JACOB'S BONES

ON THE CHURCH'S INSTITUTIONAL FUTURE

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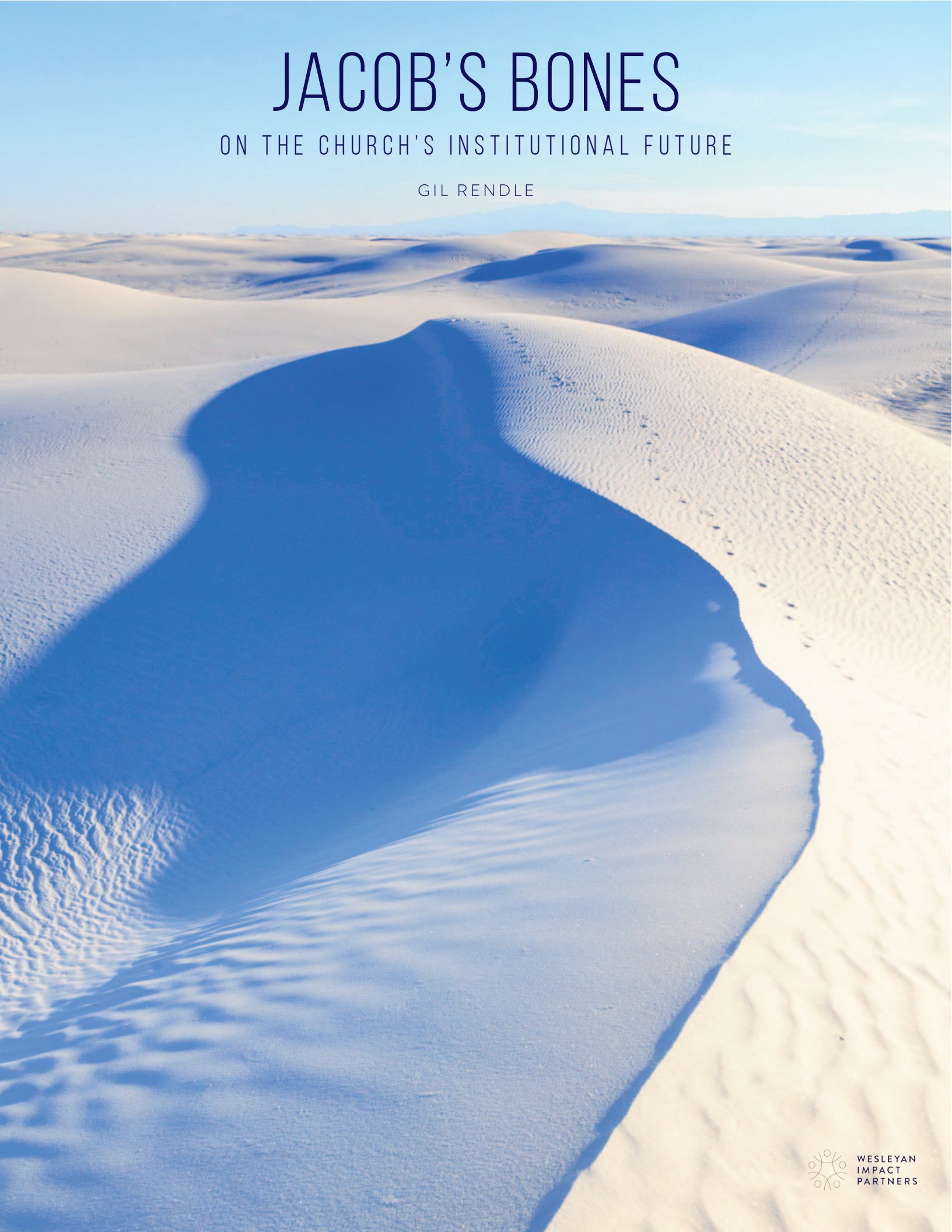

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Institutions are not organizations that house values. Institutions are values and disciplines that need organizations to bring their gifts to the people. The institutions and their organizational forms that we so need to shape our individual lives and to nurture our communities have struggled in our culture for the past 80 years. Some are resource strong, and some resource poor. But all have suffered a blow to their purpose. **This monograph looks to the future** of our institutions with the assumption that we are now perched at a transitive moment. We are at the end of a national epoch **in search of a way to move ahead**.

In writing about the death of a woman who had served as a guide in her own personal and spiritual development, Jen Bailey framed it very clearly when she wrote: "Seven years later, on February 2, 2021, Sister Weldon became an ancestor at the age of 92."[1] Sister Weldon didn't die, she became an ancestor. She didn't disappear from Jen's life. She changed the way in which Jen would carry her forward. The "bones" of who and what are most essential to us are not meant to be left behind, but to be carried forward with purpose.

When deaths occur and epochs end, we move from what we know into an unknown future. To make this transition we seek to carry with us that which is most needed for the journey. Crossing such boundaries takes us into new places and experiences making us uncomfortable enough to be changed – a necessity if one wishes to survive and thrive in the future. But importantly, futures are not disconnected from the past. We can carry with us the critical gifts from the past, limited in number but well chosen, that will remind us of who we are. What we choose to carry forward will be used to sustain our identity and purpose in the changed conditions that will be faced.

So it was that Jacob's bones went with his people out of Egypt as a marker, a reminder, to Israel about who and why the people were to be.

Israel (Jacob) lived in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. They settled in it, had many children, and became numerous. After Jacob had lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, and after he had lived a total of 147 years, Israel's death approached. He summoned his son Joseph and said to him, "If you would be so kind, lay your hand under my thigh, and be loyal and true to me. Don't bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, carry me from Egypt and bury me in their grave. **Genesis 47: 27-30.**

From living Patriarch to ancestor, Jacob changed his relationship to the people but was nonetheless seeking a way to still be carried with them as a reminder. But what was the reminder in those bones that Joseph and the people were to carry with them out of Egypt? This is an essential question for the current institutional church in the unwinding of the 21st century that is hurling it toward an unknown future for which the church will need to carry its own markers to remember who and for what it is meant to be. What bones must be carried forward?

LEAVING EGYPT – THE UNWINDING

What is most clear at this early point in the 21st century is that we are facing the death of an old epoch and the beginning of a new, unknown one. We have, if you will, already left Egypt and have been living in the wilderness. This epochal change is written about incessantly and the evidence of death/new birth is continuously catalogued: a pandemic and post-pandemic deep shift; a rising global populism spawning an historic political divide in the United States and elsewhere; a resurgence of white supremacy and racism; an economic divide between the wealthy and the poor that has eviscerated the middle class; a shift in the holding and use of power underwritten by changes in technology and communication; mercurial shifts in international agreements and relationships that undermine global stability and security; a climate change crisis that resides quietly beneath all other challenges with deadly global consequences… As Sonny and Cher sang in an earlier age, "and the beat goes on." Each of us can add our own additional evidence and symptoms of cultural disruption from what seems to be an unending stream of changes. There is no trustable future because there is no surely formed present. We live in an unformed moment.

Importantly, this unformed moment is further exacerbated by the speed of change driven by technology and social media. The description offered by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman captures it well as a "liquid culture."[2] By liquid culture Bauman means a world changing so quickly that the time necessary for a reasoned response is disallowed. By the time a response to any change is determined and moved toward implementation, the conditions requiring the response will have yet changed again.

As a culture we are at what William Strauss and Neil Howe call a "turning."[3] Cultures, like all living systems, balance their movement ahead in an oscillating pattern in which direction forward is managed by weaving a path back and forth between competing extremes. As cyclical historians, Strauss and Howe have documented this oscillating pattern in terms of a continual generational weaving among four repeating value systems.

A familiar example is child rearing. Where one generation seeks to direct and control the development

of their children through rules and constrained behavior, the next generation seeks to unleash the development of their children by unrestricting their behavior, only to be followed again by the next generation which seeks once more to impose boundaries on their children's behavior. This oscillation between constraint and freedom in child rearing styles is a natural way that generations have of steering to avoid the most negative aspects of either of the two poles of freedom and constraint. As Strauss and Howe note, each generation corrects the excesses of the generation that went before, while the succeeding generation will correct their own excesses. This leads to a situation in which every generation naturally speaks poorly about the one that went before and the one that will come after. Nonetheless, the oscillating pattern of generational child rearing styles provides a healthy cultural balance between the values of discipline and creativity, both of which are essential to the development of children.

In the midst of these more modest self-correcting "turnings" of generational value systems that happen every 19 to 26 years (the normative range of generational time), there is also the oscillating pattern of much deeper, much longer, turnings in which whole cultures seemingly reverse their defining values. In the United States the most recent reversal began in the mid 1960s in which the constraining and relational values of the early 20th century began a shift toward the liberating and individual values of the second half of the 20th century.

The early half of the 20th century was marked by a social contract that Daniel Yankelovic described as a "giving – getting compact."[4] In order to get, one first needed to give. To have a happy marriage and family

that would sustain one into old age, one first needed to give effort, faithfulness, resources and attention to the people in the family. To provide for one's family's needs and to have a secure retirement in the future, one first needed to give steady and faithful work to one's employer. The giving – getting compact was a relational social contract focused on the common good in which one provided for the self by providing for the others. It was all about "we."

Beginning with the tumult of the 1960s (a product of the excesses of constraint stemming from the previous cultural over-focus on "we") the second half of the 20th century saw a deep cultural turning of values toward a

new social contract, this time focused on the individual. Hugh Heclo described this new social contract as a "moral polestar."[5] The terms of this new social contract state that every individual is free to pursue their own needs and pleasures unhampered by others up and to the limit of when their own pursuit infringes on the pursuit of other individuals for the same. No longer a relational contract, this new turning of cultural values produced an individual contract. This individual moral polestar does not note connections among people but the boundaries and limits between people. Not about the common good and the "we," this is a social contract about the "I" – an "I" closely attended to by technology, social media and consumerism.

Consider the historic turmoil of the "freedom generation" of the 60s, the "me generation" of the 70s, and the "greed generation" of the 80s. Whatever nicknames are attributed or earned along the way, the transition between epochs is a wilderness experience of leaving Egypt in search of new promises – of leaving excesses behind by moving toward countervailing alternatives. It also eventually leads to exposing a new set of excesses that will need their own oscillating correction in the future.

Importantly, as we enter the 2020s, the unformed nature of a technology-driven global populism in a post-pandemic moment is presenting just such another epochal shift in the deep cultural oscillation between competing value systems that cultures use to find their way ahead. Both Johnathan Sacks[6] and Robert Putnam[7] argue that we are in the throes of another reversal – this time from "I" values back toward "WE" values. From a consumer society with an "attention economy"[8] that both glorifies and monetizes the individual, we are once again in search of the common good. Having experienced the excesses of an earlier focus on the "we" that reached its peak in the 1950s, our culture oscillated toward the values and behaviors that preferenced individuals. Now having experienced the excesses of overattention to individuality, we are oscillating back toward community. Leaving Egypt yet again, we ask what of Jacob's bones we should carry with us this time.

THE TIME OF "I" HAS NOT BEEN GOOD TO INSTITUTIONS

Institutions are more than a good idea; they are essential to our personal and communal lives. Institutions are where we house our most previous values and the way in which we establish and direct the behaviors and practices that will express and protect those precious values. We depend on institutions for our own personal formation and for the formation and protection of community – the "common good" writ both large (nationally) and small (neighborly).

Despite this critical importance, institutions of all stripes (government, military, politics, religion, health care, education, finance, athletics…) have suffered in reputation and acceptance during the "I"-based culture of the second half of the 20th century. The present disrespect of institutions is important to understand if "institutions" are to be a part of what must be carried into the future. Indeed, the importance of institutions carried into the future is what I argue for in this paper.

There are three notable causes of the current diminishment and mistrust of institutions. The first two come from the critical work that Heclo did on understanding institutions.[9]

1. Institutions are not trusted because they have earned our mistrust. Politicians who misrepresent truth in order to garner personal or party power; church systems that subject children to pedophile clerics; financial systems that sell worthless financial instruments to uninformed investors for corporate gain; banks that package risky mortgages and encourage them onto homeowners who don't understand and can't afford them; for-profit prison systems that reward investors by overfilling cells with minority populations… again, "the beat goes on." We can all be quick with examples of institutions that have earned our mistrust.

2. Even at their best, institutions are diminished because they are countercultural. It is the nature and design of institutions to advocate disciplines or practices – limits and boundaries to the immediate pleasures and preferences that we might seek as individuals. Remember, institutions house our most precious shared values and the place from which we impose the behaviors and practices of those values upon ourselves and others. The imposition of disciplined practices and limits is not naturally welcome in an "I" culture that follows the moral polestar of the individual as its social contract. If the culture encourages the individual to pursue immediate needs and pleasures, then institutional constraints to that pursuit will feel countercultural. For example, the institutional direction to set aside a portion of current earnings in a 401K for much later use in retirement is received by many in the individual culture more as an imposition than as responsible advice that will serve and protect both the individual and the common good. In such ways the practices of institutions are simply perceived to be out of step with the current values of the culture at the moment. It is not surprising that employees reject 401K opportunities as impositions on their current spending even while aware that such retirement programs are for their own long-term benefit.

The third reason for our current disrespect and mistrust of institutions can be seen in the distinction that Robert Quinn makes between an organization's public mission and its private mission.[10] Quinn notes that an organization's public mission is what it announces to the world as its purpose. For example, the public mission of a school system is some version of the statement that it exists for the education and preparation of children for the future. However, over time all organizations and institutions quite naturally develop an internal private mission which is the satisfaction of the most powerful of the constituencies connected to the organization. Using the example of a school system again, the private mission of constituency satisfaction leads school boards to make decisions that will focus on satisfying teachers, parents, state and federal mandates, and local community interests. In time this private mission overshadows the interests and needs of the students despite the students being the primary clients of the public mission. So…reason number 3:

3. Over time all established institutions naturally gravitate toward their private mission of constituency satisfaction. For example, well established mature institutions like Mainline Protestant denominations continue to announce their public-mission – such as United Methodism's "we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." This is an outward focused commitment to bring healing and healthy change to both individuals and communities as the target of the stated mission. But, beginning with the decline of membership and resources in

the mid 1960s the anxiety-fueled private-mission of institutional survival took over with attention given to strong internal constituencies: the security of clergy as a professional group, efforts of congregational development to increase the flow of resources of people and dollars to support established buildings and programs, the fulfillment of the letter-of-the-law of institutional management as outlined by books of polity. From outside of the institution people intuited that the church announced one thing about its purpose, but then focused its attention inwardly on its own clergy, lay leaders, resources, and rules.

Because of these three drivers trust has become a major topic in the current consideration of our cultural relationship with all institutions in this time of epochal transition. We need institutions in order to develop as individuals, in order to nurture ourselves and others in community and, in order to structure our national lives in equitable ways that won't harm others. Fundamentally necessary and deeply needed. But, not trusted. In this next epochal turning, institutions will once again be essential to the individual and to the common good.

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF THE NEXT STEPS

With attention to this dilemma, I wrote a monograph in 2015 to frame the work needed for progress toward the future of the institutional church. It was titled "Waiting for God's New Thing" and subtitled "Spiritual and Organizational Leadership in the In-Between Time – or – Why Better Isn't Good Enough."[11] The monograph was part of a major initiative by the Texas Methodist Foundation (TMF) in its work on leadership as a critical resource needed by the church.

In that monograph I described the difference between the **work of improvement** and the **work of creation.** The work of improvement seeks to make the current denominational and congregational systems more efficient and effective at doing what they already know how to do. This is the work of leaders seeking to improve, make more efficient, and be courageous in systems anxious about their difficult position of being diminished and distrusted in an "I" culture. However, the work of creation, I argued, is work of a different order. Because it is unknown, and because it is not based on what is, leaders doing this work must create something that is not yet. This is work with the potential of breaking free of old established boundaries and limits.

The conversations and the learning that came from that monograph, and the work of TMF and subsequently the Wesleyan Investive, have been substantial. For example, these two organizations cooperated in developing two tracks of a strategy. The two-track strategy was born of the insight that two separate orders of work cannot be expected of one set of leaders. To that end TMF continued their attention on the work of **improving** by engaging clergy of identified potential in peer groups designed for non-remedial leadership development. This is a strategy of challenging the best current leaders with interventions in thinking, with an insistence on mission-focused outcomes, and with peer support and encouragement to help leaders move insights and convictions to action. It is a best-practice approach to the work of improvement and effectiveness.

Simultaneously the Wesleyan Investive developed a new stream of work focused on entrepreneurial efforts of invention and exploration – efforts that were already happening at the edge of and beyond the boundaries of the denominational institution. This work by the Investive required building relationships with entrepreneurs, building a network and platform to

connect these entrepreneurs, doing creative design work, and developing a safe and welcoming space in which entrepreneurs and institutionalists ("scouts and trustees," in the words of Bishop Ken Carter) could engage one another in both learning and encouragement. This is new and unchartered work in which the Investive is learning that it must invest its resources and attention directly in individuals who are doing the work of **creation**.

These two organizations are discovering that dualisms such as improving / creating require dual strategies with questions and people separate and appropriate to each.

THE IMPROVEMENT / CREATION DUALISM

As noted, creating separate categories for the work of improvement and the work of creation is a dualism. A dualism is the division of something conceptually into two different or contrasting aspects in an effort to clarify each, as well as to clarify the relationship between the two. Western culture thrives on such categorization and the accompanying contrasts that categories provide. Dualisms are very helpful tools. But by arbitrarily forming contrasting categories dualisms are also limiting as they hide what is in the space between the categories and miss what is in neither

Beginning with the helpfulness of the dualism of improvement / creation, a shorthand is provided to identify important ideas and observations that can guide future efforts. For example:

The work of improving	The work of creating
■ increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of that which already is ■ the primary domain of institutional (denominational and congregational) leaders ■ is hampered by the private mission naturally developed by established institutions over time ■ driven by a desire to overcome negatives: ❒ structural and polity constraints ❒ the strain of competing issues ❒ cultural constraints of mistrust and disrespect	■ inventing that which is not yet ■ the primary domain of religious social entrepreneurs ■ fueled by the liberation of a highly public mission and accompanying agenda ■ driven by a desire to capitalize on positives: ❒ being free-form and adaptive ❒ having high levels of energy and inventiveness as resources ❒ attracting wider generational interest with porous boundaries

Dualisms such as this, and the contrasts they provide, help to unearth pluses and minuses, and suggest ways to move ahead. TMF, Wesleyan Investive and others have used such diagnoses to determine what work to put their hands to, collaborating with whom, and with what goals.

However, such dualisms have limitations and shortcomings as well. In this case one of the shortcomings of the separation of work into categories of improvement and creation is overlooking the work of the people who stand at the edge, or between the two poles, and seek to make sense of both. There are a host of people, groups, and organizations with one foot in either the improvement or the creation camp who also search around in the opposite camp with their other foot for what is of value and what can be learned. The is the issue of nuance. Dualistic approaches seek to be definitive by separating observations into distinct categories and are not overly interested in the grey in-between space of nuance which is much messier. However, messiness – the more chaotic in-between space – is often where new things are discovered that are missed by the categorization. Between the institutionalists of improvement and the entrepreneurs of creating is that group of leaders doing their own learning by giving attention to both.

THE THIRD CATEGORY – MOVING BEYOND THE SHORT GAME

Still, there is a bigger problem than what might be missed in the nuanced in-between space of dualisms. What if there is a third category not recognized by the reductionistic clarity of a two-pole dualism? What if there is work to be done beyond improving the institution of the church as we currently know it and the work of creating new entrepreneurial forms not yet invented? In this case the improving/creating dualism misses a third critical path of inquiry about what a religious institution would both require and provide in the future in the environment that will develop in the next cultural turning. This is a different question than asking how to improve our current religious institutions. It asks instead how will our spiritual lives, our search for meaning, and our need for community develop an institutional expression in the deeply different environment of the not-too-distant future? There is no assumption here that the religious institutions that we are currently trying to improve will be the same religious institutions as the ones established for the new epoch.

To date we have been very reasonably playing the short game of discovering what is around the corner. The work of improvement has been pursuing the immediacy of what is needed now to sustain the institutional forms of denominations, congregations, seminaries, boards, agencies, and programs that are already established. We've been at this work for decades and the work has gone well with its focus on congregational transformation, new church starts, conference restructuring, institutional downsizing, leadership development, and a host of other strategies. This work has been prompted by, and was meant to be a direct response to, the institutional stresses felt from the changing culture and the changing generational cohorts over the past decades. I now argue that we have gone about as far as we can go with this work. What is left to do in this arena is to double down on the resourcing of our leaders of greatest potential with continued interventions in thinking, insistence on mission-focused outcomes, and with peer support and encouragement meant to provide the courage to move insights and convictions to actions. This work, done well, will provide the leaders and the base which will be the steppingstones to whatever institutional form is needed in the next epoch.

The work of creation – the identification, encouragement, and support of religious / spiritual entrepreneurial efforts – is also a short game. There is little reason to expect that the current entrepreneurial expressions of religious / spiritual communities will sustain themselves beyond a five-to-ten-year range. The wonder of these entrepreneurial initiatives is that they are intense sub-group responses to clear, immediate needs and as such are sparkling correctives to the institutional, cultural and political blind spots and errors that are unwelcome and unacceptable to people who have been disappointed or injured by the institutions they now experience. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to expect that the current burst of entrepreneurial efforts will struggle, and most will fail. As a whole these initiatives must face unsustainable economic models, the challenge to maintain their current levels of participant energy, the cost of leadership and the inevitable challenge of transferring leadership from founding personalities, the burden of infrastructure, and the continual need to reinvent governance. Entrepreneurialism is exhausting and the history of these efforts speaks to their short-term nature – the disappearance of the house church movement of the 1960s, the short life span of thousands of communes from that same period,[12] the final collapse of even the most famous and deeply funded anti-institutional experiments,[13] and the pattern of transformation of religious-based communities into value-based businesses as a sole means of stability.

While the work of religious social entrepreneurialism may be a short game as measured in time, it is nonetheless work critical to pursue. This entrepreneurial work of creation is essential because it is a response that uncloaks and engages what people actually and immediately are searching for. It is providing a base of communities and strategies to find meaning, purpose, and the common good in forms that people can readily respond to. It creates new thinking and inspiration by steering close to the language of poetry and prophecy that recaptures and reenergizes what is hidden and lost in the institutional language that has been over-used to the point of having lost flavor. It rides high on the energy of a clear public mission that has not been around long enough to develop its limiting private mission shadow. The clarity and the purity of much of this entrepreneurial work is invaluable and must be protected because it is uncovering the values and practices most needed for the future. Those entrepreneurial efforts that will last longest will be steppingstones to the future. But even those that burn brightly for only a short time will serve as bellwether markers for the cultural turning we now enter – hints pointing to what will be needed for the future.

THE LONG GAME IS INSTITUTIONAL

As the larger culture oscillates away from the excesses of "I" back toward "We" values, the importance of institutions is further underscored. Remember that institutions were earlier described as essential to our personal and communal lives – as the place where we house our most precious values and where we establish and direct the behaviors and disciplines that will express and protect those values. Such institutions, values, and disciplines are part of the bones that must make it into the national as well as denominational future.

To be clearer about what must go into the future it is important to distinguish between the form and structure of an institution, and alternately the purpose and the values of the institution. This is the difference between thinking of an institution as an organization (its form) and thinking of an institution as a construction of social reality (its function) – a distinction made by Hugh Heclo in his work on understanding institutions.[14]

As an organization, an institution is the bureaucratization of human associations that formalizes relationships, seeks to replicate itself and structures actions necessary to performance. This is the institution as buildings, budgets, hierarchical staff, departments, agendas, outputs, and resources. This is how we do institutions. Stabilizing and resourcing this organizational side of our institutions has been the focus of our anxiety about institutions over the past half century.

But, as a construction of social reality, an institution is the infusion of value, purpose and discipline into the arena of shared living in community. This is the why of institutions as they bring shape to who we can be as individuals at our best and how we can best live with one another.

An institution as a construction of a social reality might more easily be understood by looking at an example of an institution that exists without an organizational form. Consider "the institution of marriage," an expression commonly used to identify a system of values and disciplines brought together to create a social reality – a respectful, healthy way for couples to be and to behave for personal and social benefit. The institution of marriage speaks of covenant / commitment, personal fidelity and responsibility, public recognition with boundaries and community support, and a nurturing family environment to support the individuals who participate in the institution. Free of the how of budgets, structures, agendas, and organizational matters, the institution of marriage nonetheless carries the why of living in a particular way through an expression of values and disciplines of behavior.

This example of the institution of marriage helps to see that it is specifically the why of institutions, the constructions of social realities, that is the Jacob's bones of great value to be carried into the future for the institutional church. Such why's of institutions are the pearl of great price that must be carried forward even as we struggle with the how of institutional life that will need to radically change to accommodate the liquid culture, unwinding, great turning that we have entered. The absence of institutions as constructions of reality is unthinkable for our future. For while we do not currently trust or respect our institutions, we must not underestimate the importance of the values and disciplines that they carry. Losing the treasure because of dissatisfaction with the earthen vessel is not a livable option.

To see this more clearly consider an editorial column from David Brooks who wrote about propositional knowledge as one of the forms of knowledge that provides a reservoir on which our nation can thrive.[15] His topic was truth and how truth can be destroyed in national conversation. Propositional knowledge, Brooks notes, is acquired through reason, logical proof, and tight analysis. Distinct from lesser forms of knowledge such as political narratives, spin, and "alternative facts," propositional knowledge must be established by carefully using evidence. Importantly for our consideration Brooks points out that the acquisition of this kind of knowledge is a collective process of a "network of institutions – universities, courts, publishers, professional societies, media outlets – that have set up an interlocking set of procedures to hunt for error, weigh evidence and determine which propositions pass muster." In other words, the great value of these institutions is not their organizational structure that provides form and stability, but their adherence to and advancement of their values and disciplines which provide meaning.

Brian Doyle makes this distinction in a much more poetic and personal way as a Roman Catholic writing, "and I saw for the first time in my life that there were two Catholic churches, one a noun and the other a verb, one a corporation and the other a wild idea held in the hearts of millions of people who are utterly uninterested in authority and power and rules and regulations, and very interested indeed in finding ways to walk through the bruises of life with grace and humility."[16] The difference between the how and the why. Denominations, Dioceses, Conferences, congregations, universities, courts, publishers, … all will undoubtedly need to find their next organizational forms in our current cultural turning. But, undimmed and unchanged in their why's – they must move forward with their capacity to shape constructions of social reality that will make this cultural turning livable.

THE DIVERSION OF DIVISION

Remember that the context of this monograph on institutions is the tumult of a great turning – a time in the culture when values are shifting and there is little stable ground to stand on. In this setting the most tempting, but diverting, work for the anxious leaders of institutions under stress to do is the work of problem solving. Problem solving focuses on fixing something that is proving to be an irritant or an obstacle to going about the usual business of the organization. Consider the pending denominational divide in the United Methodist Church that is currently on pause because of the pandemic. After decades of argument over theological and behavioral interpretations of human sexuality (homosexuality in particular), the United Methodist Church is awaiting a separation into two similar but distinct bodies that can only happen by the convening of a global General Conference. It is anticipated that the next General Conference will be the portal to the formation of a new denomination, The Global Methodist Church, as well as the reconstruction of the people, congregations and agencies that will remain as the on-going United Methodist Church. In such a stressful, unstable time all evidence points to the leaders of both of the successor institutions putting their hands to the work of problem solving.

The Global Methodist Church has been using its time to draft the form of its emerging institution. It's identity, shaped by its missional and theological documents, claims to hold new denominational space on the religious landscape but is, in fact, not as distinctive as it is historically normative. In other words, its missional and theological identity is staged in a reformulating of language and theological ideas largely acceptable to any and all Christians formed in the historic stream of Western Christianity in the Wesleyan tradition. This newly developing denomination claims its space not by what it offers as unique in its public mission but by what it omits from the mission and practice of the parent denomination that it seeks to leave. As such, there is little that is new or strategically shaped to carry the new denomination into the future cultural turning. Along with its identity, The Global Methodist denomination has been shaping its polity – its organizational form as an institution. Here great attention is given to the problems experienced when it was a part of the polity and relationships of the preceding United Methodist Church. So, for example, rules about the election and tenure of bishops, as well as the ownership of congregational property, have been rewritten to solve old problems. In similar fashion relationships among established constituencies are being reformulated to solve old problems.

While this is all necessary organizational work, the leaders of this new denomination are simply attending to its form through a process of problem solving. In the pressure of time little or no attention is given to the institutional function that it will need to live out in the newly developing epochal turning. It is the work of addressing old problems rather than looking toward new challenges. As such, current problem solving will quickly spawn the next iteration of organizational problems that this new denomination will have to address as the cultural turning continues.

Similarly, The United Methodist Church, that part of the former united denomination that will continue following the divide, is giving its attention to supporting, reshaping, and resourcing its own organizational form in light of the changes that will come. At this stage of the work, it is natural that the attention of leaders will be sharply drawn to the denomination's own private mission of constituent satisfaction as it undergoes its denominational divide. As noted earlier, over time institutions naturally shift their attention from their public to their private mission. Given the age of the institutional organization of that part of the United Methodist Church that will continue on, the internal structure and complexity of its constituencies is already well established.

In large, complex organizations such as denominations there are multiple, competing constituencies that the organization learns to hold in balance. Beginning in 1964, the United Methodist denomination developed a clear balance among constituent voices that provided certainty and stability (if not satisfaction) about how the denomination would behave as an organization. Each competing constituent group learned the organizational space that was available to it in terms of attention, resources, leadership openings, and its place on the full organization's agenda. Over time constituent groups such as boards, agencies, program areas, social justice groups, single-issue groups, and leadership sub-groups representing racial, ethnic, and gender constituencies, all learned the organizational space that was allotted to them as well as the boundaries and sanctions that would be experienced if they sought to exceed their allotment.

However, at a time when such a large, complex organization undergoes a deep reorganization as it will with the impending separation in the denomination, the balance that once held steady is naturally weakened. Old boundaries are now free to be contested. Constituent groups that once knew their boundaries and limits will quite naturally seek to claim more organizational space, resources, and attention. Racial, gender, and generational constituencies naturally push for greater leadership representation at the highest level of the reconstituting denomination. New constituent demands surface and have the appearance of problems to be solved and relationships to be negotiated.

The reshaping of the continuing United Methodist denomination is, in fact, an opportunity for reforming the institutional organization of the denomination in adaptive ways to advantage its institutional purpose in the cultural turning. However, it is more probable that the rebalancing of competing, and newly aggressive, constituent agendas will be treated as a problem to be solved. Efforts will be given to negotiating new organizational boundaries, relationships, and compromises in the search for a new stabilizing internal balance of constituencies. Here too, such problem solving will lead to the next iteration of organizational problems rather than develop the resilience needed for the institution's purpose in the great cultural turning.

RESILIENCE IN THE TIME OF THE UNWINDING

Moving our institutions of religion into a future that is currently being shaken with uncertainty will require resilience rather than stability. Being resilient means giving clear attention to what is most important while holding all else loosely. It is steadfastly carrying forward our religious constructs of an important social reality while simultaneously holding the organizational form of our denominations and congregations very loosely. Why the church exists will be important to us in our future long after how we are currently doing church has found its new form.

In her writing Bishop Janice Huie points out that ecologists define resilience as the "capacity of a system or an enterprise to absorb disturbance and reorganize so that it retains its core purpose and identity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances."[17] The argument in this present monograph is based on the assumption of just such a "dramatically changed circumstance," earlier described as a fundamental cultural turning. The basic values of our culture, as expressed by our social contract, are leaning back toward the values of community (the "WE") in order to escape the excesses of our forays into the values of individuality (the "I") that have led us to the fractured lives of an attention economy in a consumer culture. Such a deep turning of cultural values threatens any living organism that is too rigid, too stable to accommodate the level of change that will be required to live in the dramatically changed circumstances that lie ahead. Nassim Taleb makes his case for the necessity of organizations to be "antifragile" – of being able to actually benefit from shocks, and of thriving and growing when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stress.[18] In the dramatically changing circumstances of a deep turning in a liquid culture, the continual problem solving of leaders with an eye to smoothing and straightening out their organizations may lead to a life-threatening rigidity at a time when suppleness and resilience is needed. Developing resilience requires attention given to identity and purpose, not rules and regulations.

This is the work of reclaiming and reforming the public mission of the institution as well as escaping the captivity of the private mission that developed over time. It means carrying forward what was essential from the past as a NorthStar for guidance into the future. It is Sister Weldon becoming an ancestor to be carried forward when her active mentoring days are done. It is the memory, the markers, carried forward with Jacob's bones.

Some additional work with the biblical text may be helpful here.

THE BONES OF JACOB AND JOSEPH

As death approached, Jacob extracted a promise from Joseph that, as his son, he would not allow Jacob's body to remain in Egypt. In the rabbinic commentaries that followed there were a number of reasons conjectured for Jacob seeking this promise. Central to the rabbinic arguments was Jacob's fear that his people would forget who they were. "[Jacob] wanted to establish for his offspring the principle that only Eretz Yisrael [the land of Israel] was their heritage, no matter how successful or comfortable they might be in some other land."[19] After all, beginning with the portion of Pharoah's land that Joseph assigned them in the famine, they had done so well that they sought to acquire more property for themselves. As the rabbis explained, this was an indication that the Israelites no longer regarded themselves as aliens sojourning in Egypt, but as permanent residents. The Midrash described them as "grasped by the land of Egypt," implying that they could not leave. Soon, the rabbis said, they might substitute the Nile for the Jordan.

So, Jacob's bones were about identity – about the people remembering who they were. Their true identity was being threatened by their assimilation into Egyptian culture. Remembering who you are – even when anxiety or the need for comfort beckons you to accommodate your surroundings – is a radical act of resilience. In order to maintain the memory of who one is it is necessary to carry the markers of that identity, especially when everything surrounding is changing. It is the purpose of Jacob's bones.

But the story goes on and later Joseph extracts a similar promise from his brothers as his father had before extracted from him.

Joseph said to his brothers, "I'm about to die. God will certainly take care of you and bring you out of this land to the land he promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Joseph made Israel's sons promise, "When God takes care of you, you must bring up my bones out of here." Joseph died when he was 110 years old. They embalmed him and placed him in a coffin in Egypt.

(Genesis 50: 24-25)

Joseph knew that at his death Pharoah would not permit him to be buried in Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel. So, he extracted his own pledge from his brothers so that when it did come time for Israel to leave Egypt his remains would go with them. Later tradition locates Joseph's final burial at Shechem. (Joshua 24:32)

Here the issue is not one of identity, but of purpose. What is at stake is the covenant – the promised relationship with God through which they would be the embodiment of God's plan for his people. "When God takes care of you," was recognition of the covenant according to the commentaries of the rabbis. Abraham's descendants were to be a full nation unto themselves, not a people of servitude in Egypt. Joseph's bones were to go with the people as a reminder that they had a great purpose in God's plans. So it was that generations later Moses took the bones of Joseph with the people as they escaped the slavery of Egypt into the "dramatically changed circumstances" of the desert wilderness. (Exodus 13: 19)

Identity and purpose. Resilience is the capacity to retain one's core identity and purpose in the face of dramatically changed circumstances. For the leaders of our current religious institutions it is the carrying forth of that part of the institution that is the construct of social reality – the why of their institution – especially when the organizational form of the institution is under great stress with a mandate to change. Yet the reality is that it is exceedingly difficult for leaders to attend to identity and purpose (ephemeral and hard to articulate) when clear problems are all around (specific and demanding).

WORKING TOWARD AN INSTITUTION THAT CAN THRIVE IN THE NEW TURNING

In this monograph I am arguing that the long game is institutional – by which I mean giving attention to that aspect of the denominational church that is an institutional construct of a social reality. The current organizational work of the United Methodist Church and the Global Methodist Church is pressing and necessary. But alone, this organizational work satisfies immediate needs of competing constituencies without preparing the church to be an important voice in a cultural turning where there will be a new openness to the truths and values which the church uniquely carries as an institution.

Earlier I described the why of an institution, its nature as a construction of social reality, as its reason for asking people to live in a particular way guided by its values and disciplines of behavior. An institution's why is it's offering on how we as individuals can live our best lives and how we can best live with one another in community. Both historically, and especially contemporarily, the Western expression of Christianity offers its institutional why in the form of a counter-narrative to the values and behaviors of the dominant culture. That is to say, the institution of the church in the Wesleyan tradition – at its best – offers a way of understanding and being in the world that is different because it asks people to see their lives through the eyes of faith. In a sermon I recently preached in my home local church I sought to give some shape to that difference by asking:

- What will make you and me happier? more money?, or more forgiveness?
- What will make you and me more secure? more fences, more laws, more military?, or more friendships?
- What will make you and me more loved by others? more boundaries between white and black, between red and blues, between gay and straight?, or more invitations to everyone?
- What will give you and me more satisfaction? more possessions?, or more purpose?

These are simple differences invited by seeing everyday realities either through the eyes of the dominant culture or through the eyes of faith. It is the presence of the institution of the church in our lives and our communities that allows such questions to be asked and which gives people the choice of how to respond.

In his book that has been central to my thinking, Walter Brueggemann writes of the biblical text as "the Word that redescribes the world."[20] When the world speaks of power, wealth, and contracts, Christianity speaks of co-creating, generosity, and covenants. It is a counter-narrative to the way in which the dominant culture tells its story. The church carries critical values for the formation of individuals and for the shaping of community. As an institution (a construction of social reality) the church carries not only the values, but the practices that provide a path for individuals and communities to step into the redescribed world as a counter-narrative where there is life for all. In a culture that is now beginning its fresh turning toward a reformulation of the values of "WE," the Wesleyan expression of that institution of the church has a word now wanting to be heard, a way wanting to be followed.

While the time of "I" has not been good to institutions, the swing toward "WE" offers a new ballgame – a new platform from which the values of the church can be heard and appreciated. This, of course, remains dependent on whether the church can shed itself of the cultural distrust earned in the three ways noted earlier.

Resilience in this time of dramatically changing circumstances means identifying what is central (core) and holding all else loosely. The adage from systems theory about living systems that are entering chaos is to be "steady in purpose, but flexible in strategy." Be steadfast in why, but inventive in how. In order to move ahead, leaders who seek to provide a viable institutional church in the newly reforming culture will necessarily need to be of shared mind about what is core.

That which is core must be discerned out of that which is complicated. Getting to the core is difficult work, not done by committee. It is not the development of a consensus or the negotiation of perspectives and preferences. It takes time, discernment, and wisdom.

I am captured by a footnote in the Common English translation of the Bible that begins with the 613

commandments attributed to Moses (the sum of both written and oral law).[21] The footnote then points out that David reduced the law to 11 commandments (Psalm 15), and Micah reduced the law to 3 (Micah 6:8). It is easy to take the next step and point to Jesus who reduced all 613 commandments to 2: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart…You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." (Matthew 22). As if to settle the debate Jesus ended by saying, "All the Law and Prophets depend on these two commands." This is the steady biblical core around which all else is strategy focused on a particular time, issue, or context.

Having 613 commandments gives us all plenty to work with. In that great mix of rules, we can each find one or two commands that agree with our perspective or address our concern, and can point to why we are right and others wrong. With 613 commands we can argue pleasantly or combatively, but perhaps never find purpose or community. And, arguing which of our competing commands has precedence or priority deepens the game without finding any winners. But, 2 commandments cannot be argued, or argued against. When the core is found it becomes the foundation, the platform, from which we will then search for ways to live it in our own lives (formation and discipleship) and ways to live it with one another (covenant and community). Such is the nature of a core belief, conviction, or principle. It is the rock bottom on which we stand and from which we can move with confidence even in dramatically changing circumstances. It is resilience.

This is the clarity needed for the future of what will become the reconstituted United Methodist Church. Rather than clarity about how to organize the reforming of the denomination, it is clarity about the values and disciplines that it holds most sacred that will make it an important institution to the people in a changed cultural turning. There are perhaps five areas that need to be explored. They are areas needing an agreement and conviction separate and apart from any of the legitimate concerns of current constituent sub-groups already within the organizational institution. The five areas are:

Identity Who are we now – as a legitimate extension and reflection of the people we were called to be in Christ through John Wesley's story?

Purpose What real differences are we called now to make in the lives of people and communities in the next ten to twenty years?

Values What very few principles must be held dear at all costs in these next two decades that will make us instruments of God's presence in a "liquid" culture that is in the midst of a deep turning?

Practices What few behaviors and practices are to be held as central among the people who are part of the institution?

Metaphors In a time in which over-used and under-poetic language has lost its power, what will be the dominant metaphors that will carry the promise of the institution in a way that can be heard in a changing culture that listens with a different ear?

Our answers to questions such as these are the bones of Jacob, Joseph, and John Wesley that are to be carried into our deeply and constantly changed future if the institution of the church is to be what it is meant to be, to do what it is meant to do.

THE QUESTION OF THIS MONOGRAPH

In the current dual strategy of improvement / creation, there are two critically important conversations already going on. One is seeking how to address the organizational side of the institution of the church – the work of improvement. The other is exploring ways and means to directly and immediately address the questions and needs of people who do not hold the present institutional church in favor but seek values, meaning and community in their lives – the work of creating. The question that this monograph seeks to raise is whether there is a need for a third, related but different conversation prompted by a different question – the work of positioning the church as a viable institution in a culture caught in a turning. Perhaps the question driving such a third conversation may be something like:

What is the institutional (i.e., construction of a social reality) future of American Protestant religion for the second half of the 21st century and how will it live into its important role in a fast-changing culture?

That is to say:

If there is on-going serious work with a focus on how to **improve** our current religious institutional (organizational) mission and ministry…

…if there is serious, intentional work developing with a focus on learning to **create** new forms of religious communities outside of our current institutional (organizational) forms that are not undermined by their own private missions and a deep cultural distrust…

…then, who is it that will do the intentional and deeply critical work of **identifying the bones** (the core truths, values and practices – the construction of a social reality) that will rest at the center and be the foundation for building a new organizational institution in the still yet unformed new culture?

In the midst of all of the problem solving that is going on, to whom does the task of evolving a new, trustworthy, religious institution now fall? And how will they do this work?

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