
THE COVENANT
QUARTERLY

Fall/Winter 2025

CONTENTS

Comment
Paul H. de Neui
1

Lessons from Kilimanjaro
Janet Ziegelbaur
3

I Never Thought This Would Happen
Mary Lou Sander
11

Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn:
1990 to the Present
Gary Sander
17

Reluctant Recruits...Our Story
Peter and Ruthie Dutton
28

Following to the Cross
Sanetta D. Ponton
38

Cultivating an Interpretive Community
for the Present and the Future
Bret M. Widman
51

Book Reviews
Alexandria Figueroa, Reid Kappe, Markus Nikkanen
66



THE COVENANT
QUARTERLY

ISSN 0361-0934 (print)
ISSN 2380-8829 (online)
Vol. 83, No. 2
Fall/Winter 2025

Editorial Committee

Paul H. de Neui, *editor*
Cathy Norman Peterson, *managing editor*
Beth Ernest, *associate editor*
Scott Burnett, *book review editor*

Library & Publications Committee

Dennis Edwards
Evan Kuehn
Andrew Meyer

THE COVENANT QUARTERLY is published two times a year (spring, fall) in Chicago, Illinois. Copyright © 2025 Covenant Publications, 8303 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631.

The Covenant Quarterly is the ministerial journal of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Published by North Park Theological Seminary through Covenant Publications, the *Quarterly* seeks to foster theological reflection on ministerial praxis in service to Covenant pastors and the broader church.

Editorial correspondence should be sent to the editor, Paul H. de Neui, c/o North Park Theological Seminary, 3225 W. Foster Ave., Chicago, IL 60625; (773) 244-6230; pdeneui@northpark.edu.

This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606; (888) 665-ATLA; atla@atla.com; www.atla.com.

This periodical is also abstracted by *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, P.O. Box 215, Myerstown, PA 17067, (717) 866-6734; admin@rtabstracts.org; www.rtabstracts.org.

Comment

*Paul H. de Neui, professor of missiology and intercultural studies,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

Since the earliest years of the Evangelical Covenant Church, global service has been an important part of its identity. In this issue we are proud to present reflections of five long-term Covenant global personnel who share what they have learned in their many years of intercultural vocational service as they now approach retirement. Collectively these leaders and their spouses have given over two hundred years of participation in and with God's mission in several countries throughout Africa and Asia. It is timely as we celebrate the Covenant's 140th anniversary as Mission Friends this year to listen to these words and reflect together on the many ways all of us participate in the *missio Dei* wherever we are called.

This issue also includes the text of a powerful sermon by Sanetta D. Ponton, associate pastor of justice, advocacy, and compassion at Metro Community Church in Englewood, New Jersey. Her prophetic message on Martin Luther King Jr. Day challenged everyone in the ballroom of the Sheraton Denver Downtown at the Midwinter Conference of 2025. We are grateful for her willingness to share these words with our readers and believe it will be a blessing for you.

Bret Widman, director of North Park Theological Seminary's office of contextual and lifelong learning, provides helpful insight in his article, "Cultivating an Interpretive Community for the Present and the Future." In our current complicated climate Widman suggests the possibility and process of developing congregations as interpretive communities, looking to our past to determine future direction.

We hope the book reviews presented in this issue will supplement your reading, edify your leadership, and encourage your prophetic voice to speak to those whom God has led under your care. Many thanks to our reviewers.

We are grateful to Scott Burnett for his assistance as book editor of the *Quarterly*, for all the members of the Covenant Publications team, and the generous financial support from the Covenant mission priority of Serve Clergy. Most of all we thank you, our readers, for the work you do in service to God's kingdom, taking these thoughts and ideas and putting them into practice for your own growth, as well as the transformation of the world. We welcome your comments, suggestions, and submissions for future issues.

PAUL H. DE NEUI

Lessons from Kilimanjaro

Janet Ziegelbaur, retired global personnel, Central African Republic

Janet, think of it as an adventure!” Standing in the restaurant parking lot after an evening service at church followed by dessert and coffee, seasoned Wycliffe missionary Marilyn Laszlo encouraged me to pursue a life of cross-cultural ministry with Wycliffe Bible Translators. I had first heard her talk about carving God’s word on a banana leaf with a thorn at the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship missions conference in Urbana, Illinois, as a young adult. Now, as I near retirement and look back on years of serving in various capacities in two organizations and four African countries, learning three languages, and meeting interesting people including my husband, Ron, I can see that it has indeed been an adventure! In fact, the back of my first prayer card, printed by Wycliffe Bible Translators, states, “One of the greatest adventures in life is to be involved in giving the message of God’s love and salvation to a group of people who have never heard it in a language they can understand.”

Before leaving the continent of Africa for the last time before retirement, Ron decided it would be fun to climb to the highest peak, Mt. Kilimanjaro. We contacted Bless Africa Tours at the recommendation of fellow missionaries and invited our adult children who live in the United States, Michelle and Nathan, with their spouses, Nate and Cassidy, to join us in Tanzania. Our son Ben and his girlfriend, Mikayla, who had been serving in Cameroon with us in our last year, flew with us from Yaoundé to Moshi, Tanzania. We all met up in Moshi and prepared for the climb. You could say it’s “a walk in the park” as it is a hike in a national park, albeit a very hard hike. As highest continental peaks in the world go, it is the most do-able highest peak; it is not a technical climb and no special equipment is needed.

To hike the 19,341-foot-high peak, we chose the seven-day route: five days up and two days down. It was quite a bonding experience for our family, filled with challenges, triumphs, and amazing views. As we descended on the sixth and seventh days, I began to reflect on our whole life of ministry in Africa. The hike was feeling like an analogy of that life.

Following Jesus on this life journey has been an adventure, which is kind of unusual for a homebody like me to aspire to. While Ron and the kids enjoy canoeing, camping, climbing mountains in Colorado, and bouldering at climbing walls, I am content to stay home on a cozy couch with a cup of coffee and a good book! But at age fourteen, at junior high camp at Portage Lake Covenant Bible Camp in Michigan, I committed to live my life to further God's kingdom. Inspired by Christ's sacrifice, buying my salvation with his precious blood, and knowing I will one day be accountable for the life he paid for, I wanted my life to count for eternity.

Pole Pole

If you look at the highest mountain in Africa from its base, the task of climbing to the peak seems insurmountable. The climb can only be accomplished one step at a time. In fact, the mantra on Mt. Kilimanjaro is "*pole pole*" in Swahili, meaning "slowly." We were told that those who are overconfident and climb too fast usually burn out and are unable to reach the top. Similarly, the tasks of Bible translation, helping to provide sustainable public health in rural Congo, starting a Bible school or seminary, learning a foreign language, and adapting to a new culture can seem impossible. But as the African proverb says, "You eat an elephant one bite at a time." Western culture values accomplishing things as quickly as possible. But on a journey with Jesus, there is often greater value in the journey itself and how it impacts not only those we intend to serve but our own selves. The end goal is important to keep in mind as we strategize in ministry. Reaching that end goal may take longer than we like.

Following the Guide

The first and most important part of the journey is to follow the guide. The eight of us on the hike had four guides: one leading the way, one bringing up the rear, and two in the middle. These guides have made the climb to the peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro multiple times. They have led hundreds of people with a variety of abilities, fears, skills, strengths, and weaknesses. The guides know the routes well. In fact, park regulations require all climbers to travel with certified guides. Some paths are clear,

but most are not. Attempting the hike without the guides would be futile at best, fatal at worst. When there were steep steps of rock, the guides gave me a hand, pulling me up. When I lost my balance on occasion, they caught me. At times I thought the guide was getting too far ahead of me to be of assistance, but then I realized they knew I could handle that part of the path without their being so near at hand.

On our journey with Jesus, he goes before, behind, and alongside us. He knows our every need, weakness, strength, and ability. It is he who gives us the skills and interests and aligns them with needs to be filled when he calls us into service.

The good name and reputation of the tour company depends on the climbers' success. Hundreds of tour companies lead thousands of people on the mountain every year. A thriving business depends on having a good reputation. In a similar way, for the sake of his name, the Lord leads us on the journey. Does that mean no harm comes to those who follow him? Not necessarily! But we can be assured that his purpose will be fulfilled, even if we don't see it.

Switchbacks and Setbacks

Sometimes the hike seemed to take paths that are counterintuitive to the overall goal. We made great progress climbing to a certain altitude, and then the path took a dip down toward a creek to cross before mounting back up. To get acclimated to the altitude we hiked from 12,000 feet to 15,000 feet for lunch and then went back down to 12,000 to camp for the night. It was discouraging to lose so much ground. But there was a good reason for it. That lunch trip showed some of us that we needed to be taking medication our US-based kids had brought to help fight against altitude sickness. Our guides let us know what to expect generally each day, but they did not give as much detail as we requested. After a particularly challenging portion of the path, we might ask Dany, our main guide, "Is the trail going to be steep or rocky like that again today?" And he wisely answered, "Let's go see!" The response was not particularly satisfying, but we just did not need to know that much detail in advance. It was enough to trust and follow the guide.

In our years of ministry there were also setbacks. Civil wars and unrest caused us to have to leave our homes in Zaire and in Central African Republic (CAR). We experienced armed robberies, a couple of vehicle accidents, and we never returned to live in our homes or continue ministry in either Zaire or CAR. But in the end, it was enough to trust and follow the guide. We might have wanted to know in advance whether

we would have to experience those things again in the future, but God wisely kept those details from us.

The better we got to know our guides and the longer we walked with them on the trail, the easier it became to follow them. We quickly learned not to question their choices even when the way they led us didn't seem right. The better we know Jesus, and the longer we walk with him, the easier it is to trust and follow him.

Fuel Up!

On the mountain we were encouraged to fuel up to sustain our bodies for the journey. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to walk five to twelve kilometers up and down rocky paths each day. The tour company provided amazing meals and snacks all the way. There were two cooks, a cook tent for food preparation, and a meal tent for us set up with a table and chairs. At each meal the cooks brought us an appetizer of popcorn or peanuts with thermoses of hot water to make instant coffee, hot chocolate, or tea. Then they brought in a hot soup, followed by a main course and fruit or dessert. Our kids, who have hiked and camped in Colorado, said if it had been up to them, we'd have eaten Ramen noodles at every meal. Instead, we were "glamping" (glamor camping)! Besides the meals, snacks were provided along the way. Just when we felt like we needed a break, the guides would inform us that the cook had prepared a treat for us. And suddenly there they'd be, waiting for us with a table filled with muffins, fruit, Snicker bars, Pringles, juice boxes, and thermoses of hot water.

In our journey with Jesus, it is equally important to fuel up on the word of God. Jesus said, "People do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," (Matt 4:4, NLT). Jeremiah 15:16 says the prophet found God's word and ate them, and they were the joy and rejoicing of his heart. And we are encouraged in Joshua 1:8 to meditate day and night on God's word. It is what sustains us on the journey with Jesus.

Another time I was reminded of the importance of God's word was on summit night when we were woken up at 10 PM after an afternoon nap to begin our hike to the summit. With headlamps on, we made our way from 15,000 feet to 19,000 feet mostly in the dark. I was directly behind the lead guide, watching every step he took, with my headlamp lighting only the space between me and him. Taking one step at a time, *pole pole*, the phrase "thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105) kept repeating in my mind.

Living Water

We were also encouraged to drink three liters of water each day, carrying as much in our day packs. Staying hydrated is vital in the dry air at high altitudes and helps stave off altitude sickness. The staff would boil water each night, let it cool, and filter it so it would be ready for us to fill our water bottles in the morning. In our years of living in Africa, we were often without either water or electricity, or it was cut off without notice. By far, living without water was harder than living without electricity. Water is life!

Jesus offered the woman at the well living water (John 4) and told her that with his water, one would never be thirsty again. Amazingly, he claimed that the water he gave would become in one a “spring of water welling up to eternal life.” After Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus about not observing the tradition of hand washing, we read that Jesus told his followers that it’s not what goes into the mouth that makes one clean or unclean, but what comes out of one’s heart (Matt 15:1–2, 10–11). So someone whose heart is filled with evil will spew evil from their mouths, defiling them. To the contrary, the mouth of one whose heart is a well of living water speaks healing and life-giving words. I have been tested and have, unfortunately, found my heart has not always been filled with the living water. In anger or frustration, I have spoken harsh words that have caused pain, but on those occasions that I spoke words of comfort and healing out of a Spirit-filled heart, I have been fulfilled.

Clothing and Equipment

We received a packing list of clothing and equipment to bring on the hike to prepare us for the wide variety of climate and topographical conditions. The day before our hike started, Dany, our lead guide, went to each of our rooms at the hotel and verified that we had what we needed: rain gear for the first and last days in the rainforest, proper hiking shoes, a hat, gloves, and several layers for summit nights, sunscreen and sunglasses or a visor for the days when we would be above the clouds, good sturdy trekking poles, wool socks, sleepwear, a day pack, water bottle, and luggage that was the appropriate weight and type for the porters to carry. We were able to rent from Bless Africa Tour company any clothing or equipment we did not have. For those of us coming from Cameroon where the lowest temperatures we had experienced were far warmer than what we would experience at 15,000 to 19,000 feet, it was a blessing to

be able to rent warm clothing and sleeping bags. On a short hike earlier that day, it became apparent to me that I would not do well without a good knee brace. Thankfully I was able to rent one from Bless Africa for the big hike.

When Jesus fed the 4,000 (Matt 15:32–39), his disciples were perplexed, wondering where they would find enough food when Jesus suggested they feed the crowd. Jesus then asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” He took the little they had and made it work, completing what was needed to feed everyone with seven baskets of leftovers. As we journey with Jesus, he does not call the equipped but equips the called. We bring what we have to offer, and he provides the rest, with excess. I’m not sure any of us really feels sufficient for the task to which we’re called, but we bring what we have and he provides the rest.

In terms of equipment for our journey with Jesus, we have the armor of God listed in Ephesians 6. Headgear, footwear, breastplate, shield, and sword equip us for the spiritual battles we face in service to the Lord. Additionally, we are told in Colossians 3:12 to put on “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” as well as forgiveness and love. Clothes like these not only help us love our enemies and the people we’re sent to serve, but they can also be useful in getting along with fellow servants. Relationships with other believers can sometimes be the most challenging.

Enjoy Fellow Travelers

The weeklong hike was an excellent time for our family to bond. We shared the pain and joys together as we took in amazing views, passing through the variety of topography and plant life. We found out more about each other’s intestinal health than most families probably know! There were opportunities for many discussions and conversations in which we learned more about our adult children’s lives as educators and professionals. And we had chances to serve each other. At times our son who majored in outdoor recreation shared helpful tips. Our other son, who majored in kinesiology and physical education, helped us train physically and shared the load by carrying my day pack part of the time. Our daughter, the high school science teacher, pointed out interesting plants along the way.

Likewise, in our journey with Jesus, we have shared pain and joys with fellow expatriate missionaries and African colleagues. We have enjoyed a close-up view of the Lord’s work transforming people groups through the translation of his word into their heart languages. We have prayed

together with African friends and mourned over sick and dying family members. We have prayed with Cameroonian parents for our children's physical and spiritual health. We have encouraged each other with words and practical assistance. We have seen students grow and mature in their walk with the Lord. We have learned hospitality, grace, and longsuffering from our African brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is in the context of community that God has chosen to spread the good news of salvation to the world. If the main goal was to spread the gospel as quickly as possible around the world, God could do so much more efficiently than by entrusting his precious message to fallible humans. Yet, even when Jesus has appeared to people in dreams and visions, he has directed them to believers for clarification and further learning through human relationships. It is in relationship with fellow travelers that we learn, grow, share joys and sorrows, and that the word of God is spread to the world.

Appreciate the Porters

Twenty-eight porters help us meet all the physical needs of our eight-person hike. These strong men carried our luggage, tents, bedding, food, meal preparation equipment, water, and the two essential port-a-potty tents. They made multiple trips up and down the mountain, resupplying us with fresh fruit and vegetables. They disassembled and packed up our tents while we enjoyed breakfast. Each afternoon they arrived at the campsite well ahead of us to set up our tents and lay out our sleeping mats and luggage inside them. They had the meal tent set up and the cooks were already well into meal preparation by the time we arrived each evening. Additionally, they encouraged us along the way with high fives, joyful songs, and by telling us we were doing a great job. The last hour, for a distance of about 600 feet, one of the porters held my arm, escorting me and giving me strength to reach the summit. Upon our arrival at the top, he hugged me, and we danced in celebration. When our son Ben proposed to Mikayla at the summit, the porters sang and danced in celebration. After admiring the incredible views, celebrating the accomplishment of all eight of us reaching the top, we descended to the base camp where we had last slept. I was again escorted by one porter on each arm, guiding and easing my exhausted body. It is safe to say that we would never have been able to accomplish the climb without the help of the porters. And most of the time they worked unseen, in the background, out of our sight.

On our journey in ministry, hundreds of people and churches across

the United States have supported our ministry, much like these humble porters. They have prayed for us, rejoiced and celebrated with us when we met in Congo and were married, and when each of our children was born. They comforted us when our homes in Zaire and CAR were looted and when we were unable to return to either of those countries. They rejoiced with us over accomplishments like the construction of the covered athletic facility at Rain Forest International School. They contributed financially to enable our ministries. The faithful servants who served in administration and in the Covenant mission offices in Chicago ensured that our physical needs were met. And they encouraged us with counsel, prayer, and guidance. We are grateful for all the people working behind the scenes on our journey in ministry.

Your Invitation to a Journey with Jesus

I conclude this analogy with an invitation to your own adventure on a journey with Jesus. As I said earlier, he could do it without us much more efficiently, but the Lord invites us to be a part of his redeeming work in the world. To decline the invitation would be to miss out on the challenges as well as the joys, both the trials and the amazing views of his wondrous work in the world.

What might God be calling you to do? It may seem insurmountable, but know that others have gone before you and that his purpose will be fulfilled, for the sake of his name. As you consider what he may be calling you into, remember to:

- Follow the Guide and trust him. He may take you outside of your comfort zone, but nothing is outside his comfort zone.
- Fuel up on the word of God to sustain you for the journey.
- Drink in the Living Water.
- Clothe yourself with proper equipment. He will use what you have and will provide the rest.
- Enjoy fellow travelers along the way. Learn from them.
- Appreciate the porters and be sure there are plenty of people upholding you in prayer and support.

I Never Thought This Would Happen

Mary Lou Sander, global personnel, Colombia

When I was consecrated as a Covenant career missionary to Colombia in 1990, I gave testimony of God's amazing and miraculous ways of calling me into mission work and confirming his call on my life through his word, presence, protection, and provision. Psalm 77:14 from The Living Bible sums it up well: "You are the God of miracles and wonders! You still demonstrate your awesome power." I took these biblical truths to heart, grateful for all God had done and was doing in my life through a series of miracles and wonders. God was doing the impossible in me—I was going to be a missionary. Wow! I never thought this would happen!

I was given a journal to record, and a scrapbook to help me remember visually the amazing adventure our Lord God had called me to and was equipping me for. In the first years I filled that scrapbook with God's beauty seen in the faces of Colombian people and our mission staff, as well as the places, churches, and ministries I came to love deeply over the years. Each of our family of six had our own photo books as we were "leaving to learn" about who God is in the culture of Colombia. These photos display in living color the many wonderful milestones in my life and faith journey. If you were to read my more than thirty journals written over these thirty-five years, you'd get a glimpse of who God is to me—our Creator God who is love (1 John 4:8b, 16), who is Spirit (John 4:24), and who inspires and invites me to respond by participating in mission with him wherever I am, and with whoever I am with. God does his ministry to and through me as I listen to his voice, abide in him, and follow him. "For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:28, NIV).

We are his offspring, and we belong to the family of God as individuals and in community with other Christ followers. From my early childhood I always believed God invites all people to know and love him, and to reciprocate his love. “We love him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19, NKJV). God is a continual movement of giving and receiving, for God is relational and inclusive. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NIV). God calls us to himself that we may be born again and redeemed from our sin by the blood of Jesus on the cross. He calls us to receive his gift of eternal life by submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Because God is love in action I too can be love in action as I walk by the Spirit, live a vibrant relationship with him, and give out in word and deed the great news of who he is to others, because of all that I have received from him.

I was seven years old when I asked Jesus into my life. My four siblings and I were blessed to be raised and nurtured by loving Christian parents who shared about God’s love, goodness, and salvation during Bible readings and prayer times. They were actively involved in several wonderful Covenant churches during our growing up years. My siblings and I were also involved. This felt like a natural part of my family and community life.

As my childhood faith grew, so did my love for God. Since my earliest days in Bogotá in 1990, God showed me more of who he is, including from my first two Colombian friends, Alcira, my Spanish teacher, and Gloria, my church friend. These women of faith helped me learn what it meant to live in a different culture and to be patient with myself in my learning and adapting processes. Alcira was an excellent Spanish tutor who taught and led well, especially when I felt stuck learning Spanish. Around this time, I received a letter with an encouraging message that said when I think I am not progressing in my Spanish, my mind is still working and taking in many Spanish words and phrases that will be retrieved when needed.

Alcira’s time extended beyond teaching me Spanish. She, her husband, Jorge, and their two daughters became good family friends. We shared fun times in our homes and in special outings that helped us get to know Bogotá and Colombian cultural practices and traditions. Alcira and her family shared their cultural knowledge, sensitivity, and wisdom of how to live, move, and be in Colombian society regarding language, politics, dress, speech, presence, prudence, and caution. We were always received with love and respect; they modeled for us the importance of greeting

one another and welcoming us into their home. As a couple, we saw how Alcira and Jorge worked in a team, communicating and helping each other in whatever task was to be done. They also taught us the importance of bringing something to share when invited to a Colombian's home.

Through the years we saw their faith in God and their relationship with Christ grow as we shared our lives and prayer needs, especially when we were rearing teenage children and later experienced our kids leaving for college in different countries—the USA for us, and Canada and Japan for Alcira and Jorge. We remain close friends with them to this day.

Gloria and I became close friends. God's Spirit prompted us to study God's word in the early mornings before she left for her job as the director of the Covenant preschool. I often accompanied Gloria, along with Erna, a good friend and Norwegian missionary, to the preschool where I shared Bible stories, did art projects and dramas, and visited the children's families. Gloria and Erna reminded me of the valuable spiritual practice of daily being in God's word, and listening for and trusting in God to lead, especially when circumstances loomed large.

Gloria was our children's first Sunday school teacher at the new church plant, La Española. She loved our kids and all the children there. Gloria and I did a lot of praying, planning, and recruiting more volunteers to serve and care for the children of the church and in the community. With the pastor's wife, Nancy, we planned children's camps, giving children their first opportunity to leave the city, stay overnight, and go swimming. Many came to know Christ as their Savior through this ministry.

We began regularly scheduled Sunday school teacher workshops with the five church plants in Bogotá. The Covenant Sunday school material, *Mi Pacto con Dios*, was taught in interactive ways and, eventually, all churches had these volumes of wonderful Bible stories and activities to share in their Sunday school classes. I truly enjoyed being an active member on this city-wide children's ministry team.

I learned new ways to creatively share God's love with the children and teachers from Gloria, Nancy, and others. I learned that children are children wherever they are and that God is alive and moving in spaces even when there are not enough tables, chairs, and supplies. The Holy Spirit moved through these leaders and children, encouraging me to be more flexible in my thinking and actions.

In 2000, the Colombian national church leaders asked for a missionary family to move to Medellín to come alongside the pastoral and ministry leadership families. So our family moved to Medellín. We worked in a team with our colleague Cathy Campobello. This was a blessed move

that Gary and I believe God confirmed in many ways. The move also involved some sacrifice; our four children were in middle school and in high school, not easy years to relocate.

In Medellín I learned and experienced more about who God is, who I am, and about God as mission.¹ I led and taught from Neil Anderson's study *Breaking Through to Spiritual Maturity*² in five different small group settings. I cherished the prayer covering from Colombian friends involved in this study—pastors, leaders, and students. Satan wanted to stop our learning about who we are in Christ and our walking by the Spirit. The enemy does not want us to live freely and abundantly in Christ as people with a new identity, position, and authority in him (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1–3).

This study led us through many parts of the Bible, including a focus on the creation story in the first two chapters of Genesis. We read the great news of how God created all human beings in his image and likeness, to live in unity with God, others, and creation. God created all humankind with the same intrinsic value and dignity, giving us a shared vocation and responsibility to participate, multiply, and steward or govern well the world God created for us, doing so with God's good and perfect authority and leadership.

We were discovering, or rediscovering, God as Three-in-One—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who created us in love and goodness to be in a personal relationship with him. This living relationship can grow, develop, and be transformed daily if we choose to listen and follow him. Throughout the Bible, our triune God's giving and receiving is found repeatedly, for this is his nature. God's pattern of giving and receiving is foundational in my understanding of God's kingdom values of love, unity, justice, and peace or shalom. I do not just receive God's wonderful qualities and keep them for myself—no! I am (and we are) to live out God's kingdom values of provider, protector, provision, power, and peace, and to embody these *p* words for myself and others. We receive generously from God so we can generously give his blessings of shalom to others.

To do this well, I must fully embrace the inheritance God gives me now as I live in Christ, for this inheritance determines my identity and my actions. God is missional and relational, continually inviting us to

¹ See page 17, Gary Sander's article in this issue, "Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn," for an explanation of this term.

² Neil T. Anderson, *Breaking Through to Spiritual Maturity: Overcoming the Personal and Spiritual Strongholds That Can Keep You from Experiencing True Freedom in Christ* (Baker Publishing, 1992).

participate with him as mission, to live out our identity in Christ, walk by his Spirit, and share the joyous message of his love, forgiveness, salvation, healing, and shalom. God invites all people to be reconciled to him and to one another, and to flourish now and forever in Christ Jesus. Salvation in Christ Jesus is not only personal, it is communal. I am not alone in God's mission; he wants us all to know him personally, to be his disciples, and to flourish in all aspects of our individual lives and in communal love, service, and advocacy. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35, NIV).

Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, modeled how we, too, can participate in a love that gives and receives, is self-emptying, and self-giving love as "we live, move, and have our being" in him (Acts 17:28). Our identity is in Christ Jesus. May we continue to submit ourselves to Christ to be transformed from the inside out in both times of hallelujah and suffering. This continual pattern—from life, to death, to renewal or being brought to life again—is what Jesus modeled for us on the cross. Klyne Snodgrass writes in *You Need a Better Gospel*, "His death is our death, and his life is our life."³ I am humbled and grateful to God for all I have learned from him and my Christian sisters and brothers about what it means to live in Christ, to die to my false self, to die to my fear of not being capable enough, and to die to wanting to control. I am still a work in progress.

In 2004 I studied Scripture to learn about God's inclusion of women in full participation in ministry and read books, including the Covenant's writings and documents, about women in ministry.⁴ My eyes were opened to the ways God's heart is broken when his word is misinterpreted and limited to only some parts of the Bible. My eyes were opened to the widespread abuse and unjust treatment of women and people from around the world as I taught the CHET course "Women in the Mission of God." As I prepared for and shared the weekly lesson, I felt like my heart was being broken. I believe God's heart is broken every time people do great harm to others, whether in word, gestures, or in actions, and we do not repent of our evil ways. Our triune God as mission was reminding me that I am not alone. He continues to gather a community of believers

³ Klyne Snodgrass, *You Need a Better Gospel: Reclaiming the Good News of Participation with Christ* (Baker Academic, 2022), 125.

⁴ A selection of the Covenant's books on this topic can be found at <https://covbooks.com/products/women-in-ministry>.

to join hearts, souls, voices, talents, teachings, and inner strength to be trained as advocates for those suffering all kinds of abuse and other types of injustice in their lives. From 2006 to the present, many Colombian pastors and leaders have been trained as advocates for people suffering such abuses. I am grateful for this community of leaders from Colombia, Norway, and the US. They continue to raise their voices and live justly, teaching and preaching the biblical truth that all people are created in God's image and likeness, with the same value and dignity in God's eyes, and are charged with God's authority and leadership to govern well God's world so all people can flourish. This community of believers also teaches the principles of Advocacy for Victims of Abuse (AVA)⁵ and of Mending the Soul,⁶ and the basic human rights for all Colombian citizens. My friend Dora Londoño, former national president of Women Ministries of Colombia, once wrote, "Because we have felt the pain of abuse, because we recognize the importance of a friendly hand, and because we believe in the merciful restoration of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are with you, AVA, and the Colombia Covenant Human Rights Commission."⁷

There is purpose, strength, and courage to go forward when people work together in teams for the well-being of others and for God's kingdom values. In this way, we are participating in mending our broken and needy world. In this way I am a woman in mission, in God's mission, for wherever I am in the world, God is! I am forever grateful to God, to the many Colombians, and to many, many others from around the world who have journeyed with me in these amazing and miraculous ways I never thought would happen.

⁵ See <https://covchurch.org/resource/sexual-violence-uncovered-in-the-bible/>.

⁶ See <https://www.mendingthesoul.org/>.

⁷ Email in author's collection dated October 26, 2015

Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn: 1990 to the Present

Gary Sander, global personnel, Colombia

We were consecrated in June 1990 as career missionaries offering ministry in evangelism, Christian education, church planting, discipleship, and theological education. One of our final preparations before leaving for Colombia was to attend “Learning to Leave, Leaving to Learn,” a missions course at the Link Care Center in Fresno, California. There, we were encouraged to recognize and identify the culture and country we were leaving. How had the religious, social, and economic values and input we had received from our education, work, and life experiences shaped us and our worldview? We had lived and ministered for seven years in Kingsburg, California, and had begun our family there, but who were we? Colombia was going to present us with a different culture, life circumstances, and challenges. We would be learning Spanish in Colombia, so we looked at how language had shaped our understanding of US culture. Our language learning would be done not in a classroom but with private, one-on-one tutors as we enmeshed ourselves in the daily life of the neighborhoods where we would live and move around. We had learned English and US culture this way, and we were encouraged to recognize the importance of learning Spanish and Colombian culture in a similar fashion.

My wife, Mary Lou, and I left the US as thirty-four-year-olds and will return to the US to retire in 2026 at age seventy. We have spent about half of our lives in the US and half of our lives in Colombia. As we move toward retirement, we are repeating our process as we “learn to leave” Colombia and “leave to learn” to live in the US again. We acknowledge and appreciate that our unique language and culture is a fusion of these two halves of our lives.

We arrived in Colombia ready to learn the language, the culture, and life among its people. What a humbling experience. In learning, we formed various relationships with those who could teach us. Those people included Colombian Covenant pastors and spouses, church leaders, Colombian friends and neighborhood acquaintances, Covenant missionary staff, Norwegian Covenant missionary staff, and other international missionary parents. We are still in close relationships with a number of people who shared our initial learning relationships. As we focused on building these and hundreds more relationships over the years, we were establishing a foundation for long-term ministry and friendships in Colombia. That foundation has allowed us to know, learn, and experience God in ways we had not known before.

Assuming the position and posture of learners and forming healthy and holy relationships of integrity with others are both central in showing us who God is as mission. What do I mean by God as mission? God as mission includes the living out of a personal and communal relationship with God in pursuit of oneness with him and oneness with one another as we were created to be. God as mission includes our growth process of knowing God and our relationship with God in Christ through learning who God is—our triune God, God's character, virtues, and God's many names in Colombian culture, society, and language.¹ God as mission includes our knowing God as love in action, seeing God's activity, and responding to God's invitation to join God's activity as we can, learning God's identity, seeing and accompanying God's participation in the life of his creation, recognizing God's initiative, and heeding God's call to accompany God in restoring creation to its identity in Christ. For us this is done in the context of walking alongside and ministering with the Covenant Church and social justice outreach ministries in Colombia.

We believe that God as mission in Colombia is revealed in its best form in the local language and culture. God is love and God is holy, desiring that we live holy lives in relationship with him and that we participate in God's mission of reconciling and redeeming all creation to God's self through Jesus Christ. We believe God works through all local languages and cultures. Because we came to Colombia as learners, our position and posture toward others sought to be respectful of their voices, opinions, and knowledge through the sharing of resources, skills, and insights. Both parties benefited from these relationships, which helped build mutual trust and respect. These relationships were not one-sided. As we were

¹ Many congregations in Colombia include a name of God in their church name.

learning language and culture, we realized that it wasn't all about us and our need to know; rather we could also be, and wanted to be, sharing and ministering. We came to understand and respect the local culture and appreciate local traditions, customs, and communication styles as paramount for developing effective ministries.

First, a bit of history. The Covenant mission began its work in Colombia in 1968. Until 1988, the Colombia Covenant focused its ministries and church formation in the city of Medellín. Because of civil unrest, security issues, and a voiced threat against US citizens by the Medellín drug cartel, the Covenant office staff decided to evacuate the Colombia mission team from Colombia in the fall of 1989. This abrupt evacuation caught everyone unprepared. The evacuation, the temporary absence, and the return of the mission to Colombia brought to the surface many questions, misunderstandings, lack of clarification, trust issues, and unplanned for situations.

The Association of Colombia Evangelical Covenant Churches, which includes the ADIPEC, the Covenant mission, and the Norwegian Covenant Mission, worked to re-establish good relationships, communication, and understanding of how to partner together after the evacuation. However, a failure to fulfill an agreed-upon strategy for how to have ADIPEC work together with the Covenant Mission and the Norwegian Mission led to a split in 1992. Three churches stayed with ADIPEC, and eight churches with the two missions left to form the Federation of Covenant Churches of Colombia (FIPEC) in 2009. This division and what followed in terms of vision, strategy, and how to partner in ministry have been focal points for much of our thirty-five years of work as missionaries learning how to relate to, minister with, and “walk alongside” the Covenant of Colombia. God calls us to be “one in him and with others.” This calling is a continual walk together filled with challenges and blessings.

God is shalom and is always working with us to become who we were created to be—one with God, one with others, and one with God's creation—that we might establish shalom in all these areas. Our Covenant Colombia Mission, the Colombia Covenant Churches, and our common ministries partner together in shalom to expand the kingdom of God in Colombia, thus living into our name, “Pacto” (Covenant in Spanish).

I ministered in the Covenant Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation program during the 1990s in Bogotá. One basic principle taught repeatedly is that God is a God of order. Order is basic to ministry with addicts to bring order to their lives and relationships with God. Learning how God

is order in mission within the Pacto of Colombia was a major piece of our ministry during our initial years. Many of our gatherings discussed goals and objectives, but the establishment of a strong, unified vision and strategy took about twenty more years to achieve. The Pacto was working with many local, regional, and national visions coming from diverse contexts, with many diverse voices wanting to be heard. The Pacto was growing and expanding, and yet without an agreed-upon and well-communicated vision and strategy the hope of unity in ministry together, fulfilling God as mission, was hard to accomplish. It appeared like a fulfillment of Judges 21:25: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (NIV). In the midst of the chaos, however, God as mission (Gen 1) continued to guide and inspire the Pacto’s growth and expansion.

Many individual meetings took place with various groups of Pacto pastors and leaders, the Covenant, and the Norwegian Mission, each making decisions within their own group. These decisions were then shared with the others with the aim of coming to some unity. Each mission verbalized a desire to serve the vision of the Pacto, yet their actions didn’t always live that out—especially when they needed to wait for the Pacto’s input and direction, or they needed to alter their decision, or they needed to submit their vision to the wider vision of the Pacto.

Throughout our years with Serve Globally, we have witnessed the movement of God as mission shift from a mission field approach containing shades of colonialism, paternalism, and a focus on the identity and vision of the missionaries and their sending church, to a focus of missions as continual learning, strategizing, listening, envisioning, submitting, serving, and advocating. We have seen the freeing up of personal, local, and regional visions to form a national vision of being one together. We believe it is a goal that God calls us to as mission. What we learned as we established and built relationships, and learned to live, minister, and accompany God in God’s mission together was the importance of serving from a posture of kneeling in grace and love, despite differences of opinion, position, or vision. We wanted our relationship with our sisters and brothers in Colombia to reflect who God created us to be, while respecting who God created them to be. There were hard moments when trust was challenged. Yet we showed up to meetings and gatherings, and planned opportunities to be together. We participated, interacted, listened, and learned. We certainly made mistakes, spoke out of turn, offended others, and felt offended by others. We learned we could acknowledge our

errors and our offenses, and we were forgiven, so we could continue to work toward strengthening and growing our relationship together with God as mission.

We also began keeping in mind certain mission principles, asking ourselves certain questions, and looking through specific filters as we worked and ministered together with the Pacto in planting churches, evangelism, discipleship, mutual mentoring, children's ministries, youth, women ministries, theological education programs, and social justice outreach.

We want to do everything that:

1. Responds to the felt needs of those with whom and to whom we minister, appreciating the local culture.
2. Protects dignity and a sense of self-worth.
3. Encourages sustainability as much as possible.
4. Stimulates self-initiative.

We want to avoid anything that:

1. Creates dependency, is demeaning, or bypasses Colombian leadership.
2. Provides everything needed.
3. Reduces the Colombian role or responsibility in the process.
4. Makes our task impossible to fulfill.

We want to constantly ask the following questions:

1. Do they think that they can talk to you? Do you think you can talk to them?
2. Do they think that you will listen to them? Do you think they will listen to you?
3. Do they think that you "see" them? Do you think they "see" you?

We learned to identify when we were moving away from living out God as mission in our ministry relationships with the Pacto and within our Covenant Colombia mission team. We held each other accountable and encouraged each other to stay true to our desire to be in a positive relationship with the Pacto and with each other, and to ask the question, "Are we doing more harm than good?" We felt supported by the Serve Globally office team and were ministered to by the member care team when we needed it most. As I had the opportunity to represent the Covenant in front of the Pacto in meetings and gatherings on a continual basis, and, since I was a "missionary," I was offered the opportunity to speak

into whatever the item of business was. It's nice to be given a chance to speak up, but I knew that it was better to stay quiet if I didn't have something to say worth listening to. I learned to stay quiet more than I spoke, because a "missionary's voice" could carry power and control—two negative attributes that our Covenant Colombia Mission team was seeking to leave behind.

We worked to model Jesus's example of servanthood and reflect a vision centered on faith, community, service, and resilience in the face of challenges, all deeply rooted in the context of Colombian society and the global Christian mission. We dedicated ourselves to building relationships within the missionary team and with the Pacto leadership through personal interactions and communication that we might achieve mutual understanding, effective collaboration, and a stronger community. We wanted to move from acting as external experts dictating initiatives to accompanying and encouraging the discovery of how we all have been empowered to learn alongside one another. A priority was spending time with Colombian pastors and their families, not just in formal meetings but also in informal settings. Mary Lou and I began to make frequent trips to different regions, often staying in the homes of our partners, sharing meals, and engaging in casual conversation to foster deeper relationships and understanding. An emphasis on shared learning and growth meant co-facilitating gatherings and retreats. Regular and open communication with Colombian leaders about the state of our hearts, our struggles, prayer requests, and perspectives offered mutual support. We even shared daily text exchanges focused on spiritual reflection. We sought to support existing visions and serve others in identifying and accessing resources, rather than imposing or depending on external solutions. We wanted to move far away from any position or posture of control. We found that we needed, as Christ taught, to accompany those we ministered and lived with and to move beyond spiritual matters, acknowledging and addressing the social and economic realities faced by our Colombian brothers and sisters and communities. We became more adept at walking alongside our sisters and brothers in finding support for various projects aimed at alleviating poverty and fostering economic independence.

As we learned to live and minister in Colombia, we knew we were also called to promote unity and reconciliation among different regions and groups within the Pacto. When we heard about existing hurt, tension, and division, we actively participated in fostering forgiveness and healing through dialogue and prayer, hoping our posture would reflect a humble and servant-hearted approach to ministry and mirror the life

and teachings of Christ. We did not possess all that was asked for or sought from our Colombian sisters and brothers, so we actively sought to connect Colombian ministries and communities with various support groups and organizations both within and outside Colombia to expand resources and opportunities.

We prayed and hoped that our ministry in Colombia was defined by God's grace and a commitment to long-term relationship building, mutual spiritual growth, and collaborative efforts in order to encourage local leadership and address the holistic needs of the Pacto and its communities. Our aim wasn't simply to impart knowledge or solutions but to walk alongside our partners as fellow travelers on a shared journey of faith, transformation, and mutual growth.

Achieving all this involved introspection, self-awareness, and ever-growing spiritual practices. The goal was to identify and confront personal biases, assumptions, and compulsive thinking patterns that hinder genuine connection and understanding on everyone's behalf. Honesty with ourselves and a willingness to be transformed by God's grace was necessary. We needed to create an atmosphere of safety, trust, and mutual respect where open communication and vulnerability were encouraged. We found a community where we could be honest, safe, vulnerable, and trust one another. This community created opportunities for shared learning, mentorship, and mutual encouragement among leaders. Unity was fostered as the healing of past divisions and conflicts was prioritized. Some past divisions and conflicts were uncovered and exposed, allowing for forgiveness and reconciliation. Other conflicts remain to this day, covered up or unresolved.

We wanted to be changed by the experience together. It was humbling to recognize and acknowledge that all we were learning and involved in was not a one-time event but an ongoing process of spiritual and relational transformation. Both givers and receivers became prepared to embrace God's transformative power to realize justice and unity, thus putting into practice God as mission in our lives and ministries. We began to focus on our shared identity in Christ Jesus as the foundation for unity. This identity transcends cultural differences and formed the basis for our fellowship of faith and mutual support. A sense of belonging and community was fostered among diverse groups within the Colombian church—a church body that didn't always express a desire to acknowledge and address unity amidst the diversity. Eschewing action or activity that could be interpreted as imposing external solutions allowed us to work alongside Colombian leaders, support their initiatives, and encourage

them to take full ownership of their ministries, as we were learning to do with our own ministry as a Covenant mission in Colombia. We realized we needed to find a healthy and integral balance beyond immediate concerns to long-term development and support, emphasizing long-term presence and connection. A long-term presence and connection were necessary to make sure that the ministry was done locally—and very, very seldom, if ever, done off site. In this way we hoped to avoid the pitfalls of paternalism and seek to learn from and serve our Colombian colleagues. In essence, we aimed to live out the concept of “being one,” not through uniformity but through deep, mutually transformative relationships built on a shared faith in Christ, a commitment to mutual growth and empowerment, and a sensitivity to the unique cultural context of Colombia.

Mary Lou had a covenant agreement with God regarding serving in missions with our family. She knew I had been called to missions as a six-year-old and that I was committed to fulfilling that call, following God’s timing. Growing up in the Covenant Church, Mary Lou had heard from many missionaries about their experiences in their countries of service and she was impacted by the differences between their lives abroad and hers in the US. She was not ready to give birth in some of those conditions, and she asked God the favor of not sending us into missions until all of our children were born. God kept his covenant with us. Two months after our fourth child was born, the Holy Spirit began to move through our focused times of prayers, confirming my call and calling Mary Lou toward long-term missions. Mary Lou received a call to be a career missionary with the Covenant through a visionary dream from God that assured her of God’s call and God’s continual presence, protection, and provision for our family.

As we prepared to depart, we included our children in our conversations and prayer time as we wanted them to be prepared to leave and learn as well. Since baby girls in Colombia get their ears pierced at birth, our three daughters were excited to get their ears pierced before leaving for Colombia. Our son declined. Our children were seven, five, four, and two-and-a-half years old when we arrived in Colombia. Since we all were learners of language, culture, customs, traditions, and life in Colombia, we helped each other navigate the beginning years together. We learned Spanish together as a family and decided to speak Spanish when in public. Learning to interact and talk to each other in Spanish added a new dimension to our family dynamics, which continues to this day.

Our children were included in our activities and travels throughout the city of Bogotá and throughout Colombia. Many of our ministry

newsletters from our first years in Colombia related our family dynamics and mutual learning. We are blessed that our children enjoyed their experiences in Colombia. Our family being seen and active together was a good testimony for us as we participated in the church planting happening in Bogotá in the 1990s. We were asked by the Covenant of Colombia to move from Bogotá to Medellín to minister to the pastoral families and church ministry leadership families. We did so in 2000.

Mary Lou and I covenanted with each other that one of us would always be home overnight with our children when they were in the home with us. We did not want our ministry to separate us as a family. There would have been many reasons for missionaries to be out of the home together and to leave children under someone else's care, but we chose not to do that. This agreement also reflected the security situation during our first fifteen years in Colombia, including Colombia's internal armed conflict. Our whole family needed to keep up-to-date and knowledgeable about the conflict and current events in the country. Thus, we had evacuation plans, contingency plans, security protocols, and security networks. Covenant World Mission always knew where we were, and we were in constant communication with them. This aspect of our lives had an impact on our family dynamics, decisions, and prayer times.

Three of our four children lived with us until graduation from high school. Our oldest daughter, Lissa, returned to the US to graduate. They each chose to enter college in the US, and each dealt with the "learning to leave (Colombia) and leaving to learn (about the US)" in their own ways. This learning continues for our adult children today. We will be leaning on their expertise to help us live well in the US as we retire.

As part of our learning to leave Colombia, we invited our four adult children to return in February 2025 to bring our time together there as a family of six to a close. Lissa wrote some of her thoughts and insights of these experiences, which she entitled "Integration."

INTEGRATION: combination, unification. When God seeks to glorify himself in you holistically.

WHAT IS BEING INTEGRATED:

Life for Lissa in Colombia (age 7–17) and her life after departing Colombia in January 2001.

Lissa's BACKGROUND:

I grew up on the mission field, living in Bogotá, Colombia from ages 7 to 17. Bogotá was the first of many homes and places where I have lived. I have struggled to understand how it all fits together. Recently, the Lord has taught me about integration and showed me how to pray to become fully integrated. I share the prayer, verse, and celebration that shapes my understanding of its meaning.

Lissa's PRAYER:

Lord, I believe you have given me a gift in understanding INTEGRATION. This means integrating and embracing everything so that you can use me and work through me. Please renew my mind and heart according to my life experiences, both as a missionary kid and beyond. These experiences are an INTEGRATION to bring you glory; nothing has been wasted in my journey. Renew my mind and heart to this one big place, this even ground, this ROCK, stretching from Colombia to the United States, one solid plane. May I stand firm on it, dance and cartwheel, pivot as needed but come to KNOW and BELIEVE in the solid and level place that it is and who you have created me to be. Amen!

Lissa's VERSE: Psalm 40:2

He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.

Lissa's CELEBRATION:

God has given me an opportunity to fully walk in freedom. In February 2025 I visited the places in Colombia where I grew up, twenty-five years later. The truth of living integrated and whole has been realized. I can joyfully take ground for Him, standing (or dancing!) firm. I have overcome a once “uneven” ground in my life. I sing praise and glory to the Lord!

Our family did a “walk about”—visiting people and places in Bogotá and Medellín. We experienced some very holy moments of refreshment as we remembered, revisited, released, redeemed, and rejoiced. We prayed through memories, celebrated our years and life together, and praised God for his faithfulness and for loving us for who we were, who we are, and who we will be in him. We praise God for his loving faithfulness in calling us to join him in mission with the Colombia Pacto community, for how they walked alongside us as we came alongside them, together discovering who we were, learning and celebrating who we are, and anticipating who we will grow to be in Christ.

Reluctant Recruits...Our Story

Peter and Ruthie Dutton, global personnel

Missionary? Is *that* what you are? *Really?* The skepticism and incredulity we have experienced have often been palpable. In truth, it has been years since we have used the term “missionary” to describe ourselves, our work, or our sending organization. We have resorted, instead, to a spectrum of terms that, at times, both enlighten and obfuscate. “Cross-cultural workers,” “global personnel,” “development experts”—each of these terms speaks to parts of our work or hints at different roles we have assumed. Neither of us grew up in the Evangelical Covenant Church, the organization under which we have worked, but we were both children of missionaries. Peter’s parents, Harold and Agnes Dutton, experienced thirty-five years of nonstop war in Vietnam from 1939 to 1975. Don and Mary Jo McCurry, Ruthie’s folks, worked almost twenty years in post-colonial Pakistan from 1956 to 1975.

So maybe it seems natural we would become missionaries. We each had positive experiences growing up in Pakistan and Vietnam, but in college, going into missions was the furthest thing from our minds. Our goals were more along these lines: Pursue the American dream—build a home and settle down. To that end, Peter began building homes with Ruthie’s brother. After a couple of years, with our first child on the way, we wondered: Was this what we’d dreamed about? Was this what we really wanted?

God Meets Us Where We Are

One day out of the blue, we received a call from an administrator for the organization under which my (Peter) parents had worked. “Would you be willing to run a handicraft project in a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand for two years?” The timing was less than ideal. Ruthie was

eight months pregnant, and we knew from friends that they didn't accept workers with new babies. For good measure, we raised a few more issues we thought might rule us out. Surprisingly, we were told "they would not be an impediment." We prayed about it, and after a couple of days, we concluded this type of service might be a good fit for us. We would be doing down-to-earth and practical work, not direct evangelism and not preaching, which we didn't feel equipped to do at that time. After a weekend of discernment, we said yes. God, who created us, knows us. God drew us in, giving us an opportunity to serve—without a long-term commitment when we were not yet ready.

Four months later we were on a plane to Bangkok, followed a few days later by a car trip to the northeastern Thai province of Loei. We began work in a camp for Hmong refugees, just a few kilometers from the Mekong River and Lao border. Looking back, we wonder how we were entrusted to run a \$100,000 mail-order-catalog business at the ripe ages of twenty-six and twenty-three.

God provided for us in wonderful ways. We felt truly fulfilled. We enjoyed the camaraderie of working with about fifty other expatriates from many countries and multiple organizations. While most workers were young, God provided a veteran missionary couple to be our mentors. We enjoyed the work so much that we extended our time for an extra year.

Those three years taught us much—especially that we still had much to learn! Even though we had both been children of missionaries, we didn't know as much about working cross-culturally as we thought. We needed to process what we'd learned and work through our beliefs and faith to arrive at our own convictions. Learning the local language was needed to communicate with people at the heart and spiritual level. We needed to understand Scripture better. Thus, we set our sights on Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, where we'd heard of a great program in cross-cultural communication and missions.

What did we learn at Fuller? More than anything, we learned of the breadth and challenge of communicating God's love in cultures as varied and differing as they really are. And we learned that we never stop being learners until the day the Lord says to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

While at Fuller, we began attending Pasadena Covenant Church. We had visited the ministry started by a Covenant missionary working in Thailand, and we decided to apply for service under the Evangelical Covenant Church. At the time, this meant spending an academic year

at North Park Seminary. With three children in tow, no car, and just a few dollars in our bank account, we headed to Chicago. God provided what we needed: a car for \$1 and \$50 for repairs. God gave us part-time jobs that were just right for our needs, and God provided someone to pay the balance of our tuition anonymously.

God Will Provide When You Step Out in Faith

As we became Covenant missionaries, we were motivated by the holistic nature of the Covenant work in Thailand, a work that merged the practical (pig and fish raising) with the spiritual (preaching the gospel). We studied Thai for fifteen months and then moved upcountry to apprentice “on the farm” with the expectation that we would begin a ministry in Roi Et, another part of northeast Thailand. We’d only been in Udon Thani for two weeks when Jim and Joan Gustafson invited us to lunch and asked, “Would you consider starting a new work in Laos?”

Having previously worked with Lao refugees, we said an enthusiastic yes. Disparate parts of our lives seemed to be coming together. We set our hearts on working somewhere near Laos’s capital city, Vientiane, only about two hours from Udon, but God had other plans. Instead of Vientiane, we were sent to the far north of that country, as far away from colleagues and support as it was possible to go. We teamed with a slightly older Thai couple who had never lived in another culture. We went in cooperation with World Concern, a faith-based American NGO, to work in a development project to help villagers begin “market-oriented” agriculture. In that communist country, this was one of the first agricultural projects to be allowed to work outside of the capital city of Vientiane and one of the first from a “market-oriented” nation. We soon realized the huge learning curve ahead for all of us—both villagers and “foreign experts” (as we were called).

For our first six years we concentrated on finding and promoting products that villagers could sell. In our early trips to Luang Namtha’s fresh market, we discovered beautiful birds, squirrels, and bamboo rats fresh from the forest! If we slept in, we missed it all. The market only lasted until 7:30 a.m. We found that, indeed, the pork and fish we had raised back in Thailand was very marketable, but were villagers ready to raise animals and fish in an integrated system? With fishponds carefully dug (by hand, tractor, or dozer) and stocked with only tilapia (carefully propagated and male-selected), and pigs happily defecating and procreating on the dikes above, this integrated agronomic system worked. Well, sort of. It worked if the villagers could find the ingredients for pig feed.

And if they fed them regularly. And if they did *not* eat the maize and broken rice themselves. For Akha or Hmong or Khmu villagers it was a significant stretch for them to begin earning income from such activities. And, oh yes, that happened only if they managed to get their pork and fish to market and were able to sell it at a reasonable price, speaking a foreign language (Lao) they were supposed to know!

We were called “foreign experts,” sent to help villagers begin market-oriented occupations. We had learned much from our cross-cultural communications and missions classes in seminary, especially that we needed to be ready to learn from others. Our baptism by fire wasn’t easy, requiring multicultural collaboration in this multicultural context. Not only the polyglot of villagers from different ethnicities, but the task of learning to work with Thai colleagues sent to work with us from our churches in northeast Thailand proved challenging. We realized our colleagues didn’t have some of our Western prejudices, but they did have their own proclivities. Individualism, we learned, is not only an American thing. Our families needed humility and a willingness to learn.

Faith, Risk, and Crisis Always Come Together

We found God often allows us to experience crises to help us grow in reliance on him. This was the case in both our personal lives and our work lives. Our first four years in Laos saw a major crisis each year. Because we had moved upcountry in Laos and our children were all in their primary school years, we felt the best schooling option for our children was found at a Christian boarding school I had attended as a child in Malaysia. So, off they went, much as we had, with teddy bears and backpacks. After less than two months away, we awoke one night to the tinkling sound of rocks on our window. One of our colleagues had received a call from friends in Thailand who had heard from our kids’ school. It was 11:00 p.m. and we needed to call immediately. Those calls could only mean bad news. Doctors in Malaysia feared our daughter had leukemia. After a tearful, prayer-filled night, a boat ride across the Mekong, and flights to Bangkok and Malaysia, we reached Erin. But by then the crisis had melted away. She leaped from her bed delighted to see us! In the end, the doctors could not explain the change in her white blood cell count. “An unknown virus, a mystery,” they said. We knew that scores of people had been praying. We knew our God had healed her! That was our first year in Luang Namtha, our remote northern province of Laos.

Our next years in upland Laos taught us a bit more. In year two the director of World Concern was deported from the country, and

we thought the whole organization might have to go. In the end God allowed the organization and our project to stay. In year three our Thai colleagues decided it was time to go and left suddenly. In our fourth year Peter had a serious motorcycle accident and spent months recovering. God was faithful through each of these crises. We are confident our desire to persevere came from the faithful prayers of supporters. Repeatedly we learned that our lives and all of our projects and relationships would be challenging, but we could get through if we kept our eyes fixed on Jesus, our provider. We realized we have never been promised easy lives, only that God would never leave us or forsake us.

By then we had been in Laos for five years. We loved our work and the sense that we were really helping villagers. But one area of disappointment was this: We could point to no one who had accepted Christ, *not one convert!* The vice governor of our province had sat us down during our first week to tell us clearly, we were not to “propagate religion.” We would be watched. Now government employees were sent to accompany us on all our trips to villages. Luang Namtha was a province with no known believers, and the government wanted it to stay that way.

Then in the fifth year, the de facto head of one our project villages became a believer, a man we will call “XF.” What a firebrand! He couldn’t keep the good news to himself. Soon, other villagers began coming to faith. Within a year he was put in prison. We saw him one day, accompanied by guards, traveling down the road. As part of a prison work detail, he began singing a Lao praise chorus as he passed by to let us know he had not lost faith.

Faith, Risk, and Crisis: Phase II

As villagers started to come to faith, we realized the work of the Holy Spirit is to draw people in. Our job was to share verbally and in our living. Our thinking began to evolve. We realized we would need to begin taking more risks in both our verbal witness and our efforts to make a difference in the livelihoods of our villagers.

We started to imagine a different future. How could we have the time and contact with villagers to see them begin a new kind of agricultural production? We concluded we would need to become an agricultural business to effect that kind of change. For almost two years we spent time away from our small province visiting churches in the States and making trips back and forth across the Thai and Lao border.

If we wanted villagers to risk generating products for the market, we ourselves would need to take the same risk. A business would mean we

could buy and sell products and crops across the boundaries of nations surrounding us. We would need startup funds. Our own knowledge base was limited. We weren't agronomists or international exporters, nor did we have much capital. Trusting that God would provide, we submitted a business plan to the foreign investment division of the government.

After more than a year, our application and business plan were accepted. We could return to the north and start building our new company, Friend of the Upland Farmer. We began small, with only four employees. Villagers were hesitant to start anything new. We found markets by making trips to China, Thailand, Vietnam, and South Korea, but we didn't have enough product to export. It was tough going. Of course, we started to receive pressure from the government. They wanted dramatic results from one of their first foreign investments.

Nevertheless, each year crop output increased. By year eight, Friend of the Upland Farmer had grown to forty-five employees and exported over 2,000 metric tons of crops to Thailand, China, Vietnam, and South Korea. Every year brought new challenges. When we stepped out in faith, God enabled us to find the talent, skills, and people we needed. We worked with a wonderful Dutch colleague, an agronomist with expert backing from his networks. A young Thai couple joined us for four years, bridging the age gap with some of our employees and bringing needed expertise in raising fish. Through all of this, we realized God shows up when we feel most inadequate.

Loss and Crisis...More to Learn?

In year five, just as the business began to take off, we received some devastating news. Our oldest son, Graeme, who had spent a year with us visiting villagers and helping our company transport product to the Thai border, had died in a motorcycle accident in southern California. Our home church, Pasadena Covenant, provided comfort and space for a memorial. Friends from far and wide attended. Our Evangelical Covenant Church supported us with grief counseling and help for our other two children to gather with us back in Laos.

At that point, Laos felt so much more like home than the US. We could laugh, and cry, and remember Graeme in this place he'd loved so much. Our Lao friends, it seemed, lived much closer to the edges of life. Nearly every family we knew had experienced death in some way, and we learned from them. We learned that the "right words" are less important than being there, sometimes expressing sympathy, sometimes sitting in silence.

Through all that time, the business was growing. More and more village families were growing crops—cardamom, corn, soybean, and rice. We learned another important lesson: Working together as a multi-national team could be a real strength. As a team made up of Dutch, Thai, American, and Lao, we all had very different perspectives on issues and problems that surfaced. We were forced, in turn, to listen to each other and, ultimately, made better decisions.

At the same time, many villagers were coming to faith. We tried to encourage and facilitate, even while we were watched carefully by the Lao government. Some villagers traveled to Vientiane and some to Thailand where they studied and were disciplined. At the same time, the increasing number of believers made government officials unhappy. They began refusing the renewal of various business licenses required for operation. We heard, also, that some top provincial officials wanted the property and fish farms we had developed. Finally, we received an official government letter ordering us to close and sell the business.

It was not easy to learn this lesson: All we have belongs to God. We learned, like Job, that though the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, we still need to bless the Lord. Great loss can deepen your faith in ways blessings and success do not. It also develops a better understanding of what it means to suffer with Christ. During that time the first believer, XF, whom we mentioned earlier, was taken, along with his wife and eight-year-old child, from a bus station and never seen again. Since that time, many believers have been put in jail on trumped up charges, but it has only seemed to increase their faith. Without Friend of the Upland Farmer, we had no basis or reason to be granted a visa in Laos. We left and moved across the Mekong River to Chiang Rai, Thailand, where we hoped to buy agricultural products from the many farmers with whom we had relationships in both Laos and Thailand.

Mekong Valley Foods...A Brief Hiatus

We started another company just across the border from Laos in a northern Thai bordertown called Chiang Khong. We had hoped we could remain in relationship with many farmers and producers in Laos whom we knew. That was not to be. We started from ground zero again. This time we set up a factory to produce supplemental food for Burmese refugee children, made from corn, rice, and soy. After about one year, the factory hit its stride producing products primarily shipped to refugee populations along the Thai-Burma border, as well as Cambodia and Burma. After three years, we were ready to move on to

something else. We were invited back to Laos by two Lao friends and colleagues. Our Dutch friend and colleague, Wessel Huisjes, bought the company in Chiang Rai and continues to provide food for these vulnerable refugees.

Back in Laos...a Brief Interregnum

For a period of almost two years, we worked with two Lao partners who were entrepreneurs and experienced businesspeople. For one, we helped set up a pig and fish farm. For the second, a woman in her sixties, we helped develop silk production in another province upcountry. Both owners were people who had come to faith. Both had connections in the upper echelons of government. We thought that by working with Lao companies and not being the owners, we would “fly under the radar” and avoid notice.

Unfortunately, that was not the case. Apparently, officials from Luang Namtha heard we had returned to Laos and decided that we should not be allowed to continue working anywhere in the country. One day, as I (Peter) was filling out immigration paperwork to cross from Laos back into Thailand, I was told that if I left, there would be no return. I turned around for the trip back to Vientiane. We stayed for another eight months, but then it was time for a scheduled home assignment. While in the States we applied for a Lao visa from the embassy in Washington DC, and it was granted. We thought we had weathered the storm.

Not so! After a thirty-hour flight from the US, we arrived at the airport in Vientiane expecting to connect with the project owners we knew well. We stood in line, and when the immigration officer took my passport, he looked up and then picked up a walkie talkie. I was told I would have to leave the country on the return flight. Ruthie, on the other hand, would be permitted to enter the country. It was miserable! With scores of people watching, I was escorted back to the plane by police. The whole incident has given us much sympathy for those currently being deported from the United States without due process.

I expected when I reached Bangkok I would be allowed to rest and regroup after more than thirty-six hours on the plane from Los Angeles, but upon arrival I was put in a detention center deep within the airport. Thai officials explained that a bilateral agreement between Laos and Thailand forced them to deport me. They assured me I just needed to leave the country. When I returned, I'd be accepted back. They kindly gave me the password to their internet, so I was able to call Ruthie in Laos and friends in Covenant Offices.

Ruthie observes: It's not uncommon that during such unsettling times God provides comfort. Peter remembered that all the Asian Covenant churches were having a gathering in Taipei, so he chose to fly there the following morning. To be welcomed into that loving and encouraging community was overwhelming in a positive way. Once again, God was reminding us that we are never alone. He will always be with us, but he often provides other companions to bring comfort.

Déjà vu—The Work Belongs to the Lord

Once again, we found ourselves asking, “What next, God?” We felt God leading us to work with the Covenant church in Roi Et, the place where we had expected to go twenty-five years earlier. This was quite a shift for us. We would be working officially and directly with a network of churches in this northeastern Thai province, and we came with some expectations. We thought that working with believers would mean fewer occasions for misunderstanding. Our Thai colleagues also assumed that our arrival meant funding for various endeavors would also be more plentiful. For a while that was indeed the case. Funds from the sale of businesses in Laos and Thailand, though not massive, did fund many improvements to the Covenant camp property in Roi Et.

Overall, our Thai colleagues were discouraged. Growth had stagnated. Some leaders had a huge vision with evangelistic outreach as their primary focus. Others wanted to focus on discipleship and spiritual growth before expanding outward. We knew that our “taking charge” would not be good. Competing visions and agendas were ever present. In addition, a Korean missionary working with some of the church leaders had big dreams and a different vision for the work.

Those tensions simmered. In our third year one of the groups left to work with the Korean missionary. We discovered that one natural Thai reaction is “to save face” by saying the work is expanding when, in fact, there is a split. Our focus after the split was to work on discipleship, leadership, and theological training. We were able to use the church property for seminars while opening it to the Christian community for trainings and camps.

When COVID-19 hit, everything but the local fellowship stopped for a year and a half. As the pandemic eased, we returned to the US feeling there was a good group working together towards a common goal. We thought it was time to allow the young leaders to grow and not depend on our close input. Staying in the US, making trips, and mentoring through Zoom seemed promising.

Problems resurfaced. Various team members wanted to be leaders. Jealousy arose, and within nine months there was another split. Heartsick, we returned to Thailand and spent an intense time trying to bring about reconciliation, including with leaders from the first group that had split off. The reconciliation did not hold. Now we maintain relationships with all the groups and visit all of them on our trips to Thailand. When invited to teach or preach, we do that, and we pray that God will bless each of the different ministries. We've learned that God works despite and often through our brokenness and failings.

Conclusion

Here is a summary of some of the most important lessons we've learned in our missionary journey:

1. God meets us where we are.
2. We should never stop being learners.
3. God provides when we step out in faith.
4. The journey isn't always easy, but God never abandons us.
5. Everything we have belongs to God.
6. God works despite, and often through, our brokenness.

In addition to sharing some of the lessons we've learned, we want to end with a question: Why should each of us consider being a part of the work of serving globally? The easy answer is, because Christ commanded us to go into all the world and make disciples. That should be enough for us. But we think there's more to it. We have learned so much from others with a different worldview. We see how comprehensive the Bible is for the whole world. Sometimes it is a ceremonial detail that catches the attention of our Khmu friends in Laos. Sometimes it is learning to grieve the loss of a child or loved one, as we did in Luang Namtha. And sometimes it is learning how to revere Jesus as king, as we have found so meaningful to our Thai friends in Roi Et. These are just three examples from our lives.

We are now living in a world inextricably interconnected in ways it never was prior to the advent of the internet. We live in a time when people from all nations are immigrating and emigrating. Maybe God isn't calling us to go to another country, but it's likely someone from another country is living near us. They still need to hear the good news. Additionally, our interaction with our neighbors from distant places will deepen and grow our own understanding of who God is.

Following to the Cross

*Sanetta D. Ponton, associate pastor of justice, advocacy, and compassion,
Metro Community Church, Englewood, New Jersey*

“But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end” (Matt 26:58, ESV).

Last week during the monthly meeting of the justice, advocacy, and compassion (JAC) ministry at my church, Metro Community Church (Metro), one of the team members asked, “What would Metro do if US Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials (ICE) were to show up on the streets of Englewood? How would Metro respond?” He asked what I had been thinking for a while. Metro is a multiethnic church, but the majority of the congregation is Asian American. We have a growing Latino population. What would happen if ICE showed up in our local community looking for people who are undocumented? It is a real fear of ours. We are concerned about some members of our congregation, as well as their family members and others in the community. Over a month ago, a woman came to me for prayer one Sunday, not for herself but to pray for the children at the school where she works, as some of them are undocumented. Another man came to me crying, asking for prayer because he feared for some of his relatives.

Many are afraid, not just at Metro but around the country, even in this room. And the question my brother in Christ posed to me is the question I pose to all of us this evening. What will you do? What will your church do should ICE show up on your church’s doorstep or in your community? How will you contend with the Bible’s mandate to welcome the stranger when it stands against the government’s potential policy of mass deportation? How will you support people in your community?

As a pastor, I can’t ignore this question. As a Christian, I can’t walk away from it.

What are the pressing issues your congregation brings to you? What are the issues the Spirit brings to your attention as you watch the news or live in your community? What will you do about them? Each one of these questions is an invitation from Jesus. And the ultimate question being asked is, *What is the church going to do?*

This is the question beneath Martin Luther King Jr.'s pondering over sixty years ago in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." My assignment for you this week is to read it. "In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church....Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists."¹ The most pressing issues of King's time were those of racism, poverty, and war. This has not changed. In fact, these are the foundations of most of the justice issues we encounter today. Have you ever asked yourself what would you have done in the 1950s or 1960s? No doubt probably all of us in this room would say we would have been on the side of King, on the side of righteousness, on the side of justice, on the side of Jesus. We forget, however, that during King's lifetime, he regularly received death threats, was called a communist, a terrorist, and everything but a child of God and was ultimately assassinated for daring to follow the convictions of our Lord. Only in retrospect do we acknowledge and commemorate his life, legacy, and commitment to love and justice. So when we daydream about how we would have stood on the right side of justice had we lived in the time of King or been of age, we need to look no further to answer the question than to look at what we are doing today. What has the church been doing? What is the church willing to do now? What are you willing to do now? Will we, will you, stand up for those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized, abandoned, mistreated, and abused?

Why has the church been so uniformly silent on these issues? One reason is fear. We have long grappled with the ethical dilemma of what will we do when (not if) Jesus's teachings and commands conflict with the status quo, popular opinion, or government initiatives? It's Bonhoeffer before Nazi Germany, King before Jim Crow, Mandela before apartheid. Every generation has to grapple with our fear because justice requires standing up to power. It requires resistance against individuals and systems that promote the well-being of the strong and wealthy at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. Any time you confront the

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," accessed February 28, 2025, https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/1963_mlk_letter.pdf.

evils of racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and socioeconomic inequity you can expect backlash. And that backlash could mean social isolation or the loss of one's social capital. It could mean death threats. It could mean the loss of your job. It could mean losing half of your church. It could mean the fracture of relationships. It could mean being canceled or being retaliated against. It could also mean death. It is fear that keeps many Christians from standing up for justice and being instruments of righteousness and reconciliation. It's fear!

When we experience fear, our bodies automatically and unconsciously respond in some manner. Physiologists have determined that when we are afraid, our bodies release the hormones epinephrine and adrenaline which cause us to fight, move into flight, freeze, or fawn.² All of these responses are our bodies' biological ways of self-preservation.

And so we have a choice to make. We have a decision to make. How will we respond to injustice around us, knowing the potential consequences? Some of us will respond with fight—but not the kind of fighting you might be thinking about. Our response will be resistance, not to the injustice, but to the one making the request for intervention. We fight against the person who brought it to our attention rather than the issue itself. Or we rebuff their concerns as hysterical or exaggerated and refuse to further engage. That's fighting in the face of fear. The other option is to flee. This means simply to ignore the problem. You are aware of it, but you leave it for someone else's attention. This is not just a fear response but also a fear response rooted in despair. Disappointment has beaten you down so hard that rather than hope for change, you ignore the pain to avoid any further disappointment. You flee. Some will freeze. It's easier to act like both the problem and you will disappear. If you don't make eye contact with it, then maybe it won't notice you and will go away. Or fawn, join the other side. That seems to be the winning side anyway.

Will the church fight, flee, freeze, fawn—or choose another path? Could there be a way that is not necessarily a biological response but a response of the heart? Jesus offers us another way. It's not an easy way nor necessarily our default way. But it's his way. *Jesus tells us to follow.* Jesus calls us not to fight, flee, freeze, or fawn in times of fear but to follow.

This is Peter's struggle when we find him in the text. There is fear all around. It is nighttime and Peter had been there with Jesus when a crowd was sent by the Sanhedrin to capture and arrest Jesus (Matt 26:47–56).

² Olivia Guy-Evans, "Fight, Flight, Freeze or Fawn: How We Respond to Threats," *Simply Psychology*, last modified November 9, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/fight-flight-freeze-fawn.html>.

Luke tells us that the crowd was made up of Roman soldiers and the temple police, as well as representatives of the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:52). The Jewish leadership had failed to silence Jesus or stop him. Jesus was becoming too powerful and too popular. He could not be controlled. He was challenging their authority, and they feared the loss of power and influence. In their ignorance, they feared Jesus's teaching. So this crowd comes armed with swords and clubs and violence in their hearts. Judas comes boldly to identify Jesus, betraying him with a kiss. The kiss seemingly unnecessary because everyone knows who Jesus is, but how else would Judas earn his money? He was afraid of being poor and insignificant.

And then there is Peter. Peter had walked with Jesus for three years. He had even been a part of Jesus's inner circle. He loved Jesus and had just pledged to give his life for Jesus. And here is this crowd coming to take Jesus away. What would happen to Jesus and what would happen to him? As members of the crowd go to grab and arrest Jesus, Peter's adrenaline starts going and his epinephrine kicks into overdrive. His biological, unconscious acute stress response turns on and before we know it, Peter is ready to fight! He grabs his sword and slices off the ear of the slave of the high priest. The other disciples may stand around helpless, but Peter is not going to let them just take Jesus like that. Jesus says, "No, Peter, in the face of fear, don't fight!" Jesus admonishes Peter while healing the man's ear. And Jesus announces that if he wanted to, he could call upon his Father and twelve legions of angels, 72,000 angels, would come to his rescue. But he won't because that is not God's plan. Peter is no doubt disappointed and probably a little embarrassed. And as the crowd descends on Jesus and Jesus is arrested and taken to Caiaphas, the high priest, and the scribes and elders, the other disciples' acute stress responses kick in as well and they flee. In the face of fear and challenge, Jesus's disciples fight or flee.

But there is another way. And what I love about Peter as a disciple is that he is so dynamic. He's so real; he's so raw. He's so human. He's so like us. Imperfect, but trying. Initially Peter fights, and perhaps he did flee once Jesus was arrested (the Bible says that all of the disciples deserted Jesus and fled) but another instinct kicks in in Peter. Biology caught him when he tried to fight and perhaps his emotions got the best of him when he decided to flee, but his relationship with Jesus grabbed hold of him and reminded him of another way—to follow.

In the face of fear, when Peter remembered who he was and whose he was, Peter remembered to follow. The Bible says, "But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and

going inside he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end” (Matt 26:58). Peter remembered that there was another way, and that way was to follow Jesus. It’s the way of all of us who seek to be faithful.

Martin Luther King knew the way was to follow Jesus as well. In the face of fire hoses, dogs, clubs, insults, and arrests he maintained an ethic of nonviolence, not because his inclination wasn’t to retaliate but because he knew that for God’s solution to prevail God’s methods needed to be employed. With Eugene “Bull” Connor, George Wallace, and the weight of city and state governments pressing down on him, King knew that physical fighting could not be his option. “Not by might, nor by power, but by God’s Spirit” would freedom triumph in the face of fear and evil (Zech 4:6). Fleeing was not an option—tempting though it may have been—to retreat to an over-spiritualized gospel or an “ostrich head in the sand” existence. After all, where could a Black person escape segregation in 1950s America? As a Christian, as a pastor, as a proclaimer of the gospel, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, he knew there was only one way—to follow. To follow Jesus.

Following Jesus is the unpopular way, the uncommon way, the hard way. Did you ever notice that when Jesus called the disciples he never asked them if they wanted to be his disciples? He didn’t ask their preference or solicit their opinions. Instead, he merely said, “Follow me.”³ It is indeed an invitation, like “come over” but it is much more than that. It is an imperative, a declaration even. What is required of Jesus’s disciples? Follow Jesus. For those original twelve disciples, following Jesus meant following him to the temple or the mountains where he taught. Following him as he healed and cast out demons and restored people to dignity and community. Following him to dinner with sinners and as he took compassion on the poor and marginalized. Following him as he embraced small children. Following him as he refuted those who sought to test him. Following him to unfriendly territory like Samaria and the Gadarenes. Following him to mountaintops and gardens where he prayed. And, little did they know, it also meant following him to the cross.

Because following Christ is not a one-time command. From the very first “follow me,” Jesus’s command remains. Why? Because Jesus’s commands do not expire. From the first “follow me” to the reminders, time and time again the way remains the same. Follow me.

³ See Matt 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–51.

“But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end.”

Following Jesus is about *direction*. Following Jesus is about following in the direction of Jesus. “But Peter was following him....” Following Jesus is more than a declaration. It is a determination, a new way of living and being in the world. It is not our natural inclination. Rather, it is a conscious decision to walk the narrow road, the uncommon route, the unpopular route. To obey Jesus. To love like Jesus. To have faith like Jesus. To forgive like Jesus. To care for the poor and oppressed like Jesus. To point the way to the Father like Jesus.

We’re in this room today because we have committed to following Jesus. The love of Christ has captured us and we have given Jesus our hearts. We have made the difficult decisions to conform our lives to the calling of Jesus Christ. He said, “Follow me,” and eventually—some sooner than others—we said yes. But I’ve often wondered in a country of Christian leaders, what direction are we really following?

Have you ever been to an amusement park and gone into the house of mirrors? There’s the real thing—maybe your child, your spouse, or a friend—but then there are mirror images of them all around the room. It’s disconcerting because you don’t know which one is the right one. And you start moving toward the one you think is the right one and before you know it, you’ve hit yourself up against a mirror. I think that sometimes when we are following Jesus there are so many images of who we think Jesus is that we can’t always tell the right one. We actually start following one that looks more like a mirror of us or the shadow side of us rather than the actual Jesus.

Judas was called a follower of Jesus Christ. He walked with Jesus and was taught by Jesus and, I imagine, even cast out demons and healed people as a disciple of Jesus. But he was following a distorted image of Jesus. Judas never understood that Jesus wasn’t here for money, for power, and for popularity. Jesus wasn’t here to take advantage and siphon money from the poor. Jesus wasn’t here to be the most loved rabbi. Jesus wasn’t here so that Judas could live his best life. So when it became obvious that he was following a Jesus that he had created, not the Jesus who was going to the cross, he tapped out. He didn’t believe in that Jesus. He was going in the wrong direction. Judas wanted a popular Jesus.

Peter was moving in the direction of Jesus. Peter spoke for the disciples, and I believe he spoke for many of us when he said, “We have left everything to follow you” (Mark 10:28). He would tell Jesus, “Lord, to whom

can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68–69). “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). But even Peter couldn’t imagine following a Jesus who demonstrated strength through weakness, who gave himself up to arrest, and spoke of dying on a cross. Peter wanted a powerful Jesus.

Too many of us think we are following Jesus when we’re actually following the Jesus who mirrors us, the Jesus we have created in our heads. I’ll admit it, I want a Jesus who hates the people who hate me. But that’s not Jesus. During King’s time, many southern white Christians wanted a segregated Jesus. That’s not Jesus. Christian nationalists want an American flag-waving, gun-toting, and Constitution-spouting Jesus. That’s not Jesus. Liberals want a fluffy, everything-goes, cookies-and-milk, rock-you-in-your-sins Jesus. That’s not Jesus. Moderates want a complacent, in the sweet-by-and-by, don’t-ruffle-the-feathers Jesus. That’s not Jesus. And I’m glad that our Jesus is not like that Jesus. I may not know everything about Jesus, but I know Jesus loves everyone. I know Jesus isn’t a US citizen. I know Jesus isn’t a Democrat or Republican. I know Jesus hates sin and is begging us to turn from our wicked ways and sin no more. I know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, that no one comes to the Father but by him. And I know that Jesus isn’t complacent because if Jesus were complacent, we would still be in our sins. He knew we could not wait for the world to work itself out on its own. He would have to come, affirmatively, to save us. And this is why when Jesus came: “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19, NRSV). This is what it means to follow in the direction of Jesus.

To follow Jesus means that we cannot excise the prophetic witness of Jesus Christ from his mission of salvation. Jesus defends the cause of the oppressed. He defends women from public shaming. He heals people and brings them back into communal living. He gives dignity to the outsider by eating with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes. He breaks down racial and gender barriers by revealing himself to a Samaritan woman. He offers opportunity for the rich to pay restitution and reparations. And if we want to be followers of Jesus Christ, we must go and do likewise.

Following Jesus isn’t an excuse not to act. A friend told me years ago that Christians pray a good game, meaning that we hide behind prayer as an excuse not to act. Jesus did both. He prayed and healed. He had compassion and he acted.

In what direction are our people following Jesus? In what direction are you following Jesus? Jesus calls us to follow him. We must follow him in the right direction.

Following Jesus is not just about direction, it's also about *distance*. How closely are we following Jesus? "But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest and going inside, he sat with the guards." All four of the Gospels tell us that Peter followed Jesus after he was arrested but the synoptic Gospels tell us that all the disciples first fled (presumably including Peter) and then Peter did not simply follow Jesus but followed from a distance. This is an interesting observation to make. Peter was there in the vicinity when Jesus is taken to the home of Caiaphas (unlike the other disciples), but he also placed distance between himself and Jesus. The Bible tells us that it was as far as the distance of the courtyard. We have no way of knowing how wide that was, but it was significant enough to record. Why would a follower of Jesus place distance between himself and Jesus? We know why. It's when we don't want to be affiliated with Jesus anymore. Peter gives it away later when he is recognized as a disciple of Jesus, but Peter denies it three times (Matt 26:69–75). I think Peter finally realizes who he was following and he has to make a choice. Will he continue to follow or not? Knowing where following Jesus will lead him, will he continue on? Peter had been following at the wrong distance.

Following Jesus means following him closely, and it means following him at all costs, at all times. But something happens when we follow Jesus closely—we are exposed. Peter's physical distance is emblematic of his heart distance. How closely are you following Jesus? Peter wasn't willing to go all the way with Jesus, not if it really cost him his life. Peter was a bit too prideful and a bit too self-righteous and a bit too concerned about his own self-preservation. Peter was a bit too inwardly focused. Peter lost sight of the mission. Fear took over. Peter's loyalty was now being tested and that same Peter who only hours before had declared with conviction, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you" is now distancing himself from Jesus (Matt 26:33). This same Peter who just moments ago was pulling out the sword and ready to fight on behalf of Jesus is now following from afar.

Peter wasn't as brave as he thought he was. He wasn't as dedicated to Jesus as he thought he was. Adrenaline can make you stronger than you think, but so can a group. It was easy to follow Jesus when you have ten other disciples around you. It's easy when you're not alone. It's easy when you're preaching to the choir and you can hear the "Amens" and see the

nodes, but when the crowd is antagonistic and you are standing alone at the pulpit, at the dinner table, on the golf course, at the hair salon, it's much harder. We say that we won't deny Jesus, and honestly I don't think anyone in this room would deny the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I don't think we would give in to pluralism or Unitarianism or universalism. But I do think some of us would be challenged if we started talking about a Jesus who supports women preachers or pastors—not because Paul said it but because Jesus entrusted his first sermon to a woman to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen. Some of us might distance ourselves if we had to be honest about America's sins against the Native Americans, our First Nations brothers and sisters, whose land was ravaged, their culture decimated, their people left to die a slow death on reservations pumped with alcohol, drugs, gambling, and poverty, and who continue to be unseen and unheard. If we had to address the racism that still prevails in the boardrooms, the classrooms, and the sanctuaries. If we had to question our pastor friends vying for political power. If we had to do more than send thoughts and prayers when children are dying in mass school shootings. Because Jesus convicts us. Jesus challenges us. Jesus calls us to move outside of ourselves to see the other. Jesus forces us beyond compassion to action.

When we don't follow Jesus closely, we run the risk of getting lost. I remember being a little girl and going to the store with my mother. Before we even got in the store, my mother would tell me, "Stay close to me. Stay where I can see you. Stay where I can grab you." She primed me to pay attention to her, to stay close to her because she knew that when I stray too far away I can get lost. It's harder to see her. Other people would get in front of me and between us and I could lose sight of her altogether. If she were to go down an aisle, I could miss it. If she were to take the escalator, I might just pass by her, so I needed to stay close to her.

When we don't stay close to Jesus, we can lose sight of him and find our vision blocked by others. We fall back into the crowd. We know this. That's why many of us have been struggling with our congregations for the past eight years or so. Their vision has been blocked by outsiders—political pundits and social media talking heads. Every Sunday we contend with CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, IG, FB, TikTok, Joe Rogan, Charlamagne tha God, and anyone else with a phone camera. Many of our people have lost sight of Christ. Many of us have lost sight of Christ. Too many others have gotten in the way. We are following at too far of a distance. Peter ends up sitting with the guards. Their presence influences even the mighty, devoted Peter. There is wisdom in the words of

Psalm 1:1: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers.” Peter was now among the crowd and his courage is gone. Soon he will say, “I don’t know the man” (Matt 26:72).

If we’re not careful, the crowds will have us, too, behaving as if we don’t know the man. Our calls for care for the poor are deemed socialism. Our calls for racial justice and reconciliation are deemed “wokeism.” Our calls for gender equality are deemed destroying the traditional family structure. We are told we are being too political and it is not the realm of the church. But if God is sovereign, there is no aspect of our lives where the Word of God does not apply. Don’t let the crowds make you lose sight of Jesus!

You do know Jesus! You know the man from not just Galilee but Nazareth, from where no good can come. Not just Mary’s baby but the child of a teenage mother. Not just born in a manger but under threat of death by empire. Not just caring for widows but condemning a system that keeps widows in poverty. Don’t lose sight of Jesus. Stay close to him. Following Jesus is about distance.

Finally, following Jesus is not just about direction and distance but also *destination*. Following Jesus is about destination. “But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end.” Peter wanted to see what would happen. Now, would Jesus call down those 72,000 angels, or would he actually go to the cross like he said he would and what seems like is going to happen? I wonder at what point Peter thought, “I didn’t sign up for all of this. I just wanted to heal people and make people smile. I just wanted to follow the messiah we had been waiting for. I didn’t think it would come to this.” I wonder at what point you have thought, “I didn’t sign up for this. I just wanted to preach the gospel and baptize people and journey with them through life. I didn’t think it would mean I would have to resist injustice.”

Peter sat with the guards to see what would happen to Jesus, and by extension what could happen to him. Peter was focused on self-preservation. Peter didn’t want to be wrong and end up on the losing side. Merriam-Webster tells me that self-preservation is “the natural instinct to protect oneself from danger and harm.”⁴ It’s a basic survival mechanism that’s common to all living things. Examples of this include jumping

⁴ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “self-preservation,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-preservation>.

out of the way of a speeding car and fleeing a dangerous situation. The Cambridge Dictionary includes, get this, “abandoning friends to align with new rulers.”⁵ Abandoning friends to align with new rulers! That’s what we see with Peter. In an effort to protect himself, he creates distance between himself and Jesus, he stands with the guards checking out how all of this will go down and eventually denies knowing Jesus. He’s aligning himself with new rulers. Peter is fawning. Peter saw what was happening and he began calculating the risk and he determined that the cost was too high. He knew, if he didn’t believe it before, that Jesus was going to the cross. And if Jesus was going, would he be next?

Peter knew how this would end and he didn’t like the ending. I imagine that it all began to come back to him and make sense to him. That conversation recorded in Matthew 16 began to rush to his memory. Jesus told them that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed. Peter had disagreed and told Jesus no, that this couldn’t happen to him. And after rebuking Peter, Jesus replied, “If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 16:24-25). Now it all made sense. Following Jesus means a true commitment and the risk of death. There is no turning back. This wasn’t hyperbole. It wasn’t hypothetical. This was actually happening. Jesus was about to take up his cross, and if Peter was going to follow then Peter would have to deny himself and take up his own cross and follow Jesus. The choice must be made between self-preservation and following Jesus. And in this moment, Peter chose self-preservation. He saw where this was going. He saw the destination and saw it was the cross. He saw it was death. And he was not willing to go there.

King knew the destination and if he ever forgot he was quickly reminded. He was arrested over twenty times and put in jails run by openly racist officials. His home was shot into, bombed, and set on fire. He was stabbed. He received constant hate mail and death threats. The FBI sent him letters taunting him to kill himself. There was no question about his destination. It wasn’t whether it would happen but when. And yet there was a cause greater than himself, a calling greater than himself, a determination to follow someone other than himself, a commitment to follow Jesus that compelled him to deny himself, take up his cross, and

⁵ *Cambridge Dictionary*, “self-preservation,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/self-preservation>.

follow Jesus, knowing the destination. People—God’s people—needed to be free. Justice and righteousness needed to prevail. Jesus’s mandate to love needed to be worked out on the streets of Birmingham and in the jails in Montgomery and on the bridge to Selma and in the churches of Atlanta and New York and in the ghettos of Detroit and in the union halls in Memphis and even in the countryside of Vietnam. There was a calling, there was a mandate to follow Jesus. As he said, and I’m paraphrasing, “If a person has not discovered something that he or she will die for, that person is not fit to live.”⁶ King was willing to die not for Black people but for Jesus. He was willing to die for the cause of Christ that took up the cause of the poor and the oppressed. He counted the cost and he was willing to pay it. He was just a pastor and a preacher. And at the end of the day, he had one job—to follow Jesus. And justice is where Jesus took him. Fellow pastors, preachers, chaplains, denominational leaders, at the end of the day you have one job—to follow Jesus! And, today, Jesus is calling you to justice. Jesus is calling you to that pressing issue bubbling up in your community. Are you willing to follow Jesus? Are you willing to follow Jesus even if it takes you to the cross?

King understood something that Peter understood later, after he had denied Christ and after he had been restored. The destination is not the cross. The destination was never the cross. The cross is a stopover to the ultimate destination. King says it this way,

Well, I don’t know what will happen now; we’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land.⁷

King understood that the cross was not the destination. The cross is a destination, but it’s not the *final destination*. The cross was not the final destination for Jesus and it’s not the final destination for us.

Because when I go back and I read my Bible I am reminded that they took Jesus and they led him through a bogus, kangaroo court. They put

⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., “Speech at Illinois Wesleyan University 1966,” Illinois Wesleyan University, <https://www.iwu.edu/mlk/>.

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” AFSCME, <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>.

a purple robe on him to mock him. And they put a crown of thorns on his head. And they forced him to carry that cross up Golgotha's hill. And they put nails in his hands and nails in his feet. And they hoisted him up on that cross. And they crucified him between two thieves. And he died on that cross. They laid him in a borrowed tomb, and he stayed there all night Friday, and all Saturday morning, and all Saturday night. But on the third day, early, early, early Sunday morning he got up with all power in his hands. And he is now seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.

When you remember the ultimate destination, when you remember that the cross is not the end, the earthly threat of suffering and death is put into perspective. We follow Jesus because Jesus conquered death and so will we. We follow Jesus because the life that we thought we lost, we will ultimately gain. "For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16:25).

The final destination is heaven. The final destination is everlasting life. The final destination is to hear the words "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21, KJV). Can you say it with me? I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back.

This sermon was originally presented on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Monday, January 20, 2025, in the Sheraton Denver Downtown Ballroom, Denver, Colorado, for the Midwinter Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Cultivating an Interpretive Community for the Present and the Future

*Bret M. Widman, director of contextual and lifelong learning,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

“If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves; But when they attend to what he reveals, they are most blessed” (Proverbs 29:18, MSG).

Pastoral ministry in a local congregation is becoming increasingly complex. Tod Bolsinger compared the challenge of pastoral leadership to Lewis and Clark’s search for a waterway to the Pacific Ocean only to find themselves confronted with the Rocky Mountains where their canoes could not cross.¹ He rightfully addressed leading in a cultural context that was not expected by naming the pressures and pitfalls of uncharted territory. Since he wrote his book in 2015, the challenges have only increased. Polarization over the 2016 presidential election, the outbreak of COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of George Floyd, the January 6 attack on the Capitol, and the 2024 presidential election all illustrate a deep divide among those who claim to follow Jesus. The challenges of pastoral leadership have only increased in speed and intensity.

As leadership teams and pastoral staffs attempted to lead during monumental change, congregants began to question who they were and what they believed amid the tumult. “Deconstruction,” a term coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1960s, has found its footing in the present church.² Recently, a flurry of books has been written about

¹ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 24–28.

² Jon Bloom, “What Does ‘Deconstruction’ Even Mean?” *Desiring God*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-deconstruction-even-mean>.

deconstruction, which the communities we have been called to lead are reading. Many of these books are raising further questions that continue the deconstruction journey.³ Deconstruction also includes the legion of voices on social media where every question, comment, and perspective is laid bare for others to challenge.

In 2019, 3,000 churches were planted and 4,500 closed.⁴ The average church size in 2020 was down to sixty-five from 137 in 2000.⁵ In 2007, when Americans were asked to check a box indicating their religious affiliation, 16 percent checked “none.” That number grew to 28 percent in 2024. Of these “nones” 69 percent are under the age of fifty and 63 percent are white.⁶ Churches and denominations in the West that were growing and thriving in their past began to see an exodus of members resulting in financial strains. Pastoral staff layoffs, a noticeable decrease of individuals responding to a call toward pastoral ministry, the bleed of younger generations from institutional faith, and the restructuring of leadership dominate many discussions within churches, denominations, and theological seminaries. What are pastors and leaders supposed to do to navigate these rocky mountains? Where is our vision? Are we aware of what God is doing?

Cultivating an Interpretive Community

My doctoral research and work at Fuller Theological Seminary began out of my anxiety around being a lead pastor for the first time. I had served in ministry for years in youth, associate, and interim roles but never in

³ Brian McLaren has published two recent books that illustrate this: *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned* (St. Martin's Essentials, 2024), and *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart* (St. Martin's Essentials, 2024). On this same topic Brian Zahnd published *When Everything's on Fire: Faith Forged from the Ashes* (InterVarsity Press, 2021). While some view deconstruction as primarily a white Christian construct, examples of authors of color deconstructing their faith from white supremacy include Cole Arthur Riley's *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (Convergent Books, 2023), Lisa Sharon Harper's *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World—and How to Repair It All* (Brazos Press, 2022), and Esau McCaulley's *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2020).

⁴ Scott Neuman, “The Faithful See Both Crisis and Opportunity as a Church,” NPR WBEZ, May 17, 2023, <https://www.northcountrypublicradio.org/news/npr/1175452002/the-faithful-see-both-crisis-and-opportunity-as-churches-close-across-the-country>.

⁵ Neuman, 2023.

⁶ Jason DeRose, “Religious ‘Nones’ Are Now the Largest Single Group in the US,” NPR WBEZ, Chicago, January 24, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/24/1226371734/religious-nones-are-now-the-largest-single-group-in-the-u-s>.

the lead role. I was anxious because I knew, on some level, that there was an expectation that I would *lead* the congregation, which I always found interesting. In Scripture we read that Jesus was and is the *head* of the congregation (which he is building), and I was curious as to why and how we did not function in that way. The hierarchal leadership structure functioned with the lead pastor working with the leadership team to create a vision and strategy for the future with a well-crafted mission statement and then convincing the congregation that it was God's leading, exuding confidence that God would be with us in our strategic plan. Believing in the priesthood of all believers, I realized that our framework may be excluding input and vision from the entire body. Like trying to create strategy from the top floor of the tower of Babel, leadership teams and pastors may be far away from the experiences of those on the streets and, even worse, may not have a paradigm of listening and discerning what the Spirit of God is saying to a specific congregation. As a pastor and leader, I wanted to consider how the full congregation could discern together what the Spirit of God is attempting to speak to our context.

Stop, Look, Listen

When I was young, I distinctly remember being taught that when I approached a railroad crossing, I needed to stop, look, and listen. Whether I was walking or driving across the tracks, I needed to stop and look both ways. I needed to listen for the sound of an approaching train. Cultivating an interpretative community requires the slow process of stopping whenever a decision is needing to be made, looking to the past, and listening to how the community perceives their past and present. This practice will take significantly more time than a monthly leadership team meeting. Yet this is the process of discerning together what the Lord may be asking communities of faith to embark upon, especially in times of upheaval. If one does not stop, look, and listen, the consequences may be dire with even the best of intentions. An interpretive community is one where there is intentionality around stopping, looking, and listening collectively to God and to one another.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus taught about his kingdom while inviting his followers to have practical experiences of his kingdom paradigm. In Matthew 13:13–15 Jesus describes people as being able to physically see and hear but failing to understand his teaching or connecting it to practical experiences. Whether a willful ignorance of refusing to see or hear, or whether one has never considered how the Spirit of God may be moving in our decision making, Jesus's question asking if we are seeing

and hearing is imperative. The paradigm of an interpretive community is one where there is a desire, longing, and intentionality of seeing and hearing what Jesus is presently saying and presently doing.

Stop

Pastors and leaders are fully aware that budgeting, personnel, and programming decisions all have a timeline. The pressure to barrel ahead, believing that God has called us into specific positions of leadership, is real. Stopping does not imply doing nothing. Stopping is pausing the decision-making process to gather more information for pastors and leadership teams to discern what may emerge from the information gathered. This is crucial work for a better present and a hopeful future. While decisions can be large or small, the practice of pausing to gather information prior to making decisions is key to creating an interpretive community looking to the Spirit of God to speak, lead, and guide.⁷

The warning for spiritual leaders and teachers unable to discern the movement of God's Spirit in their communities is dire. We see this tension in the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus, a spiritual leader responsible for determining correct interpretations of the law of Moses to Israel, came to Jesus to ask him questions about his teachings. Jesus's question in 3:10 is imperative for all spiritual leaders discerning the work of the Spirit of God: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" In other words, Nicodemus, as a leader and teacher of Israel, are you not able to discern what the Spirit is doing and saying? Jesus insists Nicodemus be "born again" to more effectively discern the movement of God's Spirit.

John 3 is typically used to call unrepentant sinners to receive Jesus into their lives. However, that does not consider the context of this passage. Jesus never asked a sinner to be "born again." He did not ask the woman caught in adultery or unclean Samaritans or tax collectors to be born again. Jesus asks many people to follow him, but he reserved the term "born again" for someone in spiritual leadership. This was an invitation for Nicodemus to interpret what God was doing in his midst through the life, teaching, and active presence of the living

Word, Jesus himself. Pneumatology, from the Greek words πνεῦμα (*pneuma*, spirit) and λόγος (*logos*, teaching), includes the study of the

⁷ In his book *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Alban Institute, 2004) Mark Lau Branson introduced a paradigm of "interpretive leadership" where leaders seek to understand what is going on and why is it happening.

person and work of the Holy Spirit. In his dialogue, Jesus is attempting to educate Nicodemus about the Holy Spirit. An interpretive community seeks to discern the voice and work of the Spirit in their present by looking back at how the Spirit worked in their past. Such a community can move forward in the direction in which God's Spirit is inviting them.

Another leader of Israel in Scripture who failed to interpret a present moment by engaging how God had worked in the past was the apostle Paul. In Philippians 3:5–6 and elsewhere, Paul describes himself as a Pharisee of Pharisees. In his leadership position, the former Saul's interpretation of this troubling new Jesus movement led him to murder early believers. Rather than pausing, like Nicodemus, to engage Jesus and his movement and interpret what was happening by engaging their history with God, Saul perceived the movement as a threat. The resurrected Jesus does not tell Saul to be "born again" but rather that he was kicking against the goads. This is a warning to those in positions of spiritual leadership who, in their own understanding, may be kicking against what the Spirit of God is attempting to reveal to said leadership. Both Nicodemus and Saul were spiritual leaders of Israel and were invited by Jesus to pause and discern. Neither one was interpreting what God's Spirit was doing through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Nicodemus was challenged individually by Jesus to perceive the movement of God's Spirit. While this was clearly a personal directive, communities of faith are also invited to consider this paradigm collectively. A biblical example is the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 when the Spirit of God was poured out on uncircumcised gentiles. The community of faith needed to discern not only what God had done but how their faith community would respond. Should they require the whole law of Moses or not? In that present moment, they reached into their history to attempt to understand how God's Spirit may now be at work. In verse 10, Peter refers to their "ancestors" and how God had not put a heavy yoke on them and, therefore, they should not put the heavy yoke of circumcision on the gentiles. Peter and the council of Jerusalem modeled an interpretive community.

In *Pursuing God's Will Together*, Ruth Haley Barton distinguishes between decision-making and discernment. In the first paradigm, Barton writes that usually when faced with a decision, a congregational meeting with a set agenda is called. Following perfunctory opening prayers, the agenda actually makes the decision on behalf of the congregation. In contrast, the second paradigm views the agenda itself as the process of discernment. Once leadership is conscious of God as their leader, God

guides the discernment forward. Barton writes to cultivate interpretive communities who seek discernment individually and corporately to navigate their crossroad moments. According to Barton, cultivating a discerning posture is transformational for all present in the community of faith.⁸

Look

The dilemma for leaders navigating present realities cannot be overlooked. Proverbs 29:18 reminds us of the importance of vision and the thriving of people attached to such vision. Determining where we are going, how we are going to get there, and what resources we must have to arrive at the vision requires strategic thinking. However, the Hebrew word for *vision* in this verse is much broader than creating a strategic plan for God's people, the church, and its leaders. The Hebrew word חָזוֹן (*châzôwn*) is translated "vision, prophecy, and revelation." It implies divine communication and the ability to discern what that divine communication entails rather than a personal plan for a successful future.⁹ Through the prophetic office, one could interpret a divine and specific word for God's people.

Humility characterizes leaders who seek God for insight and discernment. Looking for specific and divine revelation for present realities and future possibilities has always been a church imperative, but when everything seems chaotic the intense longing for a divine word escalates. In the rush to chart a new course, communities of faith may skip interpretation all together, with dire results. Matthew Taylor exemplifies this in his podcast *Charismatic Revival Fury*, tracing what he calls the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), which began with John Wimber asserting that the church was in its dismal state because it lacked apostles and prophets who could hear from God directly.¹⁰ Taylor places the NAR behind the Capitol insurrection on January 6 by those convinced of Trump's divine

⁸ Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 50–51.

⁹ StudyLight.org, Strong's #2377, חָזוֹן, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://studylight.org/lexicons/eng/hebrew/2377.html>.

¹⁰ Listen to Matthew D. Taylor, "Episode 1: January 6th and the New Apostolic Reformation," *Charismatic Revival Fury: The New Apostolic Reformation* (podcast), March 27, 2024, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-1-january-6th-and-the-new-apostolic-reformation/id1738709631?i=1000650888048>. According to Taylor, the NAR is primarily led by white leadership. However, the NAR is a multiracial, global, and Pentecostal movement.

role as their spiritual leader.¹¹ One wonders what discernment practices the “prophetic and apostolic” leadership of NAR employed to arrive at their conclusion. To avoid pitfalls such as these in discerning the movement of God’s Spirit, a careful review of historical narratives is crucial.

Looking Back: “What Happened and Why?”

I was introduced to Jesus at the age of nineteen through a Pentecostal campus ministry. At our gatherings someone would regularly offer a prophetic word to an individual or the community about something present or future. Each week a prophetic word was spoken, but there was never a moment to look back to pay attention to whether what was said previously came to fruition. The leadership of this ministry cultivated a culture of always addressing the present and the future with a prophetic “word from the Lord.” I stayed with the ministry until I graduated and then ended up as a high school intern at First Covenant Church in Oakland, California. That internship experience led me to apply to and attend North Park Theological Seminary for my MDiv studies.

As a student at NPTS, I took a course titled “Exile and Hope” with Fred Holmgren. This seasoned faculty member and Old Testament scholar presented a perspective on the prophets that challenged my previous paradigms. According to Holmgren, the prophets in Scripture were highly intuitive, fully aware of the crises that they, God’s covenant people, were experiencing. However, the prophets did not immediately look forward in order to strategize how to get out of their current situation. Their *first* act was to look back to understand how they arrived in the crisis they were experiencing. Primarily they focused on God’s actions and words in their past, along with their responses of commission and omission to interpret their present. This was necessary before charting a course for the future. Without exegeting history, the prophets believed they might misstep charting a course for a desired future. God’s people needed to repent from their past to ensure that their present and future would be in alignment with God.

Biblical prophets were mindful of counterfeiters who preached promising messages aligned with societal desires rather than their historical call. Motivated by personal gain, false prophets gave a fabricated sense of security that everything would be fine if the community followed

¹¹ Rick Pidcock, “The New Apostolic Reformation Drove the January 6 Riots So Why Was It Overlooked by the House Select Committee?” *Baptist News Global*, January 10, 2023, <https://baptistnews.com/article/the-new-apostolic-reformation-drove-the-january-6-riots-so-why-was-it-overlooked-by-the-house-select-committee/>.

their edicts. Biblical prophets issued warnings and corrections to God's people after analyzing and interpreting their history. In other words, prophets were greater historians rather than predictors of the future. They acknowledged that their present and future would change only if they could honestly engage their past.¹² This was imperative because they acknowledged the severity of their current crisis despite the enticing proclamations of their false counterparts.

Because their messages were in direct conflict with true prophets and their interpretation of history, false prophets used political power to stir up violence toward biblical prophets. This clash of differing perspectives resulted in the death of many of God's messengers. Jesus's first public message quoting from Isaiah 61 demonstrates this, "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn" (Luke 4:18). This reading provided a present and future hope for those listening that their political ruler (messiah) had arrived and would deliver them from Roman rule and occupation, uprooting one political empire and replacing it with a spiritual empire to accomplish what they perceived was God's purpose. Those listening to Jesus's sermon that day were amazed and hopeful that their present would change toward Israel's advantage, giving them a bright and hopeful future. Knowing this, Jesus reached into their collective past to remind them that two well-known and respected prophets, Elijah and Elisha, performed miracles for non-Israelites. He interpreted their history to address their present and future. This put him in conflict with what the people wanted and expected from him as their Messiah. They immediately attempted to end his life by throwing him off a cliff. Evidently, they did not want to look honestly at their past if it challenged their desired future.

In his article "Discerning True and False Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah," Paul Gallagher contrasts the biblical prophet Jeremiah with his counterpart and false prophet, Hananiah.¹³ During Israel's Babylo-

¹² The Evangelical Covenant Church demonstrated a prophetic impulse to look back in order to interpret its present by repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery on June 25, 2021, at the 135th Annual Meeting, <https://covchurch.org/resolutions/2021-resolution-to-repudiate-the-doctrine-of-discovery/>. This act of communal repentance for a historical moment realigns the church with the mission of God for its present and future.

¹³ Paul Gallagher, "Discerning True and False Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah," *Asia Journal of Theology*, 28 no. 1 (2014), 3.

nian exile, Hananiah held a prophetic office within Israel's leadership framework, but Jeremiah did not. However, each of them had specific and contradictory words for Israel's critical moment. Jeremiah addressed their history of false religiosity and social degeneration as the reason for God's punishment through Nebuchadnezzar, resulting in a long-prophesied exile.¹⁴ Hananiah, on the other hand, assured them of God's promise and that God would force Babylon to its knees. While sounding good, it did not address or interpret how or why Israel had arrived where they found themselves. Hananiah's hopeful and optimistic message and his confidence in God's provision was appealing. However, by preaching false assurances to God's people, Hananiah failed to address the history that had led them to where they were.¹⁵ In fact, Hananiah was not interested in interpreting their history but instead ignored it completely.

In Hananiah's prophecy, the covenant with Israel is detached from history understood as Yahweh's dialogue with his people; instead, the covenant takes on a separate existence as a ready-to-hand means to cope with crisis. In such a case the covenant, and the truth of God and his intention for Israel that it brings to light, provides no illumination in times of upheaval. It is more of a spiritual lie in which the prophet's theology of God, uprooted from a historical vision of the covenant, renders him incapable of distinguishing revelation from wish-fulfillment.¹⁶

Gallagher goes on to state the false prophet Hananiah encouraged Israel to cling to their institution for comfort and, in doing so, distanced themselves from what God was doing and saying in their midst. Jeremiah, on the other hand, predicted the political, social, and religious collapse of all the institutions Israel relied upon. Gallagher's work highlights the imperative for interpreting present realities through the lens of historical exegesis. Preaching declarations of hope, confidence, and prosperity through an ahistorical lens satisfied the wishful demands of Israel as a nation but failed to engage the sovereign hand of God throughout their history.

Interpreting the Present by Looking to the Past

In her book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, Phyllis Tickle used a prophetic metaphor of a "giant rummage

¹⁴ Gallagher, 10.

¹⁵ Gallagher, 12.

¹⁶ Gallagher, 13.

sale” that happens every five hundred years in the church. In these rummage sales, the church “cleans house” deciding what to keep, what to get rid of, and how to make room for new things.¹⁷ In 2008, well before COVID-19, she believed the church was amid such a rummage sale. Tickle noted four chapters in church history that demonstrate such a yard sale. The first chapter was in AD 313, when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which allowed Christianity to be practiced in the open. That was followed by Emperor Theodosius in AD 380 with the Edict of Thessalonica to declare Nicene Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire. This marriage of a faith forged in diaspora with political power was new for followers of Jesus. Tickle’s second chapter was on the first church split, occurring in AD 1054 between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox church. The split primarily was about papal authority, including theological, political, and cultural differences. The third chapter was Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses in AD 1517. The context for this chapter, interestingly, included much of what had been taking place in the second chapter: church corruption, divisive theological differences, and the politicizing of the faith. Finally, according to Tickle, is our present chapter. She highlighted the desire for participatory spirituality, the inclusivity of all people, the drift from denominationalism, and a more robust engagement with culture rather than a retreat into isolationism. She may have not used the term “deconstruction” to identify these monumental shifts for the church; however, she did point to these moments to demonstrate her “giant rummage sale” of the church and why it takes place.

Tickle used the metaphor of an apple cart to illustrate the cycle of every five hundred years. God’s people work for approximately four hundred years institutionalizing their faith and placing metaphorical apples on a cart one by one. Once it is ordered, the Holy Spirit upends the cart for a span of one hundred years, and the apples go scattering. The church finds itself in chaos and begins the work of gathering all the apples and putting them back in order on the cart. That takes approximately four hundred years and then the cycle repeats itself. Tickle stated confidently that we are in the midst of one hundred years of scattering in which things appear to have been tipped over.¹⁸

¹⁷ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 19–21.

¹⁸ Phyllis Tickle, “The Great Emergence,” lecture presented at Rubicon: A Yearly Gathering to Explore the Interplay Between Culture and the Gospel, November 2, 2012, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNgd5ObMg&t=963s>.

Tickle's work is historic and prophetic. She reached back into the history of God's people and the major moments that caused cultural, political, and theological upheaval. The crescendo of these upheavals left leaders unable to provide new vision and has often meant doubling down on "what used to work." However, that response was proven futile, and new movements sprang up despite the resistance of leadership. One can imagine the chaos, confusion, and conflicts in each of these chapters in church history.¹⁹ In essence, according to Tickle, what we are presently experiencing, is not new for the church, but it *is* new for us in our present.

In May 2024 while attending a homiletics conference, I attended a lecture titled "Preaching Your Way Through an Apocalypse: Homiletics of Feral Hope amid Collapse," by Cody J. Sanders.²⁰ Sanders is the associate professor of congregational and community care leadership at Luther Seminary. Like Tickle and the prophets of old, he reached into our past in order to understand our present. However, unlike Tickle, he went further back to the origins of the Bible itself. He began his presentation by boldly stating that our present moment is one of the most exciting times to be in pastoral ministry, which is something Tickle often said. With a grin on his face and exuding confidence, Sanders stated that the entire Bible was written *amid* apocalypse *and* collapse! Beginning in the Old Testament, he reminded us that the predominant theme of the narrative is exile; God's people being overthrown by other people groups and nations where they were taken away against their will. He helped us to envision what it may have felt like to be uprooted, taken from our homes, our possessions stolen. While some would need to "envision" what that is like, others comprehend this through their own history. American author, journalist, and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates recounts this narrative in the Black experience in the US.²¹

Exile is thematic throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Sanders moved from exile in the Old Testament to the New Testament and reminded us that it was also written during a time of diaspora and martyrdom. God's people were shocked when their temple was destroyed after Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection even though he had told them it would happen.²²

¹⁹ One would wonder if Nicodemus perceived Jesus's kingdom movement as one of chaos, confusion, and conflict. Was Jesus's invitation to Nicodemus to perceive the Spirit alive and at work in such moments like this?

²⁰ Cody J. Sanders, "Preaching Your Way through an Apocalypse: Homiletics of Feral Hope amid Collapse," Festival of Homiletics, Pittsburgh, PA, May 15, 2024.

²¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014: 19-30.

²² The destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE and the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE fits the pattern Tickle wrote about.

That event sent them fleeing for their lives.²³ They sought safety as they emigrated from their home to unknown places, uncertain whether they would be welcomed or harmed. The first church was a refugee church looking for a safe harbor.

This is why Sanders chose to use the word *feral* alongside the word *hope*. The definition of feral is the refusal to be domesticated, a disposition of being wild and living in the wilderness. He believed that where we are currently seeing a collapse of so many familiar, domesticated institutions, we—God’s people—are being invited into the wilderness once again, as were those in Scripture who recognized the Spirit of God in their own histories. Sanders prophetically wondered if we have been viewing Scripture through a domesticated lens rather than the apocalyptic lens in which it was written; using Scripture to defend and promote our domestication to institutions rather than as a guide through the wilderness where we would meet the very presence of God.

Sanders, like Tickle, returned to the past to retrieve a narrative to provide hope, albeit a *feral* hope. Both spoke with excitement, rather than doom, for our present moment. Both reminded their audience of the ways God always showed up in apocalyptic moments in order for us to envision and move toward a hope-filled future. Neither Sanders or Tickle provided a road map out of apocalypse and collapse, but both framed this present moment in a way that reminds us that God never leaves and forsakes but continues to build his church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. God finds a way when one does not seem possible. In moments like these, we may need to deconstruct many things as we are invited into the wilderness. Yet with confidence, we will meet God in the wilderness in ways we had not imagined. Sanders specifically suggested that we view Scripture with an apocalyptic lens to find hope wherein we would meet God in our moment.

Listen

At a recent holiday gathering our four children began telling family stories. Through laughter and nostalgia, it became very clear that our recollection of events often differed. At times, memories of specific instances conflicted with divergent opinions as to what happened when and with whom. I could sense the discomfort. Yet, as we asked questions, gathered more information, and recognized particular personalities, it became a rich moment I will cherish forever. Watching my adult children listen to

²³ The apostles, however, remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1).

one another about our shared history was an experience of love.

Exegeting spiritual narratives of God's work in the past includes recounting how God's people responded and may lend direction to what God desires moving forward. Though this process can threaten to reveal divergent views, it is imperative if one is attempting to cultivate a Spirit-led, interpretive community. Jesus challenged Israel's understanding by recounting how God had worked in their past in ways which they had failed to see, hear, and understand. Jesus brought forth history that many may have forgotten or ignored. Jesus's invitation for Israel to consider their collective history threatened their leadership. This threat drove them to silence Jesus using the political empire of Rome.

Reviewing historical narratives is both threatening and imperative to lead spiritually and to discern the movement of God's Spirit. In our present moment, there has been much division surrounding honest reflection upon the history of our own country, which demonstrates both the threat and imperative involved. An interpretive community will exegete the past by listening with intent to others' experiences and perceptions of that same history. James 1:19 states, "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger."²⁴ As in my family, bias occurs when we believe our personal engagement with history is the same as that of everyone else. Leading an interpretive community involves cultivating an environment that prioritizes listening to one another for a hopeful present and future. Reviewing history together can raise concerns that the past will be rewritten. It is not a rewriting of history but a broadening of the narrative, ultimately leading to a communal enlightenment of how others experienced those same events.

Tickle and Sanders present a prophetic framing of our current situation through an exegetical review of biblical narratives and church history. While these are informative, an interpretive community such as a local congregation would desire to focus more specifically on their own context. That would include both the secular and spiritual histories

²⁴ Examples in our present day include Critical Race Theory, see Gloria Ladson-Billings, interview by Jill Anderson, "The State of Critical Race Theory in Education," *Harvard Graduate School of Education EdCast*, February 23, 2024, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/edcast/22/02/state-critical-race-theory-education>, and the 1619 Project, see Jake Silverstein, "The 1619 Project and the Long Battle Over U.S. History," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 12, 2021. These topics have sparked a national conflict with some citizens who do not believe it is important to look honestly at the history of race in the US.

of their geographic location, their social and political structures, their denomination, their congregation, and individual narratives.²⁵

Even though a local congregation cannot all do this research together, someone must begin to gather these histories. Once the histories are discovered, the data should be brought to the local congregation. The data brought forward should not be *taught* to the congregation but rather *provided*. The subsequent listening to one another regarding the data is where interpretation begins. A local congregation needs to understand why this work is necessary; to interpret what God could be asking a local congregation to do in their specific context, with their specific people, and for a specific purpose. A congregation that has been disciplined in listening to one another as they engage their collective history *and* the Spirit of God has the potential of sensing what God is asking them to do. However, it is crucial that a congregation understand that conflict will likely ensue in historical exegesis.²⁶ It takes humility and active listening to invite everyone to perceive and exegete past histories. It is imperative for leaders to comprehend that it is a very long process. Cultivating an interpretative community takes intentional work over the course of years. Taking three to five years to intentionally create fertile soil for discerning what the Spirit of God is asking of a specific congregation is a slow but worthwhile process. By cultivating this soil, a congregation will be prepared for looking at the history of their local congregation and context. The lessons from the past will be mined for the present and what the future could look like and how to get there.

In Philippians 1:6 Paul states, “For I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work among you will complete it by the day of Christ Jesus” (NRSV). The context of these words was that the community of faith in Philippi were experiencing distress, danger, and chaos. Decades earlier their rabbi had been crucified and was resurrected. However, they were experiencing conflict within and without. While they were experiencing great threat, persecution, and martyrdom, there were conflicts within the community of faith. Paul goes on to state, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2). It was from that context that Paul writes his confidence in the work of

²⁵ Matt Cheney, “Historical Database of Sundown Towns,” *History and Social Justice*, 2025, <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns/using-the-sundown-towns-database/state-map/>.

²⁶ The refrain “What’s happened in the past is in the past and we just need to get over it” is often vocalized in discussing histories. However, we need to understand that what happened in our past is active in our present. The biblical prophets, again, did this work.

Jesus Christ; that since he began something with them, he will complete it. I wonder if Paul was able to interpret this based on his engagement with his history. Can we, like Paul, state confidently that this present moment in which we find ourselves is not lost on the Lord? That we can *stop, look, and listen* for how and what the Lord did in our collective past to navigate our present and future hope?

Lord, have mercy.

Reviews

*Alexandria Figueroa, receptionist and former young adult ministry director,
First Covenant Church of Oakland, California*

*Reid Kappe, lead pastor,
Trinity Fellowship, Olathe, Kansas*

*Markus Nikkanen, academic dean,
Theological Seminary of Finland
Tampere, Finland*

Jeffrey F. Keuss, ed., *Defiant Hope, Active Love: What Young Adults Are Seeking in Places of Work, Faith, and Community* (Eerdmans, 2024), 170 pages, \$22.99.

Young adults in the twenty-first century face unique challenges. As they navigate high costs of living, identity formation, social pressure to meet milestones, and frequent life transitions, young adults are increasingly leaving organized religion and seeking community elsewhere. Exploring a critical growth edge for the church, the contributors to *Defiant Hope, Active Love* present research on the needs, desires, and challenges of young adults. The authors not only present the facts but suggest strategies churches may adopt to serve young adults well.

In each chapter, the contributors discuss their findings on various topics related to young adulthood and ministry and conclude with questions designed to prompt practical responses. In chapter 1, Jeffrey F. Keuss and Robert Drovdaahl describe emerging adulthood as a developmental stage marked by significant instability and opportunity as emerging adults discover themselves, the world, and the role they want to play in it. In chapter 2, Gabrielle Metzler and Mathea Kangas examine how today's young adults are less likely to engage in organized religion than

previous generations and other age groups. Metzler and Kangas argue that churches are uniquely positioned to fulfill young adults' desires for social transformation and spiritual growth. In chapter 3, Lauren St. Martin suggests that effective young adult ministry must see engaging young adults as a call from God, intentionally promote community and spiritual formation, and provide authenticity, understanding, diversity, and mentorship. In chapter 4, Linda Montaña explains how the church can serve as a resource station to help young adults tackle obstacles and thrive during transitions. In chapter 5, Mackenzie Harris shows how churches can identify and empower young adult leaders while fostering healthy mentorship relationships and overcoming the challenges of shifting priorities, schedules, and life stages. In chapter 6, Martin Jiménez explores young adults' interactions with new church models and their draw to less-established churches where they can help shape the culture. Keuss concludes by reflecting on how the church can come alongside this age group in their efforts to heal the mind, body, and soul.

The respect and care the contributors show for young adults is evident in their research methods, analysis, and suggestions for ministry. Voices of young adults are present throughout the book. Not only are several of the researchers in this age group themselves, but they also surveyed and interviewed young adults and those serving them. As a "twenty-something" myself and former young adult ministry director, I resonate deeply with the research findings summarized in this book. The authors acknowledge the difficulties of ministering to a group in constant flux while encouraging and equipping leaders to lean into this call. Pastors seeking to better connect with and serve young adults will gain insight into their developmental stage, what they seek from their communities, the obstacles they face, and practical ways the church can respond to their needs to foster sustainable young adult ministry. This book will be especially helpful for those in progressive urban contexts or regions like the Pacific Northwest where the shift away from organized religion is particularly notable.

ALEXANDRIA FIGUEROA

Curt Thompson, *The Deepest Place: Suffering and the Formation of Hope* (Zondervan, 2023), 240 pages, \$17.

The fact that a clinical book on trauma written by a world-renowned psychiatrist was a *New York Times* bestseller says something about the paramount importance of this subject today. *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Bessel van der Kolk not only spent 141 weeks on the coveted *New York Times* bestseller list but held the number one position for twenty-seven of those weeks. Whether addressing trauma is a felt need or just another thread in the fabric of the zeitgeist, one cannot deny that trauma is ubiquitous.

Still, questions surround this massive subject. What constitutes trauma? How do we respond to it? What does the intersection of trauma and discipleship look like? How do followers of Jesus make sense of all of this and hear what is true amidst the fray?

One such clarion call comes from Curt Thompson in his most recent book, *The Deepest Place: Suffering and the Formation of Hope*. Thompson is a board-certified psychiatrist, a follower of Jesus, and a thoughtful student of the Holy Scriptures. With remarkable skill and tender care, he integrates his expertise on interpersonal neurobiology and the teachings of the historic Christian faith. *The Deepest Place* is in one sense a long form exposition of Romans 5:1–5, supplemented with insights from contemporary studies in mental health.

One of the most powerful aspects of this book is Thompson's commitment to view suffering not as an obstacle to spiritual growth but as the ground in which deep transformation can take place. This is quite the subversive claim in our cultural moment, given our increasing proclivities toward comfort and ease, to which the church is not impervious. Thompson observes:

Our culture trains us to expect that we should not have to suffer, and that if we do for any reason we should then expect the environment around us to change so that we will no longer have to suffer.... There is little to no expectation that suffering actually has the potential to form us into more resilient people. This would be blasphemy against our culture's current code of conduct (86).

In a culture that seeks to avoid pain at all costs, Thompson reminds us that suffering is not something to be numbed or ignored. Rather, when

engaged with curiosity, compassion, and a willingness to be known by God and others, suffering can become the means by which we are formed more fully into the likeness of Christ.

I read this book in the wake of one of the most traumatic experiences of my life. It was recommended to me by a friend in the Covenant who knew what I was going through. The moment in the book that flipped the script for me regarding how I related to my trauma was in chapter 6:

We think that becoming more like God means becoming more powerful and protected from pain when in fact it is in our suffering—and in our persevering in the face of it in vulnerable community, the community of the Trinity as lived out in the body of Jesus—that we actually become more and more like God (123).

In that moment I was confronted not only with my truncated view of trauma but my truncated view of God himself. Far from trauma being something to be avoided or discarded, our suffering is a means by which we can come to identify with God, who is himself the One who identifies with us. As the author of Hebrews declares, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15, CSB).

In the end, *The Deepest Place* is more than just a book about trauma and healing—it is an invitation. An invitation to see our suffering through the lens of God’s love. It is an invitation to step into relationships that foster healing. And ultimately, it is an invitation to encounter Jesus in the very places we least expect—in our wounds, our struggles, and the depths of our pain. For anyone seeking a deeper understanding of how suffering and formation are inherently intertwined, this book is a must-read.

REID KAPPE

Jason A. Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel: Jews, Former Gentiles, Israelites* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 350 pages, \$38.

Jason Staples explores how Paul’s redefinition of Israel’s boundaries—particularly regarding Israelite status, salvation, and gentile inclusion—is rooted in first-century Jewish restoration eschatology. This eschatology, drawn from prophetic texts, anticipates the return of all twelve tribes

from exile, not just Judah and Benjamin.¹

Building on his previous book, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, Staples argues that “Israel” refers either to the Northern Kingdom’s tribes or to the twelve-tribe covenantal people of YHWH.² “Jews” (or Judeans), by contrast, specifically denotes the Southern Kingdom’s tribes, who returned from exile in 539 BCE.³ He demonstrates that this distinction persisted in Second Temple sources, with some authors ceasing to refer to Israel after the Assyrian exile.⁴

Staples challenges the notion of “Israel” as an empirical ethnicity, arguing that such a definition imposes an anachronistic and scientifically rigid framework onto antiquity. Since ethnicity and religion were not separate categories in the ancient world, *ethnos* was defined by adherence to cultural and cultic practices rather than genealogy.⁵ Consequently, Israel’s boundaries were always negotiable, primarily through Torah observance. This interpretive lens applies to Paul, who views law-breaking Jews as outsiders and Torah-observant individuals as insiders (Rom 2:29; 8:4).⁶

Staples asserts that the debate over gentile circumcision only makes sense within the context of gentiles entering the covenant.⁷ Against his opponents, Paul contends that Spirit-filled gentiles are already Israelites and thus do not require circumcision.⁸ They join God’s people not as gentiles but as Israelites whose hearts have been circumcised by the Spirit.

According to Staples, the salvation of “all Israel” occurs as “the full number of the gentiles” (Rom 11:25) joins the remnant. Contrary to the prevailing (?) consensus, Paul does not envision the church as a “new

¹ Jason A. Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 19, 45–62. He aligns with Pitre in critiquing N.T. Wright’s redefinition of “exile.” Pitre argues that while Wright’s insight is correct, he misidentifies the Exile, asserting that the southern tribes had indeed returned home. See Brant Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of Atonement*. JSOTSup 37 (Baker Academic, 2005), 34–35; cf. James M. Scott, “‘For as Many as Are of the Works of the Law Are under a Curse’ (Galatians 3:10),” in *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, JSNTSup 83 (Sheffield Academic, 1993), 187–221; N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993), 141–147 on the theme of continuing exile.

² Jason A. Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism: A New Theory of People, Exile, and Israelite Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 339.

³ Staples, *Paul*, 48.

⁴ Staples, *Paul*, 50; Staples, *The Idea*, 43–51.

⁵ Staples, *Paul*, 15.

⁶ Staples, *Paul*, 18, 145–181.

⁷ Staples, *Paul*, 9.

⁸ Staples, *Paul*, 11.

entity...of Jews and gentiles coming together in Christ equally.”⁹ Instead, Paul is a first-century Jew, who remained within his original “theological, eschatological, and ethnic framework” even after identifying Jesus as Israel’s messiah.¹⁰

Staples makes a significant contribution to Pauline studies, particularly to the ongoing debate about the identity of gentile Christ-followers. His exegetical analysis engages with overlooked or dismissed texts, particularly Romans 2.¹¹ His extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and ability to interpret Pauline writings within this broader scriptural and narrational framework are especially commendable. These strengths make his work a valuable resource, setting a benchmark for future scholarship. Among his novel interpretations is his argument that in Romans 11:25 (“until the full number of the Gentiles has come in”) Paul alludes to Jacob’s blessing over Ephraim, Israel’s leading tribe (“and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations” [Gen 48:19]).¹²

However, Staples’s work would have benefited from greater methodological clarity in identifying allusions in biblical texts, a common critique in biblical studies.¹³ Furthermore, why does Paul continue to address his recipients as gentiles if this identity is no longer relevant (e.g., Rom 11:13; cf. Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 5:1; 10:1; 12:2)? While not all readers will be convinced by Staples’s arguments, his work remains essential for any serious student of Paul.

MARKUS NIKKANEN

⁹ Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* (Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 149.

¹⁰ Staples, *Paul*, 8, 5–6, 20. Staples critiques older readings of Paul for misrepresenting Judaism as works-based and portraying Paul’s conversion as a rejection of the law. While acknowledging that the New Perspective on Paul avoids anachronistic accusations of legalism, he argues that it fails to address Paul’s ethnocentrism (cf. Rom 1:16). He contends that it merely replaces “legalism” with “ethnocentrism” and projects modern inclusivity onto Paul’s theology. Paul’s debate is not about particularism versus inclusiveness but about defining the boundaries of God’s exclusive community.

¹¹ See Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace—to the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul,” NTS 32, no. 1 (1986): 72–93.

¹² Staples, *Paul*, 307–312.

¹³ Staples briefly addresses this issue in relation to Paul’s audience’s competency on pages 27–28, but does not provide a methodological discussion on identifying allusions. See Paul Foster, “Echoes without Resonance: Critiquing Certain Aspects of Recent Scholarly Trends in the Study of the Jewish Scriptures in the New Testament,” JSNT 38 (2015): 96–111.

