

**PASTOR AS STRUGGLING POET:  
EXPLORING AN ALTERNATIVE MODE  
OF MISSIONAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP**

By

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Charles Scott Kinder-Pyle

When the text comes to speak about this alternative life wrought by God, the text must use poetry. There is no other way to speak. We know about the future—we know surely—but we do not know concretely enough to issue memos and blueprints. We know only enough to sing songs and speak poems. That, however, is enough. We stake our lives on such poems.

Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes The Poet*

Poets are the articulators of experience. They image and symbolize the unarticulated experiences of the community, identifying and expressing the soul of the people... the poet writes so that the congregation hears their story as God's pilgrim people.

Alan Roxburgh, *Church Between Gospel & Culture*

In the church where we go to now the tension exists  
of the two or three or more  
who have gathered in the name of...  
in the name of...  
in the name of...  
and the body is played as a stringed instrument:  
a lute, a lyre, a harp, or, more likely,  
a guitar, a piano, a violin.  
And the music that is made  
comes at the cost of this peculiar tuning-together  
that hurts  
as it readies for pleasure.

John Terpstra, "Tension," *Mars Hill Review* 20

We are what is called a "Christian" nation—but in such a sense that not a single one of us is in the character of the Christianity of the New Testament, any more than I am, who again and again have repeated and do now repeat, that I am only a poet. The illusion of a Christian nation is due doubtless to the power which number exercises over the imagination... For true Christianity this is the most dangerous of all illusions, and at the same time it is of all illusions precisely the one to which every [one] is prone; for number (the high number, when it gets up to 100,000, into the millions) tallies precisely with the imagination. But Christianly of course the calculation is wrong, and a Christian nation composed of units which honestly admit that they are not Christians, *item* honestly admit that their life cannot in any sense be called an effort in the direction of what the New Testament understands by Christianity—such a Christian nation is an impossibility.

Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon "Christendom"*

## DEDICATION

To the poetic pioneers—to the members and friends of the Crossroads Presbyterian Church, *sent out* from Limerick, Pennsylvania, I humbly submit this joyous record of our ministry together. Praise God for the ways in which you have made yourselves vulnerable to serve Christ Jesus.

Sheryl, because of you and your loving support, I've kissed time like the maples kiss those springtime showers and become intoxicated with our summer days. Thank you for being my lover, my friend, my spouse, my colleague as well as the mother of our two children, Ian and Philip. I also offer my deep appreciation to them, and look forward to the imaginative trails that each one will blaze through the wilderness.

Finally, without Avanelle and Bob's *ooops* and continuing nurture, I would not have joined that ragamuffin clan of two brothers and two sisters, known as the Pyle family. From my mother I learned how to touch, to weep and to intuit the truth, and from my father I learned how to *not* always fix cars, and their passengers, but to love them both with passion.

ABSTRACT

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Purely academic and abstract discussions about the so-called *Missional Church* will no longer suffice. What pastors and other church leaders now require are theo-poetic forums, in which we might explore the words, images and metaphors that influence the way we do ministry in the postmodern world. The biblical text itself yields an abundance of possible literary and mythic associations—many of which have compelling resonance with those who feel estranged and alienated from the institutional church community. This project offers analysis of truly “raw data,” which does not include numerical gauges and statistical percentages. The most insightful data in the case of the Crossroads Presbyterian Church of Limerick, Pennsylvania, arises from the primordial creative capacity of those who respond to passages like Matthew 13:52 and testify, in word and in deed, to the Truth of the ever-elusive and unfolding Gospel Story. In this regard, pastors are encouraged to submit themselves to the scribal training of Jesus of Nazareth and to embrace an identity as struggling poet.

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### **Introduction: The Raw Data**

The raw data of this project consists of poetry [*See Appendix I.*]

That is to say, if *data* is defined as “ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment” (Merriam: 69)—then *poetry* is as raw as raw data gets. Moreover, if the analysis of these figurative bits constitute “the process of making meaning” (178), then what this project aspires to accomplish is nothing less than the making of meaning out of the lyrical ways by which a certain group of people have already made meaning, and may be capable of making meaning in the future.

In 2006, the Crossroads Presbyterian Church of Limerick, Pennsylvania, consisted of 170 or so members, assorted friends, two music leaders, an administrative assistant and a clergy couple. As a teenager and young adult, one of those ordained leaders used to write poems. That would be me. My confession is that I gave up that passion for verse primarily for the sake of growing the church, but secondarily because my missiological repertoire had been dominated by the preponderance of “facts.” In my seminary-trained mind, monolithic blocks of prose had all but crushed the more fragmentary pursuits of the bard. Evangelical wizards had long since shamed me in the futility of the mainline guild. If there was anything I could do to salvage a so-called “missional” identity, that activity would have to mimic what had worked well elsewhere (or so I imagined). Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch had offered profound theological respites, but for the enduring grind of local ministry, some critical data needed to be retrieved and revived: *poetry*.

The precise issue that a poetic discipline may help to address becomes clear whenever a pastor buys a book, reads an article, attends a conference or applies to an institutional program for continuing education. Amid the hurricane-force winds of postmodern pluralism, theoretical models of leadership are being refurbished and re-tooled only to be obliterated time and again. Moreover, while church growth methodologies often suffer from a lack of depth and sophistication, the mountain of *Missio Dei* literature has failed to yield an accessible foothold [See Appendix II]. In *The Missional Leader*, for example, Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk highlight the slippage by quoting one anxious denominational official:

You see, when a pastor walks into my office and asks for help with other kinds of issues or problems, I can reach onto my shelf and pull off any number of programs that will help them know what to do. But this missional conversation is just that: it's a conversation, but there's nothing to help us know how to do it in the real life of our congregation. (4)

An important implication of that last sentence, of course, is that many of us do not yet understand how to engage in a missional conversation with those very persons who comprise our congregations [See Appendix III]. To alleviate the awkwardness of this situation, our research will consider the unguarded ways in which the written testimony of a specific community of faith actually introduces dissonance amid colliding and increasingly disparate narrative orientations. The poetry of the Crossroads Presbyterian Church depicts *struggle* with its own context. The poets of this faith community struggle against the techniques with which a congregation might generate an increase in numbers. They also struggle with the socio-economic systems which seemingly force the church into hegemonic groupings.

In his book, *Everything Must Change*, Brian McLaren distills this dynamic:

Just as your ten biological systems and trillions of cells are unified, integrated, motivated, and guided by the framing story you tell yourself as a person, our societies are unified, integrated, motivated, and driven by the framing stories we tell ourselves as groups... If our framing story is wise, strong, realistic, and constructive, it can send us on a hopeful trajectory. But if our framing story is dysfunctional, weak, false, unrealistic, or destructive, it can send us on a downward arc, a dangerous, high-speed joyride toward un-peace, un-health, un-prosperity, and even un-life. (66—67)

At Crossroads, the “joyride” had crashed into something which would have remained imperceptible had it not been for the poetry. And here is the ironic crux of the matter: a stated belief in the Sovereign Lord of the Universe cannot and will not cohere with the meta-narrative of the idealized, autonomous individual. Inevitably sparks fly when the felt-needs and entitlements of that over-arching story run headlong into the relational and redemptive character of God. Hence, the struggle with this conflict is good. Far from originating in the big, bad postmodern world, it may find its mysterious impetus in the very life of Jesus himself, as he is rendered in the canonical scriptures themselves [*See Appendix IV*].

The contention of this project is that a primordial poetic capacity precedes (and exceeds) our impulse to conveniently reframe the story of Jesus in terms that are too easily recognized by mega-church models for success. We do not know the whole story of Jesus of Nazareth and neither may we know or tell the whole story of the local congregation who strives to make a witness in his name. By admitting this limited perspective, we then discover the eschatological integrity of the unfinished in everyday ministry. Words are savored. The impossible possibility of wholeness is imagined, even as pastors and their churches must live amid the broken pieces.

Peggy Rosenthal, in *The Poets' Jesus*, points us in the right direction:

As contemporaries of postmodernism as well, these poets can interrogate the mystery of Incarnation dispassionately, because interrogation of inherited truths is the postmodern mode. So they can probe this embodied figure of transcendence without either defensiveness or anxiety. Of course they might struggle with their personal relation to Christian faith, yet they can do so without calling the whole two thousand year old enterprise into question, because they know that questioning was core to this mind-stretching and soul-piercing enterprise from the start. (167)

**Immediate Context: “Come & Meet Christ At The Crossroads!”**

The Crossroads Presbyterian Church of Limerick, Pennsylvania celebrated its inaugural worship service on Sunday, October 13, 1996. In November of 2006, the New Church Development of the Presbytery of Philadelphia and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) bid farewell to its founding Co-Pastors, Scott and Sheryl Kinder-Pyle. During those intervening years, the congregation rented space at Brooke Elementary School, received the *Sam and Helen Walton Award for Outstanding Achievements In Evangelism*, became an official congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), completed a capital campaign in support of a new facility, and, with great jubilation, moved into that 2.1 million dollar complex. Coincidentally, participants at Crossroads Presbyterian Church grew in numbers and in faith.

Our mission statement tried to strike a missional pose:

Meeting Christ at the Crossroads—  
we journey with all people  
into the transforming story of Jesus' love,  
equipping them to follow in his footsteps.

Our governing scripture—Jeremiah 6:16—had been weaved into sanctuary banners and printed upon letterhead:

Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads,  
and look, and ask for the ancient paths,  
where the good way lies; and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls...

And yet, no amount of sloganeering or branding could have anticipated the impending breakdown in communication.

### **The Plateau, The Crowd and The Scribes In Training**

Upon completion of the newly constructed edifice in October of 2003, official membership figures at the Crossroads Presbyterian Church had leveled off. As many who had joined our ranks, a corresponding number had moved away. At a special meeting of the congregation called to discuss the mortgage payments and perhaps a second capital campaign, someone mentioned the word, *plateau*. In spite of the peak in energy, lay leaders had recalled the comments of an executive with the Presbytery of Philadelphia. He had said that we should build the building to resemble a bank; that way, if the church failed, the Presbytery could always sell it. Haunted by this corporate speech, the volunteer treasurer rose from his seat to recommend that representatives of the congregation visit other new churches in the area in order to determine what they were doing to succeed. Apparently Northpointe Community Church had recently boasted a worship attendance of 400, and Christ's Church of the Valley, meeting in a movie theatre, had nearly doubled that number.

At the milestone of one of its greatest achievements, Crossroads had become an institution that needed to be maintained, a business venture that needed to be fixed and a consortium of shareholders whose egos needed to be massaged. Is it a pastor's job to do all these things? No one actually said so out-loud. Maybe I simply imagined it. But whispering in the wings of this self-inflicted job description was Rick Warren's infamous book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*. One particular chapter of this best-selling volume seemed to heighten the *plateau* effect:

One of the impressive characteristics of Jesus' ministry was that it attracted crowds. Large crowds. Enormous crowds... What attracted large crowds to Jesus' ministry? Jesus did three things with crowds: He loved them... he met their needs... and he taught them in interesting and practical ways. These same ingredients will attract crowds today. (207-208)

Such popular counsel among church-growth protégés eventually fermented into the elixir of life. At the Crossroads Presbyterian Church, however, we took a brief swig of the concoction, but failed to imbibe it completely. Thank God for that. Something in Warren's words just didn't sit right with us.

First, when we examined passages like Mark 3:7—12, it seemed clear that Jesus had drawn a crowd, but that collection of people did not resemble that homogenous and affluent group of religious consumers who assembled in Orange County, California at the Saddleback Community Church:

Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him; hearing all that he was doing, they came to him in great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. Whenever unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, 'You are the Son of God!' But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.

Moreover, whenever Jesus taught, we observed that even his most immediate followers were left scratching their heads in confusion. Parables may be interesting, but they're not very practical. Consequently, John 6:66 notes how, in response to the pedagogy of the Nazarene, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

In fact, often lost in the multiplicity of cultures that press against Jesus is his own recommended model for assimilating the vast array of interpretive possibilities that are available to us as church leaders today. Jesus truly did not love people or meet their needs with the goal of gathering a large crowd. Rather, God sent him into the midst of those very multitudes, including Samaritans (John 4:4, Luke 10:25), Canaanite women (Matthew 15:21), Roman centurions (Matthew 8:5), as well as the standard Pharisee, Sadducee, lawyer and scribe. God sent Jesus of Nazareth, not as a utilitarian means of getting, acquiring or grasping, but as the utter, non-utilitarian presence of the Living God, as the One who is worthy to be praised.

Many of these and other connections had been made by the members and friends of the Crossroads Presbyterian Church, who still loitered on that dreaded statistical plateau. What could we do? Would Jesus become our mechanism for growing a substantial crowd, as per the framing story of Rick Warren? Or would Jesus become the poetic matrix by which we might help to create a more authentic missional community? During an evening class, Matthew 13:52 provided this cryptic counsel:

Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

In this obscure passage, Jesus recommends a model for ministry that resembles a "scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven." This scribe is therefore set apart from

other scribes of the first century—most of whom had a reputation for strict adherence to the Mosaic Law. This scribe does his or her apprenticeship in what Paul Ricoeur refers to as a “limit-expression,” which is a corollary to a “limit-experience.”

*The kingdom of heaven* designates our shared life at the limits of our language and our experience as human beings. It connotes a great deal more than the temple in Jerusalem or the synagogue in Capernaum—institutions that first century, observant Jews felt worthy of preservation. Therefore, to be “trained for” an entity or an enterprise as mysterious and as awe-inspiring as the Reign of God implied that these particular scribes would have to come to the edge of their personal and corporate experience—their limits. Major storylines in Israel’s sacred history were unraveling at the time of Jesus’ teaching and these scribes-in-training would have to position themselves at the threshold of a house—some sacred structure, out of which, *as masters*, they would give and receive access to new and old pieces of treasure. Could we, centuries later, still find ourselves at this threshold?

Walter Brueggemann, in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (404—426), mentions Matthew 13:52 as a way of summarizing the tedious process by which biblical texts exercise authority and transformative power over people of faith. He argues that in this passage Jesus permits, promotes and propagates *new* interpretations which arise from the *old*, incomplete and inchoate verses of the inherited tradition. Brueggemann claims that the historic scribes of Ezra’s ilk came into their own only “after the withdrawal of kings and prophets.”

Essentially, then, what emerges from this discussion is the subtle tweaking of John Calvin’s three-fold office of Christ. Instead of king, priest and prophet—we have

*the scribe* displacing the prophet. And we have Jesus, leaning against the imposing institutional structures of his day, and making “poems,” and eventually “poets,” in the midst of all the seemingly frayed storylines of post-exilic Judaism.

### **Why Narrative Will Never Tell The Whole Story**

The complete story of the Crossroads Presbyterian Church has yet to be told. What is true about the seven Asian congregations addressed by the author of *The Revelation to John* is also true about those who gather on the Lord’s Day at 10 West Cherry Lane: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Revelation 3:22). Something more elusive than a coherent plotline happens whenever God’s pilgrim people embark on that journey toward the new heaven and the new earth—and that elusive something cannot be accounted for in the mere categories of the narrative theologian.

Certainly we can stipulate that the hermeneutics of H. Richard Niebuhr, Hans Frei and Alasdair MacIntyre are more amenable to the notion of God’s sending character than are historical criticism or source criticism. The biblical text itself has meaning as a narration of events regardless of whether we ferret out a solid referent beyond that story. Niebuhr writes, “It may be said that to speak of history in this fashion is to try to think with poets rather than with scientists. That is what we mean, for poets think of persons, purposes and destinies.”

Nonetheless, even as we applaud such rhetoric and live inside it for a season of Sundays, there are in fact some poets who struggle with the stories in which they live; and some who are even willing to die amid the *fragments* of a story for lack of truth.

Listen to what the Spirit continues to say. The story is not over, and neither are the stories anywhere close to merging into one, over-arching, grand story of the ages.

Niebuhr continues,

The simultaneous, unified knowledge from within and from without that we may ascribe to God is indeed impossible to men, but what is simultaneous in his case can in a measure be successive for us. The church cannot attain an inclusive, universal point of view, but it can attempt to see the reflection of itself in the eyes of God. What it sees in that reflection is a finite, created, limited, corporeal being, alike in every respect to all other beings of creations. To describe that vision in detail, to see the limited, human character of its founder, the connections between itself and a Judaism to which it often, in false pride, feels superior, between its sacraments and mystery faiths, between Catholicism and feudalism, Protestantism and capitalism, to know itself as the chief of sinners and the most mortal of societies—all this is required of it by a revelation that has come to it through its history. (5)

This is an awesome synopsis of the church's somewhat unwieldy narrative—one that necessarily finds expression as reflected “in the eyes of God.” Yet, in venturing beyond the realm of Christendom in 1941, something about this narrative in particular and other narratives in general do not sound right in public. “The question arises of my participation in the stories and histories of others, which themselves are open/closed stories/histories,” claims Ricoeur (*Figuring The Sacred*: 314).

How are we to speak about Jesus of Nazareth and the *Missio Dei* when our framing narrative is simply one among many? Is retreat into an insular subculture an option? Not as long as we identify with the sending character of God. Are imperialism and dogmatism the only true and courageous strategies available to us? Not as long as we wish to love our non-believing neighbors as ourselves. So Mike Regele writes,

This trend is evidence that the more sensible epistemology of the postmodern objectivist is supplanting postmodern radical relativism. While the objectivist does not affirm with absolute certainty the ‘rightness’ of a particular story, he or she *does* insist that not all stories are of equal validity and importance. Moreover, the objectivist believes it is reasonable to support a single story above other stories when that story provides the best possible explanation. Asserting a story is true based upon the principle of unsurpassability is defensible (Regele: 92).

In the short term, the risky advocacy for “a single story” helps. As pastors in North America’s amorphous mission field, we must cope with a multiplicity of historic, mythic and imaginative frameworks. To proclaim the “unsurpassability” of the church’s meta-narrative—namely that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19)—might be enough to maintain a public and vocal presence for the time being. And yet, the biblical text itself cries out for more. This is the argument of the project members who contributed to *The Missional Church*:

A particular community’s purpose is to hear and translate the gospel in its specific setting so that the witness to Jesus Christ takes place... the particular mission community is always involved in the discipline of becoming culturally bilingual, learning the language of faith and how to translate its story into the language of its context, so that others may be drawn to become followers of Jesus. (237)

Translatability, however, points to the *intersubjective* dialectic of the truth we proclaim in Christ. No person may presume to tell the whole tale. No community, however disciplined or undisciplined in the ancient traditions of the faith, may solidify or close off what the Spirit is saying.

That dialectic emboldens Maurice Wiles to take on Hans Frei, declaring,

...when narrative is used as the key concept in an attempted rehabilitation of the role of scripture in the church, the result can be dangerously misleading. That is not to deny the magnitude or urgency of the problem these writers are tackling with courage, nor the possibility that narrative interpretation may have a useful role to play in the attempt to find some answer. (Greene: 50)

To be sure, narrative theology remains a compelling frontier. Story is good. We neither condemn, nor deprive others of, the category of story.

But, based upon our experience of translating the gospel story into the context of postmodern suburban sprawl, there are words and phrases which fundamentally precede our inclination to hear a coherent tale. In this regard, Stephen Crites is concerned, not simply with the *meaning-making* form of storytelling (like Hans Frei), but with the *truth telling* capacity of stories which are bounded by dimensions of inner and outer space.

Pastors have long walked the tightrope over this void:

For stories take place in those middle regions between the emptiness beyond and the emptiness within. Still, for us who bear this cold acosmic emptiness like a nitrogen bubble in our inner space, there can be no truth in a story that is not edged by this chill. (111)

With this weather forecast, we orient ourselves by the warmth of sacred stories while simultaneously preparing our congregations for the colder climes of mission and its collision with other stories. “In this stammer of reason no story can be told,” says Crites (112).

### **Why Poetics Will Give Us A Glimpse**

“Among contemporary literary genres,” writes Donald Capps,

the modern poem is the most direct descendant of the parable. Like the parable, the poem is typically much briefer and more compressed than the novel or the short story. Like the parable and unlike the novel, the poem is episodic, usually concerned with a single life event or experience, with little or no attempt to explain how this event or experience fits within the larger life structure of the poet or the poet’s subject... Like the parable, the poem is an extended metaphor... Like the parable, one does not look outside the poem for the ‘point’ of the poem, since the poem *is* the point. Too, like the parable, the poem is necessarily open-ended. Its goal is not to tell a complete story... Like Jesus’ parables, poems are usually considered unorthodox, if not radical, precisely because they challenge

our usual and routine ways of perceiving and construing our life experiences, enticing us into viewing them from a different angle or slant. (2)

With these introductory words, the author of *The Poet's Gift; Toward the Renewal of Pastoral Care* announces his intention to find definite affinities between pastors and poets. Without fully realizing it, however, Capps has also provided us with a linkage between the person of Jesus and that veritable plethora of poetics which claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. What this accidental linkage may imply for the missional church dynamics will depend upon the way actual poems do embody the breakdown of narrative frameworks in public space. As Capps states his case, of course, there is hope for the professional caregiver. But this hope is also now available to the pastor who struggles to hear God amid a cacophony voices that rant on everything from career to canon. Such struggles, it turns out, give birth to the most resilient poets [*See Appendix V*].

As we indicated earlier, poets are not mere story-tellers. They are, by contrast, tellers of partial stories, intimations of an ever-elusive and even eschatological culmination of events. As *makers* (from the Greek, *poiesis*), poets produce linguistic and oral works of art which evoke and invite questions from others. Those who taste the fruits of the poets' creativity do not have to take it like medicine, nor buy it up as if it were a limited commodity. On the contrary, both sacred and secular verse begets more and more verse without worrying itself about a scarcity of inspiration. According to Andrew Shanks, this is what distinguishes local poetics from the metaphysical maneuvering of the institutional church:

The more that faith is entangled in metaphysics, and the supposed 'correctness' of 'correct' opinion is given effective precedence over poetic truth, the less free access there is allowed to genuinely *fresh* poetic stimuli the level of religious

practice. For lack of this, faith starts to wilt like a flower without water. That, I think, is the real epidemic problem now. What is therefore required—I want to argue—by way of remedy, is a theology whose initial focus is on the sheer *freshness* of the very freshest, that is, the most profoundly original religious poetry, in its distinctive challenge to faith. (6)

As we will see, engagement with “fresh poetic stimuli” may yield benefits for the poetic self as well as that provisional community of selves, who are baptized and commissioned in the name of the Triune God. Pending those benefits, we stipulate that the poetic witness of pastors and other community-affirmed leaders already constitutes the *defacto* leadership of the local congregation, even at the Crossroads Presbyterian Church.

### **Poetry At The Crossroads (Presbyterian Church)**

In what follows, the reader will take note of several creative efforts. These poems are not intended for the serious scrutiny of literary critics. Clichés abound. The participants entered into the exercise, knowing that none of their words or phrases would be published beyond this discrete project. Here then are four selected expressions of faith among those gathered on successive Tuesday nights in September of 2006. A running commentary is offered on each, making possible connections with the ethos of this particular faith community.

#### *Crossroads Poem #1*

Though nothing like a multitude  
 We come to seek, stand and sing our grafts  
 To the true vine not yet mended, but bound  
 Tightly dissenting voices raised in song for Him  
 Sound full and though knowing others scares  
 The flesh we fellowship politely

The lot, the lobby, the pews and the pulpit,

We know no other hill worth climbing  
 His message resounds through the din of our lives  
 And bids us to carry Lighter Crosses  
 That offer a glimpse and a taste of God's eternal  
 Burden Chosen by God, created in love, we are  
 Nothing to Him but  
 Extraordinary

Like waving branches in a gale, we  
 Are blown away by the Spirit  
 Sun shining in, some squint lest we be  
 Blinded while gazing at the fading shadows  
 On this hillside, listening to your every breath  
 Though nothing like the multitude, you feed us  
 And it is no less amazing

In the poem above, several awkward phrases bear repeating. “Though nothing like a (the) multitude” essentially brackets a sweeping and varied encounter with the person of Jesus, rendered as “Him.” The reference to “multitude” is most likely derived from the gospel accounts mentioned earlier in our discussion of Rick Warren’s book. Within the purview of this witness, however, the “grafts” we sing “Sound more full.” The “Lighter Crosses” we are bidden to carry in no way compare to the “Burden Chosen by God,” which is mysteriously assumed because “we are Nothing to Him but/ Extraordinary.” Those depicted in this poem are “blown away,” and “Blinded.” There is a pervasive passivity throughout, which nonetheless conveys a sense of worshippers who are thoroughly engaged and enthralled. God acts and is addressed in the second person, “you feed us.”

*Crossroads Poem #2*

On Sunday morning we gather together  
 We are the woman at the well, the late-comer,  
 The orphan, the sick, the salt, the blind.  
 When I truly recognize myself, I shall be healed.

Are there any among us who are unleavened?

The direct association of “we” with “the woman at the well” and the other biblical personages here is revealing. This poet maintains a perspective which utterly contradicts the prosperity rhetoric of growing, affluent congregations. He also has the audacity to characterize very competent residents of suburbia in terms of lack, injury and illness. The “We” becomes an “I” in the fourth line, who among those previously observed at the gathering, “shall be healed.” The impression remains that such genuine recognition of self will entail a long and tedious process.

Finally, the question connects the community of faith again with implicit bread, which does not meet the Passover standards. Such “unleavened” bread, according to Exodus, must be eaten in haste in deference to the Hebrews quick exit from bondage in Egypt. This verse, by contrast, may suggest that we are in no hurry to loose the bonds of slavery, and that we indulge ourselves with as much time as we may need to rise like fully leavened bread.

*Crossroads Poem #3*

Spend time with Jesus every day.  
 Read the Bible and bow your head and pray.  
 Rest in him, and let his living water flow,  
 And he will heal your body, mind and soul.

The simplicity of this poem, with its rhyming words, “day” with “pray,” and “flow” with “soul,” may suggest that this artist wanted to complete the exercise without much consternation. The causal relationship of “time with Jesus” in line one with healing in line four reflects a theological banality that is almost nauseating. Of course, setting aside our compulsion for literary analysis, we may posit allusions to the complex practices of *Lectio Divina* (“Read the Bible and bow your head...”) and *Sabbath*

*Keeping* (“Rest in him and let...”) As a mechanism for discerning the *hoped-for* cadence of a congregation, therefore, the poem evokes a moral capacity to respond, or perhaps a reminiscence of the self who may have responded. Regardless, the Christian faith, in this rhythmic scheme, becomes an *imagined, but untried* inheritance. The writer chooses *not* to explore how the disciplines of discipleship often prove difficult. Rather, she remains at the level of a commercial jingle or slogan or sound bite. If the poetic witness is to have any lasting impact upon the ministry of the church, other poets must penetrate this *Hallmark* veneer.

Annie Dillard, in *The Writing Life*, inspires us to see how the work of a poem and the grace of God go hand in hand:

At its best, the sensation of writing is that of any unmerited grace. It is handed to you, but only if you look for it. You search, you break your heart, your back, your brain, and then—and only then—it is handed to you. From the corner of your eye you see motion. Something is moving through the air and headed in your direction. It is a parcel bound in ribbons and bows; it has two white wings...(75)

*Crossroads Poem #4*

**not slaying giants**

laugh-out-loud funny  
Life of Brian scenes  
Why do i love the stoning  
the best?

pompous priests and petty  
villagers at odds over  
slaying the sinner

there's a right way  
to kill someone  
orderly, in unison  
like playing Chopin  
together

can't let the rabble rousers ruin  
 the holy holocaust  
 there's a right way  
 to slay the sinner

i laugh as  
 he who was condemned  
 becomes the condemned  
 slain for the sin  
 he brought against the other  
 is this wacky story silly,  
 irony, or gospel?

i laugh harder  
 and try not to think about all  
 the stones I've thrown  
 in the name of  
 Jehovah  
 (ping!)

This poem generates interest visually. Each line and free-form stanza are centered on the page. The only capitalized words are proper nouns like the farcical Monty Python film, *The Life of Brian*, the legendary composer, *Chopin* and the divine name, *Jehovah*. Lower-case letters fan out like emissaries on an earnest mission. Similar to the work of e.e. cummings, the poetic testimony of this writer involves the overt flouting of grammatical rules—or perhaps the flouting of hard and fast categories in general. After viewing a cultural depiction of Jesus in the satirical spoof, an introspective question launches a tirade of tragic declarations: “there’s a right way/ to kill someone/ orderly, in unison/ like playing Chopin/ together.” Drawn into the theater, where the movie’s playing, the reader drops through the trap door of the poet’s imagination and suddenly finds a seat at the symphony. Within this affluent and sophisticated setting, we are invited to equate the stoning of a sinner (who utters the forbidden name) with the

masterful work of a world renowned figure. High culture meets low culture, and both are found wanting.

Whether or not this member of the Crossroads Presbyterian Church intended it, she anticipates a major component of this project’s remaining analysis—namely, that the liturgies of postmodern life prompt an inter-subjective engagement which we “try not to think about...” It is the contention of this project that pastors strive to become those leaders which help their congregations to *think about* this engagement nonetheless.

### **A Collision of Narratives**

Each of the poems, discussed above, point to the fragmentation of Christendom’s meta-narrative. This is what we have tried desperately “not to think about”—the catastrophic and ironic abuse of the gospel story, which we have presumed to be fully known and controlled by us. This is the struggle we face.

With his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, novelist Walker Percy comments on the conundrum of the artist upon re-entry into the mundane life. Something similar to this re-entry happens whenever members at Crossroads have tried to write about their encounters with God and others within the context of the faith community:

The experiment: Start with the *world*, that is, the same somewhat deranged place which everyone experiences in more or less the same degree. The *world* is the aggregate of your perceived environment encoded by signs: other people, family, house, marketplace, culture, myth, TV, past, future, and God as more or less real depending on whether you are an unbeliever or a believer, and even if the latter then God as more or less problematical.

Next, there is the self, the individual conscious artist-writer reader-viewer self, the movable piece in the world, like a token in a Monopoly game.

The problem for the movable piece: How do you go about living in the world when you are not working at your art yet still find yourself having to get through a Wednesday afternoon? (*Lost*: 144)

Implicit in Percy's set-up is the notion that the human self has the privilege and the capacity to tell his or her own story. In the case of the participant in the life of the church community, however, that agency meets a roadblock in the form of an inherited collective narrative.

The conflict of the autonomous individual with the sacred texts and traditions of the Judeo-Christian ethos has been a peculiar phenomena of the Enlightenment Project, beginning with Rene Descartes. Descartes' hermeneutic of doubt—*I think, therefore I am*—effectively displaced the communitarian markers of self-identity which had essentially held sway for centuries [*See Appendix VI*]. Those markers included the literal circumcision cut of the rabbinical knife as well as the more figurative circumcision of the heart, described by the apostle Paul. A person's story, therefore, had been wrapped up with his or her covenant relationship with God and with others in the community. Beyond the shared narrative of one's covenant neighbors, however, that grand story would inevitably wither away like the grass of Isaiah 40:8: “the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of God...”

In other words, if foreigners were to be included in Israel's covenant narration of history, those *goyim* would have to submit to a marginalized place within that story. Genesis 12 describes God's blessing of Abraham and his “great nation” as being inclusive of “all the families of the earth.” Yet, are these families permitted the expression of their own mythic renderings of the world and all that it entails? Might other Ancient Near East narratives and episodes be permitted to intrude upon the Hebraic

depiction of world history—and perhaps help to shape the making of meaning? If so, the Bible itself has been crafted out of a collision of stories.

To be sure, we can safely say that the biblical text does in fact include the intermingling or cross-pollination of Hebrew culture with Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek cultures, among others.

Walter Brueggemann relates Israel's own experience of being marginalized with its most creative strategy for survival as a chosen people. This strategy finds abundant expression in the poetry of the Psalms, the prophetic books of Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel and perhaps, as we've suggested, in the parables of Jesus:

This practice of narrative admits no easy 'Christ against culture' model, but recognizes the requirement of an endlessly cunning, risky process of negotiation. Such negotiation may seem to purists to be too accommodationist. And to accommodationists, they may seem excessively scrupulous. If, however, assimilation into the dominant culture is a major threat to exiles, the lead characters of these narratives do not forget who they are, with whom they belong, nor the God whom they serve. I imagine many baptized exiles must live such a life of endless negotiation. These narratives might name and clarify the process and tilt self-perception toward membership in the faith community. The stunning characters in these narratives are indeed 'bilingual,' knowing the speech of the empire and being willing to use it, but never forgetting the cadences of their 'mother tongue'. (*Cadences*: 11)

The point I wish to highlight with these and other literary analysis of the Bible is that its covenant story comes through in 'cadences' and not some epic and intact monologue. It is, as Alasdair MacIntyre presents in *After Virtue*, as if we have suffered a primordial catastrophe: "What we possess...are fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derives." (2)

### **The Making of Meaning: Tethered Testimony**

A question or two comes to the forefront of any discussion about poetic theory and biblical theology: one of these questions concerns the way in which words are attached to empirical persons, objects, places and events. Can there in fact be any meaning assigned to our metered syllables if they do not root themselves in objective, historic happenings? The second question concerns whether or not any mode of language can place us in the proximity of Truth—with a capital T. Is the question of Pontius Pilate in John 18:38 an interrogatory which Jesus might answer *poetically*, if not through the gospel narrative of his life, death and resurrection that will be transmitted in later generations? Such conundrums also go to the very roots of that verse which comes to fruition at Crossroads Presbyterian Church.

For example, *Can Poetry Matter?* is a collection of essays in which author Dana Gioia laments the state of affairs in poetry circles in which professional writers work at their craft, but only to receive tenure at the University. Among literary elites, the business of rhyming a couplet is good. Publishers presently turn out anthologies at an astonishing rate. But are any of the poems contained in these thick tomes true? Are they speaking in the idioms of public space that even non-English Majors might make an effort to understand?

The parallel phenomena in the life of the church goes like so: pastors work at their craft, in terms of homiletics, therapy and organizational management. But they perfect these skills only in an effort to create an insular Christian enclave.

Others, however, may still wonder about the truth around which that distinct community spreads out its nouns, adjectives and verbs. Where is it? In *God and the Poets*, David Daiches claims that “the truth of poetry... gets behind belief to the human

dilemma that belief arose to cope with, even though it may be ostensibly basing itself on a given belief” (Daiches: 214). Likewise, Amos Wilder declares that with sacred poetry:

We have a wedding of general human experience with revelation. This suggests that all Christian arts to this day must be built on human nature and its Adamic vitalities and creativity. The Christian arts should not be hot-house products confined to the shrine and isolated from the world... Faith grows bright because it is fed by the fuel of generic mortal experience. (97)

There must somewhere be a tether to common experience. That tether, of course, need not be perceived as binding or restrictive or censorious, but rather as liberating us from the esoteric posturing in which poets invent their own individualized and lonely truths.

“Human culture,” writes Gregory Orr,

“invented” or evolved the personal lyric as a means of helping individuals survive the existential crises represented by extremities of subjectivity and also by such outer circumstances as poverty, suffering, pain, illness, violence, or loss of a loved one. (4)

But is this really how this specific genre of poetry came to be?

Another explanation could be that the historic or “outer circumstances” themselves would not conform to a given culture’s framing narrative. As instigated by events, personal lyric relies upon the corporate experience of a group who agrees with the poet: this event does not fit.

Such an understanding of the development of personal lyric poetry might also touch upon the local congregation’s view of the authority of the biblical text, which includes many forms of poetry. Richard Bauckham, for one, attributes the distinctive craftsmanship of John’s Gospel to the eye-witness testimony of John. He writes,

Of course, the writing of a Gospel was significantly an interpretative act in a variety of ways (the selection and arrangement of testimony in a unified narrative are themselves interpretative and were entirely

unavoidable in the writing of a Gospel). But the interpretative act of writing a Gospel intended continuity with the testimony of the eye-witnesses who, of course, had already interpreted, who could not but have combined in their accounts the empirically observable with the perceived significance of the events...(472)

What Bauckmann leaves unresolved here are the criteria such an eye-witness to historic events might employ in evaluating the significance of what had been observed. These criteria are complicated even more when we consider the intrusive nature of Jesus' resurrection, if we are to believe that it truthfully occurred within the realm of common experience. To the rescue is N. T. Wright, who suggests that the cumulative *traditioning* process in the Second Temple period allowed for two basic meanings:

There are no traditions about a Messiah being raised to life: most Jews of this period hoped for resurrection, many Jews of this period hoped for a Messiah, but nobody put those two hopes together until the early Christians did so. (*The Resurrection*: 204-205)

Arguments like these seem obtuse and irrelevant to this project until we recognize that poetry itself is an act of testimony which must be *tethered* to events on the ground. Such a tethering also includes the meanings that are available in previously held storylines. Poems make new meaning when old meanings falter.

Amos Wilder in *Theopoetic*, declares,

The transcendental categories and symbols in which the first Christians testified to resurrection as sequel to, or as the other side of, the crucifixion reflected their visionary insights as conditioned by their inherited sensibility and mental categories. Their reports crystallized in somewhat varying narratives which like all true poesis employed current genres and models and merged surrealist epiphany with earthy-historical actuality. (95—96)

True *poesis*, as rendered in this quote, cannot stop making new associations with the “old idioms.” In an earlier work, Wilder makes the point of highlighting the Aramaic poetry (which preceded Jesus' three years of public ministry) as well as the Hellenistic pool of

materials which followed it. The audible sound of Jesus' words in Aramaic, says Wilder, resembles the rhythmic cadence of other Aramaic hymns and liturgies. Similarly, as Christians hoped to communicate the significance of Jesus to a predominantly Hellenized culture, they adopted pagan images and story fragments to make their witness that much more impactful. Wilder claims examples of such borrowing can be seen in Philippians 2:6—11, John 1:1—9 and Colossians 3:16—all reconstituted passages that had been originally written in praise of a more Gnostic figure. (105—111)

Again, the essential point we hope to convey is that testimony has always included the poetic discipline of incorporating a wide range of cultural images and metaphorical referents. We borrow the meanings of others in the public realm to testify to our own episodic experience. Like the eye-witnesses and scribes who crafted the New Testament, the local congregation includes those who tweak and who transform the mythic categories of which history and society are comprised.

### **Nominating A Struggling Poet Instead Of An Entrepreneur**

The Crossroads Presbyterian Church really had no choice. Of course, at one level, the charter members of the newly incorporated fellowship did vote in true parliamentary fashion. Scott and Sheryl Kinder-Pyle were in fact duly called and installed as the permanent co-pastors after a three year stint as organizing co-pastors.

But something else happened that 19<sup>th</sup> day of October, 1999. After approximately 150 worship services, the participants in this congregation had nominated a struggling poet. No one would have said so at the time, but there I stood. This new

church development would succeed. In very many ways, it already had. In spite of the many visitations from the ghost of Rick Warren, the church had learned to listen to a preacher's cheap imitation of Emily Dickinson and not flinch:

The Falls of Man—I hardly knew—  
 Until there came by chance  
 An Angel sleeping in my bed  
 While demons did their dance—

I thought to pray—I thought to cry—  
 Some supplication send  
 But when all else in me sought to die  
 The Angel rose to rend—

Soul from the Spirit—split—  
 Despair from the Heart  
 My body in Eve's Womb had hoped  
 For such a newer start—

I cannot comprehend the Word—  
 The Sword that pierced my skin  
 Yet Christ in blood he sheds these days  
 Forgives me still my sin—

How would this kind of aesthetic indulgence ultimately play out? Would the pastor who wrote and spoke these trembling words have to adjust his expectations? Would this ordained leader have to compartmentalize—managing clients and selling the gospel message in one arena, but practicing poetics as a sideline? It has been the assumption of this project that such a dualistic model of vocation is not required. As one of the poets from this study put it,

I imagine that pastors don't really want to be the professional expert, which leads to isolation from the flock. I assume that they want to be loved like everybody else and treated fair and square... But... if they share their feelings, they run the risk of repercussions...

Risk, undoubtedly, will always come with the job. Noting several major crisis indicators with regard to clergy mental health, training and perseverance the Alban

Institute Special Report, *The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations*, has identified the following challenges:

1. We need to develop new, healthy safe environments for clergy to learn and connect.
2. New pathways and processes of learning need to be created for all congregational leaders.
3. All of these leaders need to see leadership in new ways.
4. There are many leaders who feel dispirited or ill-equipped for their current roles.
5. Major attention must be given to recruiting the next generation of leaders. (2001)

Moreover, if we add to this catalog what William Willimon refers to as the maladaptive *persona*, the only recommendation is that we give pastors the permission to “derole” (318). We must instigate and pursue forums in which those who have been called by God may examine and ponder their call *poetically*.

### **Alternative Images of Where Church Is**

Lesslie Newbigin claims we must “put the gospel at risk in public” (59) and in North America, this is now possible. In the case of Crossroads Presbyterian Church, however, we didn’t fully comprehend that risk until that image of ourselves as a thriving, young congregation collapsed in the competitive market that Christendom has become in its waning days. When attendance at worship seemed stagnate, the sovereignty of the static noun, *plateau*, damned us to purgatory. What was wrong with us that we could not overcome that 200-barrier?

My answer, as a struggling poet-leader, is more words. We need more words, and better words. We need the abundance of metaphors and images that seemed so prevalent

to the first century Christians. *Plateau* comes to us from the sterility of the business matrix. Other options that we reject involve the church's grasping for the right reformed methodology (Henderson: 22), or for the right "top-tier traits" (Wood: 62), or for the right "Apostolic Genesis" (Hirsh: 244). *Grasping* is a doomed participle. The alternative, as we have seen, is for local congregations to *be grasped* by that which is larger than their own urge to survive. This is where we have landed. If Jesus, in Matthew 13:52, likens us, collectively, to "the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old," the up-to-date associations that pastors make with the following ancient images may help us to move from our *plateau* fixation toward a more eschatological motivation for ministry.

Ironically, these are also the images that permeate much of the poetry at the Crossroads Presbyterian Church, and perhaps elsewhere:

the body of Jesus.....the resurrected body of Christ  
 the seed.....the harvest  
 the shrub.....the tree  
 the darkness.....the light  
 the fish.....the net  
 the beaten traveler.....the Samaritan  
 the ruins of the temple.....the clouds of glory.

Each of these pairings, of course, begs narrative resolution. In between, "the body of Jesus" and "the resurrected body of Christ," for example, we may assume that the historic person would not have blinked at his death, given his knowledge of the full story. We may assume that synthesis and closure, but it is far from the dynamics which

are depicted in the gospel accounts themselves. In the final chapter of Matthew's Gospel, it is interesting to note the instructions of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene: "go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (v. 10). Tom Long has interpreted this remark as if Jesus were telling the readers of Matthew's story to return again to the beginning, to go back to the inception, to the conception, to the incarnation, to that grass-roots locale of a particular place in a particular time, to Galilee.

Isn't this the same return-trip that pastors must make in the local context?

Fred B. Craddock, in *As One Without Authority*, is convinced that it is. He declares that both the Bible and recent philosophical approaches to language have broken "the domination of empiricism and the insistence that words serve only as signs pointing to discovered or discoverable data" (28). Yes, let the people of God say *Amen!* The words, held in irreducible tension above, do not point to black-and-white digits on the page, or to percentages on the pie-chart, but to the myriad of inter-personal and covenantal possibilities which are available if Christ truly has been raised.

From the same vantage point, we may begin the process of perceiving the church communities around the world as the various, interrelated synapse connections which fire off messages between Creator and Creation. Somewhere between *seed* and *harvest*, somewhere between the *shrub* and the *tree*, somewhere between the *darkness* and the *light*, somewhere between the *fish* and the *net*, somewhere between the *beaten traveler* and the *Samaritan*—somewhere in between—the *ecclesia* gathers and scatters amid the vicissitudes of human history. That's where the church is, even local expressions of the church, like Crossroads.

Finally, however, we find ourselves in between *the ruins of the temple* and *the clouds of glory*. For this daunting pair of images we must call upon the assistance and rely upon the inspiration of N. T. Wright. Mark 13, among other passages, sets the stage. The disciples, in verse one, marvel at “the large stones and large buildings,” to which Jesus retorts: “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (v. 2).

Wright interprets this text, not as a prediction of Jerusalem’s downfall alone, but ultimately as God’s judgment upon Israel’s temple ideology, which had stipulated that God would guarantee the stability and the safety of this iconic institution. And yet, just as Jeremiah had warned about “these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’” (Jeremiah 7:4)—so Jesus launches an assault upon the very narrative explanation which had supplanted trust in Yahweh. In effect, Jesus *deconstructs* that supreme vision of Israel’s survival amid Roman hegemony, and so pushes every faithful Jew closer to the edge. We may speculate about Jesus’ prophetic motivation—that perhaps he even thrived on conflict. But another way to interpret his words in Mark 13 (as well as his earlier actions in Mark 11:15) is that Jesus did what poets do. He interrupted. He sabotaged the contours of Hebrew self-understanding and therefore invited those who had “ears to hear” to listen even more deeply. This constitutes “the ruins of the temple.”

Next, we come to “the clouds of glory.” Jesus says in Mark 13:26, “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory,” and regarding this cosmic entourage Wright has this comment:

The ‘coming of the son of man’ is thus good first-century metaphorical language for two things: the defeat of the enemies of the true people of god, and the

vindication of the true people themselves... As the kingdom-bearer, (Jesus) had constantly been acting... in a way which invited the conclusion that he thought he had the right to do and be what the Temple was and did, thereby implicitly making the Temple redundant (*Jesus and the Victory of God*: 362).

If we are to accept Wright's analysis we must assume that Jesus of Nazareth had been *telling a story*, in which he himself played the pivotal role and from which he would soon exit *without knowing* the end. Or, did he know the end?

The reference to "the clouds with great power and glory" conjures up Daniel 7, in which "one like a human being" approaches the Ancient One enfolded by "the clouds of heaven" (v. 13). It is ambiguous and impossible to say if the clouds in the Book of Daniel are *going up* toward heaven or *going down* toward earth. Within that visionary haze, however, the prophet catches a glimpse of God's kingship over all, a kingship that renders all the empires of history as mere episodes.

Wright portrays Jesus as claiming this same vindication. "The clouds of glory" linkage would be triggered by the actual demise of the temple story in 70 AD. Mark 13 hits the mark as poetic testimony delivered to the church inasmuch as Jesus' words are tethered to real events on the ground and yet freed from the hegemonic dictates of the Hebraic framing story. For Jewish believers in Jesus of Nazareth, there is hope even as their predominant icon lay in ruins. As of 2006, Crossroads worships and serves there too: somewhere between the ruins and the clouds.

In this project we have sparred with the fatalistic notion that the institution of church in North America follows the same trajectory as the temple. To the naked eye, of course, this is far from the penultimate truth. Pastors across the country still receive paychecks and plan on retirement benefits. Membership figures shift from the mainline to the mega-church and perhaps, before too long, back again.

Nevertheless, in the words of Walker Percy,

It is something else to live in a time of great good and evil which nobody understands, where there are many kinds of discourse each of which makes a kind of sense to its own community, but where the communities don't make sense to each other and none of them makes sense to the novelist [read PASTOR AS STRUGGLING POET], who feels more and more like the canary being taken down the mine shaft with a bunch of hearty joking sense-making miners while he, the canary, is already getting a whiff of something noxious and is staggering around his cage trying to warn the miners, but they can't understand him nor he them." (*Signposts in a Strange Land*: 159)

It is indeed "something else" to live and to lead as pastor in a postmodern time such as this. And yet, unlike the canaries in their mine shafts, pastors on their plateaus may soon sniff a breath of fresh air in the mode of Acts 2:8, which reads, "And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" The wonder of that Pentecost question still opens us to the impossible possibility of genuine understanding, of relational wholeness and yes, of worldwide reconciliation. From a sociological angle, Charles Taylor would seem to agree when he provides the final touches to exhaustive tome, *A Secular Age*; by stipulating the ironic trajectory of forces which have had every intention of wiping the language clean of subjectivity, the perennial scholar claims that something very messy has been retrieved:

Think of 'Spirit' again: it enters our world through the Bible and related texts and sayings, its reality fixed in narrative and doctrine. The new poetics involves a reflexive move, which points to the way the Bible itself is not a simple narration of events which were already there... It points to the way that these events themselves have been made manifest, and given shape, in language. (757)

Taylor's work collates every jot and tittle of the Enlightenment's rise and fall—from the milestone year of 1500, when it seemed that nearly all Westerners believed in God, to the year 2000, when disbelief in God appears functionally plausible, even banal. It is, however, this very tedium which portends our future:

A new poetic language can serve to find a way back to the God of Abraham. (757)

Without realizing it, Mary Oliver, among others, finds her way back:

You can  
die for it—  
an idea,  
or the world. People

have done so,  
brilliantly,  
letting  
their small bodies be bound

to the stake  
creating  
an unforgettable  
fury of light. But

this morning,  
climbing the familiar hills  
in the familiar  
fabric of dawn, I thought

of China  
and India  
and Europe, and I thought  
how the sun

blazes  
for everyone just  
so joyfully  
as it rises

under the lashes  
of my own eyes, and I thought  
I am so many!  
What is my name?

What is the name  
of the deep breath I would take  
over and over  
for all of us? Call it

Whatever you want, it is  
happiness, it is another one

of the ways to enter  
fire.

## Appendix I: *Poesis* As Spiritual Discipline

### A Communal Exercise

On the reverse side of this page, write a poem (at least four lines) which uses the **text** to interpret a **congregational scenario**, or uses the scenario to interpret the text. Be descriptive, allowing the **images** that you observe and the **actions** that you witness to paint a picture with words. Sound out what you write as you go. Shun perfectionism. Take ten minutes and do this. Read your completed work aloud to at least one other person from your own congregation. Listen to the completed work of another. Choose one or more of the poems to be recited within the context of a worship service.

#### Texts:

1. Genesis 1:1—5
2. Genesis 28:10—17
3. Exodus 11:1—10
4. Isaiah 6:1—9
5. Matthew 27:55—61
6. John 4:7—15
7. 1 Corinthians 3:1—9
8. Other: ?????

#### Images (characters, places, things, smells, tastes, sounds, textures):

Watery chaos. Garden. Wilderness. Exile. Storm. Crowd. Battle. Sea. Cave. Wall. Voice.  
Flower. Loin cloth. Sweat. Menstruation. Donkey. Eagle. Rock. Mountain. Pit. Cross. Fig.  
Burnt offering. Passover lamb. Blind man. Widow. Log. Speck. Hooves. Bronze. Sandal.  
Flood. Stars. Tongue. Spear. Chariot. Raven. Demon. Angel. Snow. Babylon. Sanhedrin...

#### Actions:

Leap. Walk. Run. Faint. Stumble. Speak. Mold. Weep. Gaze. Listen. Smell. Touch.  
Descend. Ascend. Fly. Fall. Burn. Complain. Proclaim. Wade. Sigh. Gasp. Embrace.  
Gather. Tear down. Kiss. Hide. Draw. Cultivate. Get drunk. Fast. Rest. Be Still. Console.  
Anoint. Escape. Play music. Dance. Punish. Whip. Caress. Bathe. Breathe. Write. Fish.  
Boast. Bow down. Cover with ashes. Heal. Kill. Bleed. Break open. Bless. Have labor  
pains. Give birth. Curse. Wander. Entrap. Sleep. Keep. Promise. Let go. Bind. Scatter...

#### Congregational Scenarios:

1. Walking through the door, and being greeted by an usher
2. Potluck Supper
3. Foot-Washing service
4. Committee meeting
5. Children's Education lesson
6. Bedside in the I.C.U.

7. Mission Trip to Appalachia
8. Other: ?????

## **Appendix II: A Peer Review of This Project**

In November of 2007 a group of Presbyterian clergy from the area of Spokane, Washington gathered to offer critical responses to the *Pastor As Struggling Poet* model. They also enjoyed the free drinks, appetizers and ensuing dialogue.

Included at that public meeting were two pastors, two associate pastors and one Christian educator. Examples of the comments are summarized below.

### *Comment #1:*

This is a very compelling and innovative proposal. It seems, however, that you have two points of interest: one is your exploration of pastoral leadership and the other is the notion of congregational identity and the various images associate with that identity.

### *Response to Comment #1:*

Thank you. In my view, those two ideas are not mutually exclusive. I think that I am venturing a view of pastor as poet because my sense is that we lead best by offering new and imaginative images of where we are on the journey.

### *Comment #2:*

I wanted to hear more about you—who is this man behind the curtain, more narrative in the beginning. What circumstances in your life and your ministry led you to this idea of poetry? And I guess I'm more a novelist than a poet and I'm hoping that you can help me understand the difference...

### *Response to Comment #2:*

That's good feedback and my intention is to re-work some of the material in the Introduction. Regarding the novelist approach to ministry—I am arguing that we never get to know or to tell the whole story, and by *story*, I mean the complete set of circumstances and motivations that influence people to do what we do. And we also don't get to know the full narrative about God. I understand how a novelist has to create a plot with characters and give them interesting personalities, which are explainable. But in ministry, my experience is that people don't always act in ways that make sense to me or to anyone. God certainly knows what's going on, but as pastor I can't pretend to have that perspective. A poet, by contrast, deals with episodes and with those bits and pieces that we can see, touch, hear, taste and smell... A poet doesn't explain so much as describe the snippets and let them evoke and inspire.

### *Comment #3:*

At times it seemed as if you were advocating vagueness. Don't you think there are some things that we know and have to be clear about with our people? I mean, how would the pastor as poet respond to a situation where there's conflict and folks are coming to me and telling me all this negative stuff?

### *Comment #4:*

I think the pastor as poet would look at the images that are being used in that conversation, right? You might mirror what's being said, reflect with the people on the repercussions, and then propose alternative images of what's actually happening...

### Appendix III: DMIN Colleagues Inspired by John 4

The use of images in the following six poems suggests a collision of meta-narratives. With Christendom's schemes and strategies coming up empty, these Columbia Seminary colleagues in the Doctor of Ministry Program acknowledge that emptiness even as they express faith in spite of it. Compare their words with those of the more well-known authors who follow...

#### *Columbia Poem #1*

We came with a bucket we thought was free  
 At first glance the old, worn house seemed empty  
 And thirsty down to the bottom.  
 And so we filled it with work and laughter  
 Blessing and precious youth.  
 And when it was done Christ had filled  
 All our buckets to overflowing.

#### *Columbia Poem #2*

Living water for a dying church  
 Whose spouses are gone.  
 No one to retrieve.  
 What can he give them? What will he ask?

#### *Columbia Poem #3*

You ask of me a drink?  
 What have I to offer you  
 I am so dry... But  
 I dip my bucket into the well nevertheless... waiting

#### *Columbia Poem #4*

Splash seeping through cracks  
 The holes, the broken places  
 Refreshing, renewing, nourishing  
 Offering shalom through torn crumbs and small sips

#### *Columbia Poem #5*

Silently indicted, laughing nervously, the accused  
 Made their entrance, M&M's in hand.  
 "Courage food," they said. "Can we sit here by you?"  
 "Sure," I said, hiding the dirty knowing in my heart that the seats  
 They took would not hold the weight of our repulsion.

#### *Columbia Poem #6*

I, the well-keeper, the water-giver, lie dry in the bed  
 The cup of crushed ice, melting beyond my reach, the nurse's  
 Changing shifts when in comes the cleaning woman to mop  
 My floor I eye her bucket. She knows she's not supposed to;

she feeds me ice  
*Alexander Pope*

The least confusion but in one, not all  
 That system only, but the Whole must fall.  
 Let earth unbalanced from her orbit fly,  
 Planets and suns run lawless through the sky,  
 Let ruling angels from their spheres be hurled,  
 Being on being wrecked, and world on world,  
 Heaven's whole foundation to their center nod,  
 And Nature tremble to the throne of God:  
 All this dread ORDER break—for whom? For thee?  
 Vile worm!—oh, madness, pride, impiety!

*William Blake*

I went to the Garden of Love,  
 And saw what I never had seen:  
 A Chapel was built in the midst,  
 Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,  
 And "Thou shalt not" writ over the door:  
 So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,  
 That so many sweet flowers bore,

And I saw it was filled with graves,  
 And tomb-stones where flowers should be;  
 And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,  
 And binding with briars my joys and desires.

*T.S. Eliot*

Do I dare  
 Disturb the universe?  
 In a minute there is time  
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all—  
 Have known the evening, mornings, afternoons,  
 I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall  
 Beneath the music from a farther room.  
 So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
 The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
 And when I am formulated, sprawled on a pin,  
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
 Then how should I begin  
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
 And how should I presume?

Pope defends the "ORDER" over and  
 against the individual's experience.

Sacred verse like this perpetuates an  
 understanding of the Christian faith as  
 utterly closed to dialogue and therefore  
 opposed to the cross-pollination to images  
 and vexing experiences.

Blake speaks to the sad domination of a  
 Christendom culture, which he perceives  
 as restrictive. In contrast to the "sweet  
 flowers" the unimaginative "Priests in  
 black gowns" cast a dark pall on life's  
 mystery.

Eliot will eventually convert to Christianity  
 and write a collection of poems, known as  
*Four Quartets* in 1943. This poem, "The  
 Love Song of J. Alfred Prurock," is found in  
*The Wasteland and Other Poems*,  
 published in 1930. These three stanzas  
 help us to appreciate how the articulated  
 struggles of an individual may actually  
 lead one into profound conversation with  
 God and others.

*Wallace Stevens*

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?  
 What is divinity if it can come  
 Only in silent shadows and in dreams?  
 Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
 In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else  
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,  
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?  
 Divinity must live with herself:  
 Passions of rain, or moods of falling snow;  
 Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued  
 Elations when the forest blooms; gusty  
 Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;  
 All pleasures and all pains, remembering  
 The bough of summer and the winter branch.  
 These are the measure destined for her soul.

*Kathleen Norris*

He is there, like Clouseau  
 at the odd moment,  
 just right: when he climbs  
 out of the fish pond  
 into which he has spectacularly  
 fallen, and says condescendingly  
 to the hosts, the owners  
 of the estate: "I fail  
 where others succeed." You know  
 this is the truth. You know  
 he'll solve the mystery...

*Stanley Kunitz*

Who are we? Why are we here,  
 huddled on this desolate shore,  
 so curiously chopped and joined?—  
 broken totems, a scruffy tribe!  
 How many years have passed  
 since we owned keys to a door,  
 had friends, walked down familiar streets  
 and answered to a name? We try  
 not to remember the places  
 where we left pieces of ourselves  
 along the way, whether in ditches  
 at the side of foreign roads  
 or under signs that spell FOR HIRE  
 or naked between sheets in cheap  
 motels. Does anybody care?

Stevens published "Sunday Morning" in 1923. In the poem, he describes the inner questions of an affluent woman as she broods on missing worship, the standard cultural fare of the early twentieth century United States.

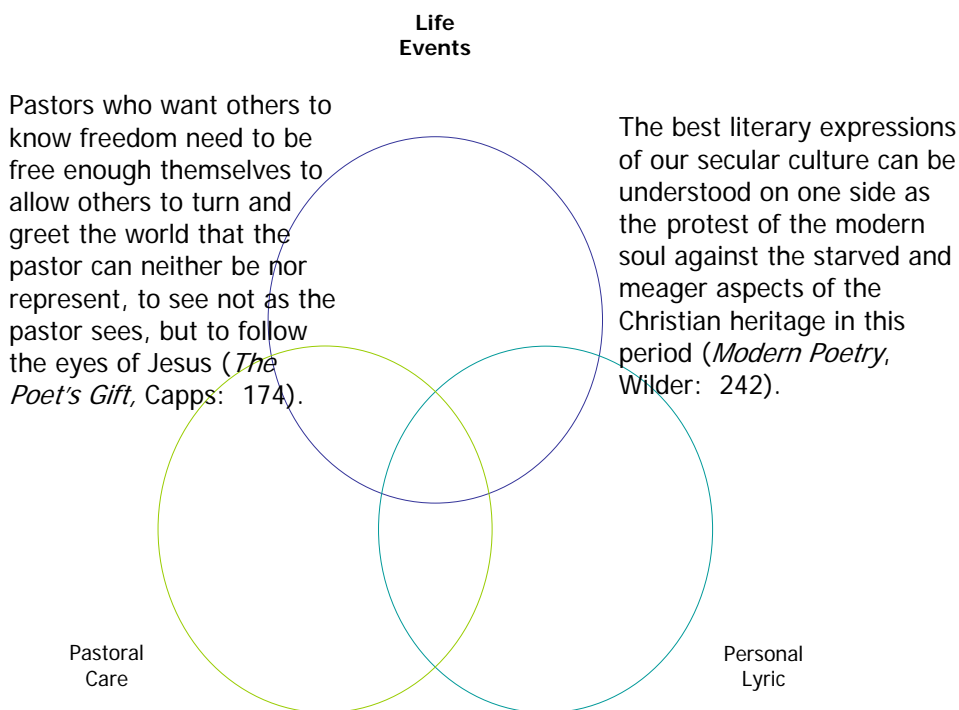
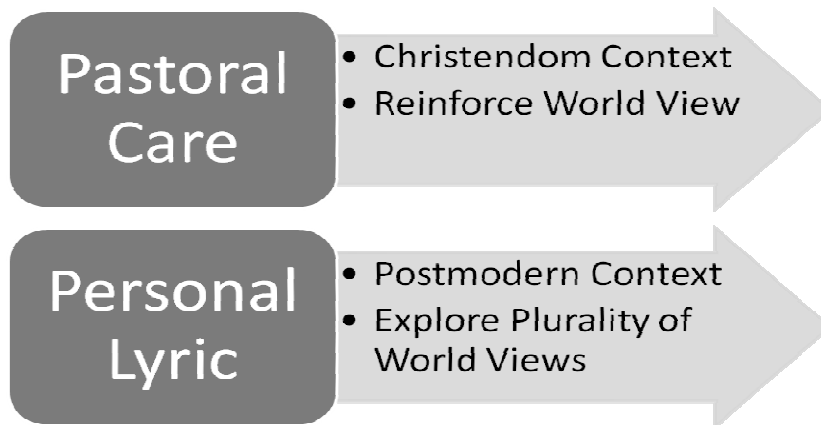
Norris offers a stark contrast to Stevens' view of the Christian faith. These lines, from a poem, entitled, *Luke 14: A Commentary*, provide a great glimpse of a postmodern Jesus. He is funny, and even a little absurd. But his appeal is no less sublime.

Kunitz writes *The Sea, That Has No Ending* in response to a painting, that goes by the name *Green Sea*, by Philip Guston. The poet's question, coupled with phrases like "broken totems, a scruffy tribe!" are indicative of Christendom's collapse. Exilic descriptors abound.

**Appendix IV: Table of Biblical Images, Allusions and Collisions**

|   | <b>Crossroads Poems</b>  | <b>Columbia Poems</b>  | <b>Alexander Pope</b>  | <b>William Blake</b>               | <b>T.S. Eliot</b>                                    | <b>Kathleen Norris</b>                | <b>Wallace Stevens</b>                 | <b>Stanley Kunitz</b>                           |
|---|--|--|--|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Biblical Images</b>                      | Multitude<br>Graft<br>Vine<br>Flesh<br>Crosses<br>Branches<br>Blind<br>Salt<br>Water<br>Well<br>Unleavened | Bucket<br>Water<br>Blood<br>Perfume<br>Crumbs<br>Empty<br>Filled<br>Overflowing<br>Tomb<br>Dry<br>Food<br>Torn<br>Accused<br>Cup | Ruling<br>Angels<br>Heaven's<br>foundations<br>Throne of<br>God<br>Worm! | Garden<br>Flowers                  | Room   | Fish<br>Fallen<br>Owners<br>of estate | Bounty<br>Dreams<br>Fruit              | Keys<br>Door<br>Tribe<br>The way<br>Signs       |
| <b>Biblical Terms</b>                       | Fellowship<br>Pray<br>Sinner<br>Holy<br>Gospel<br>Jehovah<br>Soul  | Blessing<br>Shalom<br>Eternal life<br>Body, mind<br>& soul   |  | <i>Thou<br/>shalt<br/>not writ</i> |  | Truth<br>Mystery                      | Heaven<br>Divinity<br>Passions<br>Soul |   |
| <b>Allusions to Meta-Narrative</b>          | Read the<br>Bible  |  | System<br>Whole<br>Nature<br>Order                                       | Chapel<br>Priests                  | I have<br>known                                      | He is<br>there                        | These<br>are the<br>measure            | Familiar<br>streets<br>A name                   |
| <b>Allusions to Collision of Narratives</b> | <i>Life of Brian</i><br>(ping!)<br>Din of our<br>lives   | Changing<br>shifts<br>Weight of<br>repulsion   | Oh<br>madness!   | Binding<br>with<br>briars          | Sprawling<br>on a pin<br>How<br>should I<br>presume? | Like<br>Clouseau                      | What is<br>divinity                    | Ditches<br>Foreign<br>roads<br>Broken<br>totems |

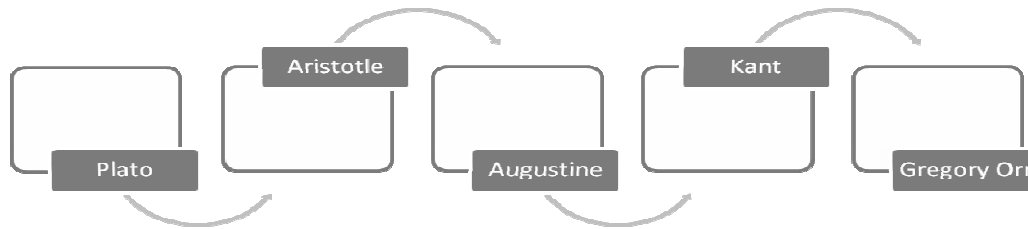
**Appendix V: Models of Pastoral Care Vs. Personal Lyric Care**



Donald Capps argues for a natural affinity between the provider of pastoral care and the poet. My suggestion is that poetics may offer a caring critique of the provincial world-view and "false peace" by which many Christians in North American are comforted.

Amos Wilder anticipates the postmodernity's bread and butter.

## Appendix VI: The Philosophy of Popular Poetics Before, During And After Christendom



“And so when we have anointed him [the poet] with myrrh and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city. For we mean to employ for our souls’ health the rougher and severer poet or story-teller who will imitate the style of the virtuous only...” (Plato: 86).

“[The poem] should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it. It will differ in structure from historical compositions, which of necessity present not a single action, but a single period, and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as they events may be” (Aristotle: 47, 48).

“For what survives of that primitive morality which the poet called Rome’s safeguard? Is it so obsolete and forgotten, that, far from practicing it, one does not even know it... Its admirers have need to inquire whether, even in the days of primitive men and morals, true justice flourished in it; or was it not perhaps even then, to use the casual expression of Cicero, rather a colored painting than the living reality...” (*The City of God*, Augustine: 62).

“I don’t know how [God] should be shown to me so that I might say, ‘That’s enough.’ For I do not think that I know anything in the way in which I desire to know God” (*Soliloquies*, Augustine: 1.2.7).

“Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own minds, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us). Everything that provokes this feeling in us, including the might of nature which challenges our strength, is then, though improperly, called sublime, and it is only under presupposition of this idea within us, and in relation to it, that we are capable of attaining to the idea of the sublimity of that Being which inspires deep respect in us, not by the mere display of its might in nature, but more by the faculty which is planted in us of estimating that might without fear, and of regarding our estate as exalted above it. (*The Critique of Judgment*, Kant: 114).

“Subjectivity describes us. What I *am* is subjective: I am this embodied self that feels, thinks, senses, remembers, imagines. But it may be that this mildly chaotic state is just the day-to-day condition of my existence: who we are, what we live with and in. Until a powerful crisis destabilizes us, we may not even realize how precarious an entity that self really is. And it is then that the personal lyric steps forward with its offer to restabilize us” (*Poetry As Survival*, Orr: 41).

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