what the church says it communicates is different than what the church actually communicates. As with the example of Reverend Fairbanks, churches often mix the gospel, or good news, with bad news. "God loves you, but you are not accepted." Or "God forgives, but you need to get your life together." Or worse still, "Come as you are, but change when you get here."

There is a reciprocal effect of accepting others. It's a dynamic exchange: when we accept others, we come to understand and accept ourselves for who we are. Those who are the most critical of others are often very critical of themselves. Likewise, churches that often preach a gospel of condemnation, do not know the good news of freedom and grace for themselves. When we learn to embrace the "others" in our communities, we also learn to embrace the rejected and condemned parts of ourselves. How can congregations move toward helping people live out their identities in the One who is the "I am"? Perhaps, it starts with conversations across the table, to listen more than to speak, to understand more than to be understood.

The church's mission is not to identify who people are, but to help them express who they are. In a culture where our identities are informed by mass media, advertisements, and politics, the church need not be another type of identity-stamping organization. "Asian-American, male, theologian, philosopher, artist" can describe us; or, "North American, female, writer, mother of two" can safely affix us to neat categories, but a series of descriptions cannot capture the sense of who we are. This sense is only given in our encounter with the one who is the "I am," who sends us where we need to go, and who sends us where we need to be.

Responsive Reading for the Church of I AM

Celebrant: Call us to the places of suffering, of poverty, of sickness, and imprisonment.

People: Send us to those places, so we might find peace, healing, and freedom.

Celebrant: Call us to the places of dry desert, demons, and darkness.

People: Send us to those places, so we might dig wells, cast out demons, and bring light.

Celebrant: Call us to the places of deep within our souls, where even angels fear to tread.

People: Send us to those places, within us, to meet you where you are, to meet us where we are.

For Further Study

Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books; Revised ed., 2013).

Daniel L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

Endnotes

¹ The four-letter name of God, also known as the “tetragrammaton,” is transliterated as YHWH, and usually translated as “I am.” In English translations the word “Lord” (all capitals) is used. This follows a tradition of not pronouncing the name of God, but instead using the word, *adoni* (lord), as a substitute. The rabbis were careful to not use the “Lord’s name in vain” and so they adopted this nomenclature instead. See the following curriculum for various translations of the divine name.

² This is opposed to a model that attempts to meet people outside the confines of the church building, sometimes called the “**missional**” model. See Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost for “attractional” church, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books; Revised ed., 2013) and Daniel L. Guder and Lois Barrett for “missional” church, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

³ Mark 10:17–27, Matthew 19:16–26.

⁴ Hines was the 22nd presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States and the youngest to hold that office. He also played an important part, alongside Bishop Desmond Tutu, in dismantling apartheid in South Africa.

⁵ Exodus 3:13–16.

⁶ Or sometimes translated: “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be.”

⁷ *Church*, 123.



4

Eucharistic Community: How We Will Connect

Doyle begins this film by invoking the two images of the church receiving the Holy Spirit. First, he describes Jesus breaking through locked doors to engage his followers and breathing the Spirit on them in order to send them out into the world.¹ The second image describes tongues of fire coming down to those gathered in Jerusalem, bringing the Spirit upon them.² Both powerful stories reveal how God shared God's self with the disciples, but they also ask us to go a step further and share ourselves outside the walls of the church. For eucharistically-centered believers, that is

essentially who we as Christians are. We are a community who experiences connectedness at the Eucharistic table and then shares that same spirit out in the world. In this film, Doyle asks us to envision what this connectedness, this sharing of God's self, looks like in our unstable world.

Questions for Conversation

1. “When we experience Eucharist together, we are sharing in the same act of all the saints that came before and all that will come together,” Doyle says. There is mystery in that, a ***mysterium tremendum***, in not knowing exactly how that works, centuries later.³ And as Eucharistic believers we celebrate this “numinous connection” every week. What experiences have you had coming to the altar, moving from a vertical share (God with us), into the horizontal (us with the world)?

2. Principles of Newtonian physics were not limited to the realm of science only. Since the 19th century, we started to create organizations that were reasoned and process-oriented. We instituted hierarchies that did not necessarily reflect how the church had been organized for centuries prior. Instead, we began to experience a community that was linear and wholly without mystery. Doyle explains this shift that happened in the Age of Enlightenment. “Reason became a great gift... and a curse.” Reflect on hierarchical organizations of which you are a part. How could the idea that knowledge need not be shared in old “top-down” linear modes affect the structure of your family, your office, your community organization, your church?

3. Jesus's specificity intends that we remember our interconnectedness – even with those who aren't inside the church walls. Doyle says, “The task of the church in this VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world... is to think of communities and how to create organizations that work the way God intends for humans to work.” How is God inviting you out of your routine? How is God putting it on your heart to say ‘yes’ and be vulnerable in your interconnectedness?

4. “Here's the real radical news,” Doyle says, “God is present in your workplace. God is present in your family.” How might we discover God where God is out in the world, not just in the various iterations of “church centers”? In what ways can we be open to the presence of God in places we haven't sought before?

5. God is part of the dispersal model. Doyle remarks, “God intends to undertake the work of generous evangelism.” How are we going to share what we have learned about God in the world outside of traditional, attractional models of church?

6. Doyle spends some time exploring the concept of curiosity and its importance in our understanding of ourselves as a part of the Eucharistic community. He describes the word icon as “the painted image of God, or of God’s action in some transparent way that allows the viewer to look into the relationship of God. The icon allows us to say, ‘I just saw God do that.’” What does it mean to say that curiosity is the icon of our world?

Scripture: John 20:19–23, Acts 2:1–13, Mark 14:22–24

Becoming the Eucharistic Community

From the earliest teachings of the Eucharist, Christians have understood the body of Christ to be a diaspora. A part of the Eucharistic thanksgiving of the *Didache* reads: “Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.”⁴ The thanksgiving meal symbolized the coming together of the church from across the world. The “bread” that is the symbol of Christ’s body is “scattered.” In this way, the church is not a central hub of community, relationships, information, and resources. Rather, it is a wide net that is interconnected throughout the world.

Doyle observes that we have “created a system by which people support the church rather than the church support[ing] the people in making community.”⁵ It is often said that the church is the only organization that exists not for its own members. Too many churches see their mission as supporting their own organizations rather than reaching out to the world. Doyle continues:

When we do this we take power and energy out of the organization—we take life out of the organism. The only way to build a vital and healthy mission in the future will be to engage with people in real time, where they are, and to listen and work with them to create the new living church.⁶

The “living church” is one that is organized around the creating of community. German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaks of a kind of “natural life” that brings people into community and is in direct opposition to the “unnatural” life brought about by artificial and authoritarian structures:

The natural can never be a construct of some part of some authority in the fallen world. Neither the individual nor any community or institution in the preserved world can set and decide what is natural. It has already been set and decided, and in such a way that the individual, the communities, the institutions receive their respective share in it. What is natural cannot be determined by an arbitrary construct [*Setzung*]; instead, every arbitrary construct of this kind, whether by an individual, a community, or an institution, will inevitably be shattered and will destroy itself against the natural that already exists. Injury and violation of the natural avenge itself on the violator.⁷

Bonhoeffer writes his treatise in the context of the Nazi Third Reich, and it remains incomplete because of his imprisonment and execution in a concentration camp. The “natural” was a way to talk about the tendency to move toward life, specifically the life that anticipates the coming of Jesus Christ. This is a life of resurrection and hope, rather than one that “closes itself” off to this possibility. While the unnatural will, in time, crumble through its constant opposition to the natural, the natural will always flourish. In Bonhoeffer’s words, “life itself is on the side of the natural.”⁸

Churches that are fixated on single authoritarian models of leadership and governance move against the organic life of the “natural.” These are closed, rather than open and distributive systems. They feed off the sheer force of charisma, power, demagoguery, and manipulation. Christian history is littered with these types of churches and it would be unproductive to name examples. These systems prize power over mutual trust between clergy and congregants. It is easier to manage congregants within the system than to encourage their movement out into the world in deep, sometimes messy, relationships. Under this type of governance, the Eucharist becomes an exclusive meal on which only members feed. It is not an inclusive system where the world is welcomed: “Take; this is my body” and “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”⁹ While the Eucharist is only transformative for those who are Christians, it is something that is offered to the world so that many, not few,

might come to the table. The essence of the great thanksgiving feast is to distribute God's presence in the world.

Congregations that have closed themselves off, that have become increasingly insular, fear that sharing resources with the community will deplete the church of its own resources. But these fears are born of a fundamental belief in a system of scarcity rather than abundance.¹⁰ The fear manifests in one of two ways: hoarding or extravagant spending. When congregations and their leadership are able to operate out of a healthy view of God's provisions, they wisely share their resources with the community.

We learn how God wants us to choose to act—out of scarcity or abundance—through the image of Jesus' return to his disciples and his breathing of the Spirit of peace onto them. This act is the ultimate expression of God's extravagant love, or *chesed* (Hebrew). While the first disciples hide behind locked doors in fear of the consequences of the cross, Jesus transcends physical and personal barriers to share life-giving breath. Even when the disciples close themselves off to the world, Jesus presses into the closed room in order to move them out to the world with the gift of grace and forgiveness. This is God's tenacious love.

The Spirit given at Pentecost expresses God's creation of the church and shares the gospel to the diaspora. Jews "from every nation" convened in Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Pentecost when the Spirit descended upon the disciples to share the good news in the various languages of those gathered. The Spirit moved the ministry of the disciples into the particularities and diversity of the world. In reading the story of Pentecost, we see the church, not as an insular institution given to fear and self-protection, but a church rich in the diversity that only comes from fearless inclusivity. Pentecost shows that the church is formed when it speaks in a language the whole world can hear.

Speaking the language of the world is not about conformity or accommodation with the world, but rather, it is about God moving into the world and finding habitation among God's people. Some decaying church communities in transitional areas of Houston spend their resources just to keep the lights on and the water running. Retired congregants use their social security money and retirement pensions to forestall the evaporation of the image of the church remembered from their childhood,

colored more vividly by their memories of a once-flourishing body of Christ. There are other churches going through similar transitions of declining membership and dwindling offerings that decide to let go of the past. They find other Christian communities with whom they can share their space. They sell valuable land in order to offer scholarship money to disadvantaged youth in the community and to help support other institutions. Instead of making the building an idol, these Christians attempt to see where God is working in their community and worship the living icon that exists among people. It is a VUCA world. We, the church, have two options: retreat and protect, or engage and share.

How can your congregation become the Eucharistic community that is self-giving and nurturing to others? How can we build a system where information is freely shared and relationships are boldly embraced? Reflect on the church as you see it. Identify how leadership is structured and if members are trusted to carry out the mission of the church. Too rigid an organization can crush an organism. In order for life to flourish, there must be a balance of tending to the body while allowing it room to grow. Artificial and un-natural growth stimulants will only lead to unhealthy forms of life. Nurturing and supporting the relationships that already exist will lead to health and flourishing.

Eucharistic Prayer

This is the body,
broken, vulnerable,
to be shared, tasted, eaten,
parts of God,
given to the world,
the crushed wheat rises
to nourish and feed our faith
at the table,
an open invitation

This is the cup,
poured out, as blood,
as life and salvation,
drunk deeply to quench our parched souls

crushed grapes,
staining our lips
with the violence that we have done
to God and others
we find forgiveness
as we share this common cup
with our sisters, and our brothers
with our friends, and our enemies
Amen

For Further Study

Walter Brueggemann, “**The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity,**” *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.

Endnotes

¹ John 20:19–23.

² Acts 2:1–13.

³ *Mysterium tremendum* is a Latin term used by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*, meaning “fearful mystery.” For Otto, because God is “wholly other” we are both repelled by God and fascinated by God.

⁴ 9:4, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, trans. Tony Jones, was written in the first century and is the earliest known catechism of the church, <http://www.paracletepress.com/didache.html> (accessed Sept. 27, 2015).

⁵ *Church*, 142.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Works, Volume 6: Ethics*, Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott trans. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress), 175–176.

⁸ Ibid, 177.

⁹ Mark 14:22–24.

¹⁰ For more insights on the ideas of scarcity and abundance, see Walter Brueggemann’s article, “**The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity**,” *Christian Century*, March 24–31, 1999. Brueggemann’s videos are also available on www.TheWorkofthePeople.com.



5

Organic Church: How We Will Grow

In this fifth film, Doyle questions old notions of measuring church growth. If we are to truly engage in the work of growing a new church, Doyle asks us to resist old ways of thinking, not only about the economic model of the church, but also the structure of the church as we have come to know it.

Questions for Conversation

1. At the ordination of a priest, the Bishop will often invoke the gospel lesson where Jesus quells the doubts of his followers: “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the field to do the work.”¹ Doyle believes that God is breaking us open to see a variety of different ways to be and create in Christian communities. There are times in our own faith journeys when we have doubts about whether or not we are the right laborers God wants doing God’s work. How do we do the work of building Christian communities despite our own doubts?
2. What are some ways we can think beyond traditional modes of “outreach” for the church? How can we make the church a place where we are encouraged to be vulnerable, break bread, and work together?
3. If the economic goal of the new organic church should go beyond just sustaining its own economic viability, how might we envision a new economic model?
4. Doyle asks us to reimagine the parable of the seeds² where we are the laborers in charge of protecting the seeds in the fields. We have a responsibility in building new Christian communities that shoo away the birds, tend the fields, and water the ground so that Jesus, who is God’s harvest, may flourish. In this interpretation, how do we as laborers tend to the organic church in its new incarnation?
5. Can we finally relinquish control over where the seeds are thrown? What would it take for us to allow growth to happen around us, finding grace in the process, instead of solely valuing the product of our aspirations?

Scripture: Luke 10:2 (Matthew 9:37–38), Mark 4:2-9 (Matthew 13:3–9; Luke 8:4–8)

Becoming the Organic Church

For things to grow, they need to be nurtured in an environment that promotes growth. Plants require healthy, rich soil. People require care, encouragement, and love. The words “organ” and “organic” are related to the Greek word for “instrument” or “tool.” Just as instruments and tools are made to serve a particular purpose, organic things live to fulfill their ultimate purpose, to flourish.

On the other hand, artificial systems exist in the absence of life. There might be the appearance of growth, but it is growth produced only by sheer force of power. The church is called to be life-giving. To extend the concept of “the organic” to the church, let us use the analogy of cultivating a plant, wherein the plant is the community at large, the soil refers to those called to be the church, and the field is the institution of the church. The field and the soil exist in service to the plant, not the other way around. When we set up churches that are persuaded only to nurture the system, we build an artificial system, one that exists in the absence of life.

The parables of Jesus illustrate the organic nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus, being a skilled day laborer, often used agricultural models in order to present God’s mission in the world.³ We are to be co-workers with God in gathering God’s plentiful harvest. God grows the garden and we harvest it. We see another example of God’s organic Kingdom in the “Parable of the Sower.”⁴ Fr. Robert Farrar Capon interprets the parable to mean that God is the sower and the seed is Jesus.⁵ In this reading, the laborer nurtures the environment in which the “Word” is sown. Here, Jesus asks his disciples to join God in the work of providing the environment in which Jesus can be found throughout the world.

To be co-laborers with God requires us to trust God in conditions that might be out of our control. As Doyle describes:

The future Church will need to invest in a life that embraces randomness and creativity, allowing for locally-led ministry in a variety of ever-diverse contexts. It will have to become comfortable with interchangeable parts and reusing old traditions in new ways. The organization will change.⁶

The word “organization” shares the same root as “organic,” or something living. But when the church organization no longer exists to nourish community building, then the organs fail, just as a heart fails to pump blood or a kidney fails to filter it. Organs function to serve the whole organism, not themselves.

Doyle tells the story of a church plant that started out like many churches start, meeting in a school building. As the church planter made more relationships in the community, they found they needed more space. They needed a church building. The denomination provided a physical structure on purchased land so that the pastor did not have to worry about building rental. However, as they grew, the members of her church decided that they wanted to “do church” the traditional way and spend their time and resources in sustaining the building. The pastor regretted the decision to receive a church building because of the responsibilities that came with it and, more devastatingly, the energy it took away from building relationships in the community. The unfortunate outcome was that the “structure” ended up robbing life from what it was intended to nurture.

It is not that attractional churches do not serve a purpose; on the contrary, they do. But they must improve in the way they bring people into the community and be innovative in the ways they approach liturgy and communal life. The real challenge is not to build larger attractional churches, but to nurture smaller communities, communities that are often more diverse and sustainable. Again, we would do well to take our cues from nature. The natural world thrives on diversity. Organisms that can adapt and are more resistant to a variety of diseases are those that have diversity built into their very genetics. Rich biodiversity in an ecosystem contributes to the strength and health of all organisms within it. In order for an organism to continue to exist, it must not only use its resources wisely, but also generously. The ecosystem seeks to maintain balance. Most organisms do not seek to use up all of their resources for their own growth and development. Organisms in the natural order share the system in which they exist. They make ample room for others. Without a commitment to living in community, we put others and ourselves at risk of extinction.

Imagine one species taking all the resources of an ecosystem. Doyle insists:

The church must be about the work of inspiring generosity in giving and in action. It will have to become entrepreneurial and experimental in its funding of

new communities and new congregations. It will have to understand that the new church will be formed with technology as a hub of life and not an addition to life. The church's website is more important than its address and its phone number because people will find it first in the cloud and only then geographically.⁷

Technology dictates the way we live and act in community. It is also a resource that can be used to promote service in the world. It should not replace communication, but it can enhance it. Virtuality should not replace physicality, but if we use it in the service of others, it can move us towards physicality.

Nineteen years ago, Matt Russell set up shop at a Dietrich's Coffee Shop in the Montrose area of Houston and asked people who had had negative experiences of church to meet with him and be interviewed:

My intention is not to invite you back to church... I want to hear what happened, how you felt, and what you wish was different. Will you just come and tell me your story?⁸

His interviews with initial respondents led him to interview still others who reported similar experiences. A single theme emerged over a period of nine months of interviews. People left church not because of theological differences but because "people in the church were more invested in the process of being right than in the process of being honest."⁹ It seemed what churchgoers lacked was the ability to be vulnerable and open to others. In short we struggle to truly share our lives.

Russell discovered the solution to be found in the problem itself. He invited 30 people from among the 70 who were interviewed to dinner to share the results of his findings. Many of these people interviewed were those in recovery from drug, alcohol, sex, eating, or gambling addictions. They had been rejected by various congregations because they were bravely confronting problems some Christians have a tendency to deny. Russell then asked the provocative question, "What if we became the answer to these problems?" Out of this inquiry, a community called Mercy Street was born. Nineteen years later, it continues to thrive because the congregation has the courage to engage with those in the community and honestly share, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, "life together."

How can the church help those in the community be the answer to their own problems? How can the church help in the sharing of resources: time, energy, money, information, and life, with those who are not the church? How can the church be involved in the life of the stranger so that it might see Jesus in the stranger? Engagement requires the church to imagine itself as something more than buildings and structures. We are those who are called to till the ground with God, in order to help others know the truth of Jesus.

A Prayer for the Planting

From these hands, help us till the ground
Soil sometimes hard, clay and stones
Dirt sometimes arid, dry and dusty
From these seeds, help us to wait for fruit
 Trusting that you will germinate
 Life from death, birth from teardrop kernel
 Pushing its way upward
 Green, leafy palms opening to receive your grace
Help us to enter into this world, all the mess and manure
 So that we might see you there,
 In the abundance of harvest
 Reaping a bounty of joy
Amen

For Further Study

Matt Russell and Angie Ward, “Can Your Church Handle the Truth?”

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2009/spring/canyourchurchhandle.html>

(accessed September 28, 2015).

Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002).

Endnotes

¹ Luke 10:2 and Matthew 9:37–38.

² Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 61.

³ Often the word *teckton* is translated as “carpenter” to describe Jesus’s day work. However, considering the very few carpentry references in the New Testament, it would be better to translate it as skilled “day laborer.” In this way, Jesus identifies with all those who work for a day’s wage.

⁴ Matthew 13:3–9; Mark 4:2–9; Luke 8:4–8.

⁵ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 61.

⁶ *Church*, 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ Matt Russell and Angie Ward, “Can Your Church Handle the Truth?” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2009/spring/canyourchurchhandle.html> (accessed September 28, 2015).

⁹ *Ibid.*



6

The Self-Forming Church: How We Will Claim Our Christian Journey

In the sixth part of this film series, Doyle considers what it means for us to be members of a community engaged in the act of Kingdom building. For Doyle, this building requires us to confront our nature as human beings to organize, limit, define, cleanse, and contain. It is an uncomfortable, messy process, but we are called into our discomfort to discover God's true intentions. If we are brave in our endeavors, we just might discover God's true gift to us: the privilege of a joyful community in that Kingdom building.

Questions for Conversation

1. Doyle likens the church to God's making of a garden. As humans, we like to build walls around our gardens; we want to plant it in neat rows where everything has a place. We fool ourselves into thinking we have mastered garden making, but, as Doyle says, God is constantly pulling at the walls, encouraging the garden to grow wild. What structures, egos, and preconceived notions do we have to let go of in order to allow space for God's bigger plans for the garden?

2. What does God's mission of reconciliation through service and evangelism mean in our world today?

3. In the age of small businesses, crowd funding, and internet start-ups, people are making and creating now more than ever. God's spirit is moving people out in the world. How can we as Christian communities recognize this push towards a creative/maker community and attempt to co-create together in communities of faith? It can be difficult to move away from current church ministries, e.g. Visitor Committee, Vestry, Sunday School coordination. How do we reimagine what co-creation looks like without limiting this spirit of creating by attempting only to assimilate it into existing church culture?

4. At the same time, how can we unleash the makers in ourselves? How do we get out of our own way and allow the gospel to come alive in us?

5. Doyle explains that in the self-forming church preaching starts to come from the stories of the communities' members, not just the priest's imparting of scriptural wisdom through sermons. In the same way, breaking of bread takes on new meaning. God is present with us in mysterious ways through storytelling. It can happen without structure, money, or coordination. What is your part in the future church as we form it, in the gospel happening now? What are the modes in which church communities might be able to use storytelling as a vehicle for the gospel to be made in the world?

6. Doyle recalls the familiar lines from the Gospel of Matthew: "When two or more are gathered together, God is present there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20). Doyle says this is a foretaste of the Kingdom and asks us to understand the Eucharist

as something greater than what happens on any given Sunday. Where do we experience communion outside of the altar on Sunday morning?

7. Doyle admits that his heart is broken when he sees the inability of people to see how much love they are receiving from God, and how little they would have to do to grasp it all. But his heart is broken open when he receives or sees love being shared openly and without reservation, even among the seemingly undeserving. In thinking about our own communities, where can we find opportunities to both accept the vastness of God's love and also unreservedly share it with others?

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12–31

Becoming the Self-Forming Church

Elier Rodriguez is seeking to make a life for himself in Austin, Texas, among other creatives/makers. In the beginning, this looks like sleeping on a friend's couch, working at a coffee bar in the mornings, and making jewelry at night to sell. He is working his way into a community college, where he hopes to gain the tools to become an entrepreneur. Once a month he returns to Houston, where his mother and younger brothers reside, and he finds faith and support through a faith community called projectCURATE. Within this group, theological learning is cultivated through a network of friendships. Rodriguez is shaped and transformed by these relationships. Jagged edges are rubbed smooth. The seeds of faith and thinking are encouraged to germinate and take root. In sharing how he sees God working in the world within this community, he helps to shape and transform others.

Rodriguez is what we could call a “self-maker.” This “self-maker” is not to be confused with the concept of the “self-made person.” Rodriguez's coming to be who he is cannot be done on his own or in isolation from others. It is continually supported through his life in God and community. Being a self-maker means Rodriguez is taking the initiative to form his life in the fashion that God has called for him. More appropriately, we see Rodriguez as part of a self-making system.

In talking about “sources of order” that are found in nature, Margaret Wheatley writes:

Life is about creation. This ability of life to create itself is captured in a strange-sounding new word, autopoiesis (from Greek, meaning self-production or self-making). Autopoiesis is life's fundamental process for creating and renewing itself, for growth and change. A living system is a network of processes in which every process contributes to all other processes. The entire network is engaged together in producing itself.¹

The term, *autopoiesis*, is a combination of two Greek words, *auto*, meaning “self,” and *poieo*, meaning “to make” or “to create.” It can be expressed as “self-making” or “auto creating.” But as Wheatley describes, this process is self-forming and self-renewing; each process is a contributor to the other and does not occur in isolation. For many churches, especially those in North America, this notion of creation through collaboration and sharing chafes against the uniquely American spirit of rugged individualism. Many churches would rather be autonomous (self-ruling) rather than a part of the process of self-creating. Dialogue, interdependence, shared learning, and cooperation are difficult especially when congregations are divided by ideological and theological differences. There is a latent belief that since we are autonomous and our congregation is growing under our autonomous rule, then we must be “right.” But this belief is neither faithful to the calling of the church nor sustainable. Against this notion, Doyle comments, “We must see differently, with new eyes, and work differently, with new ideas, if we are to allow for a living thriving autopoietic church.”²

If we take Paul's view of the “body” of Christ as the church seriously, we should not see any one congregation, or even any one denomination, as being autonomous over the other.³ Just as the hand does not exist without the heart, or the heart without the lungs, no one body part exists independently from the other. We can amputate a leg to save the whole body, but this would be at the expense of the whole. The current body of the church looks like a disembodied mess, a dissected biological specimen, when compared to the church of the first century. It is a surprise to many Christians to hear that one of the first major splits of the church came from the disagreement over one word in the Nicene Creed.⁴

Realistically, the church cannot revert back to “one holy, apostolic, and catholic church,” but parishioners, congregations, and denominations can find the humility to lay aside differences, albeit important ones, and find ways to come to the table of community. Admittedly, just like a Thanksgiving dinner table, this process is messy.

There will be black sheep and overly critical relatives. There will be angry, tired, and hungry toddlers. It is a table where we spill gravy and sling mash potatoes. It is a table where dad has had too much to drink and mom is busy stuffing us with more turkey. It is, at turns, a joyous and difficult gathering.

If we focus on sharing with and nurturing others, we come to find innovative ways to invite others to the table, to create other forms of sharing in community. We are open to these possible outgrowths of the church, in coffee shops, taverns, book groups, food trucks, and still other forms of Eucharist. When we are, we will enter into new relationships that are life-giving and self-sustaining. When we are closed to these possibilities, the church moves into the mode of trying to rule by power. Many large churches have been formed by charismatic and authoritarian figures, but this is the equivalent of the McDonald's model of doing church. Fast food restaurants may boast "one billion burgers served," but who can continue to live off of a diet of low-grade beef and high-fructose corn syrup? Many Christians who belong to megachurches are starting to realize that sugary sermons and empty-calorie programs will not get them the deep and formative relationships we all crave.

The alternative is communities that are small-batch and micro-brewed, close-knit and porous, communities that are generous in the sharing of their resources. They value relationships over structures, physical or otherwise. It is not to say that structure, organization, and liturgy are unimportant. But a body without a spirit is dead, just as a spirit without a body is merely an apparition. Holistic integration requires a negotiation between the structures and the life grown within these structures. Some plants cannot remain within their containers. They need to be re-planted in order to grow and flourish.

How can your congregation turn its energies toward being a part of the autopoietic church? How can your resources be shared with others? What are some places you recognize gaps in need, relationship, resources, dialogue, and services? How can your church community help stir the deepest joys in the lives of people in your neighborhood, in your city? How can your church community move from being (or thinking they must be) the central hub of resources, culture, and education toward networking with others and nurturing relationships?

From the word, *poieo*, we receive our words, “poetry” and “poem.” The beauty of poetry is in its economy of words that can be used to convey a rich range of meaning and experience. Rita Dove, U.S. Poet Laureate, describes poetry as “language at its most distilled and most powerful.” But poetry can be difficult for people to access. Interpreting poetry requires patience and a contemplative willingness that, especially in our world set on immediate gratification and easy hacks, is rare. The future is full of possibilities for the church. The God of hope is waiting for the church to move into the future with patience and effort, as well as generosity, curiosity, mercy, courage, and anticipation. Just as a poet painstakingly distills and empowers language over time, the future church cannot be formed quickly and easily. It is often said that one does not grow plants, but grows soil. This is a time-consuming process. Any meaningful work of the church will require this process. May your labors be blessed.

Moving into the World

We move into the world
as God moved into the world
where we were born in the soil
humans from humus
woman and man from womb of earth
We till the ground together
not to return to the places we have lost
but to venture out into new new places
setting forth into new lands
from where we hear the voice of God call
We make our home
though temporarily,
all as foreigners, resident aliens
to remind us that all we have
is not ours to hoard
but to be shared
between us and the one who is waiting for us
between this world and the world to come

Amen

A Blessing for Self-Makers

(Take the hands of those in your church community. Bless their vocations. Nurture their callings. Help them to become integrated in the self-making church.)

With these hands,
you will heal, bring peace,
save a life,
bring joy into this world,
play beautiful music;
create something new.

With your eyes,
you will see what no other person will see.
You will notice the outcasts, the lonely;
the ones in need.

With your ears,
you will hear words only given to and for you.
You will listen attentively.
You will receive the sound of tears.

With your mouth,
you will share words of comfort.
You will speak truth to power.
You will call forth life, where there is death.

In all that you do and are,
the God of love, who has created the world,
is creating life in you

For Further Study

Mary Karr, "A Perfect Mess," *Poetry*, December 2012, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/244928>.

Endnotes

¹ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006), 91–92.

² *Church*, 137.

³ 1 Corinthians 12:12–31.

⁴ The Nicene Creed (325 AD) states, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.” However, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed added “and from the Son” (*Filioque*, in the original Latin). The second ecumenical council of 381 AD made this modification to the Nicene Creed of 325 AD, which led to the “Great Schism” of 1054. After this, the Church divided into the Western Church (Latin) and the Eastern Church (Greek). Western churches maintain that the Spirit only proceeds from the Father, but not the Son. The division, based on irreconcilable differences, stems from the one word, *filioque*.



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