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RESERVOIRS
of Resilience
— IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

reflections on hope, courage & purpose

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As I sit at my desk looking out the window, I can see the first reservoir dug on the farm where I live. It is surrounded by oak and mesquite trees and provides water both to our cattle and native wildlife. Nearby is a well. It was probably drilled about the time I was born—almost three-quarters of a century ago. It is powered by an old windmill, pulling water from deep in the earth and sending it into a concrete cistern which overflows into the reservoir. Most of the time, cattle drink from the cistern. However, when the wind doesn't

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blow for three or four days or we are in a drought, the cistern quickly runs dry. In those times, these reservoirs—we call them “tanks” in South Texas—are a saving grace for every living thing. When a normal water supply is not adequate or available, a reservoir makes up the difference. In our area, the deer, coyotes, various birds, small animals, fish, frogs, and turtles who live in or near these reservoirs testify to their continuity and generosity through the years. These “tanks” or reservoirs expand the resilience of the land to sustain life until a “new normal” reveals itself.

This paper is about resilience in a season when ordinary sources of spiritual nourishment are not adequate to the uncertainty and loss many people are experiencing. For people of faith to thrive in such a time and continue to build toward the world that God imagines, I believe we will need to drink deeply from reservoirs of the Spirit, particularly the dimensions of hope, purpose and courage.

On all levels of life in America, norms that have long undergirded our personal behavior, our ministry and our culture are shifting. Author Margaret Wheatley describes the current time as “the age of retreat: from one another, from values that held us together, from ideas and practices that encouraged inclusion, from faith in leaders, from belief in basic human goodness.”⁽¹⁾ New York Times columnist and PBS commentator David Brooks observes, “Levels of trust in this country, in our institutions, in our politics, and in one another—are in precipitous decline.”² Fareed Zakaria, Washington Post columnist, notes, “The world that is being ushered in as consequences of the covid-19 pandemic is new and scary.” However, he continues, “it is also in times like these that we can reshape the future.”³ Susan Beaumont, church consultant and spiritual director, characterizes this time as a “liminal season,” “a time of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs during transition, when a person or group of people is in between something that has ended and something else that is not yet ready to begin.”⁴



First reservoir dug on family farm near Beeville, Texas, described on page 2. Photo credit: Claude Pichot

The conditions that give rise to these descriptions have been developing for some time. The deaths of Mr. George Floyd, Ms. Breonna Taylor, and others too numerous to name have made the need to address systemic and institutional racism in our church and our culture unescapable. The wealth gap between America's richest and

what we wear, where we work or no longer work, how we attend school, where and how we worship, and even how we die or mourn a loved one's loss. These are profound disruptions. Almost certainly, we ourselves are being changed in ways both known and unknown to us. Life will not return to the way things were. Uncertainty, turbulence,

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poorest families has more than doubled between 1989-2016. The richest families are the only group to have gained wealth since the Great Recession.⁵ Unaddressed climate change is causing irreparable harm. The church is not immune from these shifts and others. Indeed, the polarization in the culture has replicated itself in the UMC, and our beloved church is now reconciling itself to the once unthinkable notion that individual persons, some congregations and perhaps a handful of annual conferences will soon separate from the United Methodist Church.

In the past ten months, the novel Corona virus has changed everything around us:

and vulnerability has threatened to overwhelm pastors and laity alike. At the same time, leaders are discovering fresh capacities to learn and love and create new possibilities in a rapidly changing world.

When I was involved in disaster recovery work with UMCOR, Reverend Tom Hazelwood, who led that Office, would remind me regularly, "Plan ahead. About 50% of pastors at the center of the storm will likely be gone from these appointments in two years." He was right. These pastors were faithful shepherds of their flock in extraordinarily difficult times. They gave their all, sometimes heroically. For some, the stress was simply overwhelming.

These pastors would often retire early, quit, or request to be appointed in another area of the conference. I understood. I also wondered. What inner or outer resources made it possible for other leaders—clergy and lay— to grieve their losses, care for those hurting in the church and community, and then begin to imagine and build a new future?

Unlike a localized disaster in which at least some stress can be relieved by changing locations or repairing a house, today's pandemic is global. There is no place to retreat from either the virus or the economic loss, educational disruption, or isolation it causes. Furthermore, many persons are living with simultaneous disasters: pandemic plus hurricanes, pandemic plus economic loss, pandemic

plus racial inequity, or all the above and more. In a season of dying and rising, even our strongest leaders are weary with the many bone-rattling experiences of dying while catching only occasional glimpses of the rising.

In such disordered times, we need substantial reservoirs of resilience so that, in drinking deeply from those waters, this season might be not only a time of loss, but also a time of spiritual deepening and new life. In another period of profound change, the Apostle Paul writes, “All creation is groaning as if in childbirth.” (Romans 8: 22-23) Even as we groan and grieve, people of faith intuitively sense that we also inhabit a pregnant season, ripe with amazing possibilities and new birth.



Ecologists define resilience as the capacity of a system or enterprise to absorb disturbance and reorganize so that it retains its core purpose and identity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.⁶

A key concept in resilience thinking is a threshold. Thresholds are the point where a system has changed so substantively that it transitions into an entirely different regime.⁷ Knowing where thresholds might lie and being attentive to the drivers that cause it to cross into an alternative reality is critical to resilience thinking. The closer to a threshold, the less change is required to cross over it.⁸ The more one can build capacity to absorb disturbance and maintain function, the more resilient something becomes. Resilience work requires that we constantly reflect on what we are doing and why we are doing it.

Some congregations and leaders will have the spiritual capacity to deepen and grow in these seasons of loss and renewal. They are like those described by the prophet Jeremiah, “a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17: 7-8) These are the congregations that are clear about their purpose, deeply engage with their neighbors and courageously embrace the rebuilding of their communities.

However, congregations in which a threshold has been crossed will no longer be capable of sustaining life as they knew it, particularly regarding their buildings or previous style of pastoral leadership. Some churches will close, re-locate or sell their property. Yet, even there, God continues to call people of faith to imagine and create a “new normal,” such as non-congregational forms of faith that dare to live out love of God and neighbor, justice, mercy, kindness and generosity in these wildly disruptive times. We are already seeing signs of these new creations where a threshold has been crossed. For example, a congregation is closed and its space becomes affordable housing, a community center, or a green space for neighborhood children.

Such resilience is the work ahead of us. It is the work of building capacity to absorb disturbance and maintain function in our healthy congregations. When a congregation crosses a threshold—and many will be crossed, it is the work of imagining and building a different future. This work may be done by the conference, a non-profit or another faith community, and is a primary task ahead of us for at least a generation. So how are people of faith and communities sustained in these difficult “times between the times”? I believe they will need large reservoirs of hope, purpose and courage.

Imagine some of our largest water reservoirs—maybe Lake Amistad on the Rio Grande or Lake Travis near Austin or Lake Livingston in East Texas. Some reservoirs are natural like the Great Lakes, but most are created to enlarge capacity for managing disturbance in times of extreme weather. Damming up rivers prevents flooding in times of heavy rain and provides additional water in times of drought. Although not their primary purpose, these large reservoirs frequently become sources of recreation, economic activity and renewal. A reservoir

lies ready, waiting until it is needed. In a reservoir, there is more than enough.

In our time of extreme disruption, I believe we need “reservoirs of the Spirit” that can sustain people of faith as they navigate the changing cultural landscape, expand their capacity for resilience in healthy communities, and create new communities in situations where a threshold has been crossed. Such reservoirs enlarge both our personal and collective capacity for resilience and help disciples of Jesus live as people of hope, purpose and courage.



NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE

It is good to begin with what we already know. Suffering is a part of life. God can and does use suffering for both our personal transformation and for the transformation of the world. Father Richard Rohr reminds us, “The Gospel was able to accept that life is tragic, but then graciously added that we can survive and will even grow from this tragedy. This is the great turnaround! It all depends on whether we are willing to see down as up, or as Jung put it, that ‘where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold.’ Lady Julian put it even more poetically, ‘There is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God.’”⁹ Jesus puts it this way in the Gospel of John, “Unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains just a grain of wheat.” (John 12:24) Resilient Christians choose to focus on where God is at work for good and lean in that direction, remembering that “all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Sharing stories of transformation through suffering may be one of the greatest gifts pastors can give one another, their families, and to their congregations. These stories convey a sense of being part of something larger than ourselves. They help both the storyteller and the listener discover meaning in the journey of life. In his new book *Life Is in the Transitions*, Bruce Feiler points to the work of Marshall Duke at Emory University to describe three categories of family narratives: ascending, descending and oscillating. Ascending narratives sound like this: “We came from nothing, we worked hard, we made it big.” Descending narratives sound like this: “We used to have it all. Then we lost everything.” **Oscillating narratives are the strongest.** They sound like this: “We’ve had ups and downs in our family. Your grandfather was vice president of the bank, but his house burned down. Your aunt was the first girl to go to college, but she got breast cancer.” He points out that children from these families who know that lives take different shapes are much better equipped to face life’s inevitable disruptions. **These oscillating stories are narratives of resilience.**¹⁰



A similar but more organic pattern occurs in the field of resilience in ecology. Ordinary adaptive behavior has two loops: a fore loop and a back loop. The fore loop begins with rapid growth and transitions into a season of conservation of resources. For example, a seed sprouts and the plant grows producing a flower and then more seed. Sooner or later the organism moves

shared by individuals who were willing to be quite vulnerable about their experience and their feelings. They were stories of loss, addiction, post-traumatic stress from war injuries, sexual assault, financial ruin, etc. They were also stories of God's grace and mercy in a time of trouble. One by one, over three months, the stories were shared and people engaged in deep conversation

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into the back loop. It begins with the release of those resources. The seed falls, the plant dies and its organic material fertilizes the soil. In time, the new seed sprouts and the plant transitions into the fore loop again bringing about renewal.

In the early days of the pandemic, the pastor of a congregation in San Antonio invited more than a dozen laypersons to share what he called "wilderness stories" as part of a Sunday evening conversation on Zoom. The people and stories were carefully curated—one story per evening,

with one another. Over time, congregational relationships were strengthened, and congregational identity was clarified. These Methodist Christians know they are resilient—both as individuals and as a congregation. They have shared stories of hope, purpose, and courage and God's presence in difficult times as well as good times. In fact, the recordings have become the beginning of a congregational library about resilience. Jim Collins calls this kind of work "preserving the core while stimulating progress."

OSCILLATING PATTERNS OF RESILIENCE IN RELIGIOUS BEHAVIOR

Dr. Walter Brueggemann's life's work has been to help us see how the Psalms function as resilient narratives of faith in the life of a believing community. With their poetry of orientation, disorientation and reorientation,¹¹ the Psalms describe this oscillating narrative of human experience: pain and loss, hope and trust in the mercy of God, followed by a new alignment. For example, Psalm 69 begins with a story of disorientation, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold." In every life, there are the seasons of loss and despair. Who among us has not been so disoriented that we feel we are drowning? In verse 13, the writer begins a turn toward God. The suffering poet reaches out to God, making a choice to put his faith in God's love and hope. "But as for me, O God, rescue me. Your steadfast love is good." By the end of the psalm, the poet has discovered a "new normal," a new orientation, "For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah.....and those who love his name shall live in it." It's a song of resilience.

Especially over the last century, American Christians have become more accustomed to the poetry of "strength to strength," and "victory to victory" rather than wails of total dependence on God. We have expected life to follow an ascending pattern, so we scissor out the poetry of pain and loss and suffering. We have removed many of the prayers of confession from our liturgies, and we are "unpracticed in grieving," as my colleague Reverend John Thornburg says. We lean toward the fantasy of "more of something": technology, material goods, Hallmark-card happiness, or whatever will temporarily repair that which is broken so that we continue our upward trajectory. However, if a human being is privileged to live long enough, he/she discovers that loss and death come to everyone.



The invitation to discipleship is following the path of Jesus. There is a choice to be made. In his life and death, Jesus chooses the pathway of emptiness and loss. Recall this narrative from Philippians:

- Orientation: “Though he was in the form of God....”
- Disorientation: [He] emptied himself.”
- New Orientation: “Therefore God has highly exalted him.” (Philippians 2: 5-11)

In Jesus’ death and resurrection, we experience how his suffering is transformed into life and how Jesus’ disciples are called to “have this same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus.” In doing so, a new community of faith is begun in which Jesus’ pattern of death and resurrection becomes our oscillating pattern for living and dying.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Bruce Reed, from the Grubb Institute, developed a theory of oscillation¹² as a general theory of religion. He stated, “We have concluded that in order to survive, human beings are inevitably and continuously engaged in the process of fluctuating or oscillating between two frames of mind or modes of experience. One mode is characterized by [people] feeling weak in the face of difficulties and anxieties from within and without, in which case [one] seeks to disengage from normal social and working environment.” This is the turn toward the holy, the divine, the sacred (Extradependence). In the second mode of experience, [the person] has a

sense of wholeness and power which enables [one] to engage with some confidence in relationship with the world and other people around.” (Intradependence)

The purpose of the church, Reed says, “can be defined as facilitating and managing the regressions to dependence on God in such a way that the worshippers, in reverting to the intradependent mode, are involved in a change which provides the basis for development, growth and creativity, both individually and corporately. What we would describe as religious behavior takes place when a person acknowledges that one is caught up in this process and engages in activities which enable one to ritualize the oscillation.”

This oscillating pattern occurs in the ritual of the worship service itself. To regain our bearings and find a way to re-order ourselves, we turn to God in worship. This turning is expressed through prayer, Biblical stories of dependence upon the mercy and power of God, acts of repentance and re-assurance, and remembering our baptism. Such acts of turning toward extradependence (the divine) help us pause sufficiently so that we regain a sense of well-being and belonging in our inner life. That faith gives worshippers the confidence and strength to engage the world on behalf of God’s love, justice and kindness.

The liturgy then turns us outward: sending and commissioning members for mission, Holy Communion, stories of resurrection, and practicing relationships of love, kindness and generosity in community. As these rituals are repeated hundreds of times over many years, they enlarge both our capacity for love, kindness, generosity, hope, and courage and our desire to be attentive to the presence of God.

In addition, daily rituals of prayer and meditation as well as frequent worship with the community of faith prepare us for engaging the world on behalf of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. **Over a lifetime, this oscillating pattern of inward/outward, private prayer/public witness, and personal holiness/social holiness expands our capacity to become purposeful, courageous, and resilient disciples of Jesus.**



Aerial view of Riggle-Huie family farm.

DRINKING DEEPLY FROM THE RESERVOIR OF HOPE

This historic pattern of worship sustains us well in ordinary seasons of both loss and grief as well as renewal and celebration. However, in times of extreme change, failure, and even destruction, people of faith need additional spiritual practices that renew and restore resilience and clarity of purpose. Rabbi Jonathon Sacks reminds us¹³ that the prophets, even the most pessimistic, were all agents of hope. Jeremiah, who had warned of incoming peril from the Babylonians, wrote during the exile, when people were in despair, “For surely I know the plans I have you,” said the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29.11)

In a season when nothing seems normal, when disruption and disappointment surround us like an endless desert, it is time to drink deeply from the reservoir of hope and to take public steps to embody that hope in action. Almost forty years ago, John Gardner, founder of Common Cause, wrote, “If people are apathetic, defeated in spirit, or unable to imagine a future worth striving for, the game is lost.”¹⁴ Without hope, we find ourselves mired in the present or even the past and cease to lean toward the future. The energy to imagine, create and build dissipates into thin air.

Hope is not the optimistic view that everything will turn out all right in the end if everyone will just do what we do. At its best, such an understanding of hope is wishful thinking. At its bleakest, it turns toward denial. Hope that is crushed by the first defeat or failure helps no one.

Scholars who study the development of leaders have situated resilience, the ability to sustain focus in the face of frustration, at the heart of potential leadership growth. Some people extract wisdom from experience, and others do not. Doris Kearns Goodwin has noted that the American presidents to whom we most often turn in times of adversity are those who have personally dealt with hardship, failure, loss, and learned from it, gaining wisdom. Abraham Lincoln suffered from a debilitating depression in his early years. In less than twelve hours, Theodore Roosevelt endured the death of his mother and the death of his beloved young wife. Franklin Roosevelt was stricken with polio as a young man and was paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life.¹⁵

Nothing in Scripture tells us that success is guaranteed. To the contrary, we are inspired by the lives of saints who resolved to trust God no matter what. The writer of Hebrews recites the familiar stories of those in the “great cloud of witnesses,” a roll call of people of faith in difficult situations who were filled with hope. He tells these stories so that his readers will persevere through their own suffering and loss, looking to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter

of our faith who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 11-12.2) These saints were sustained from deep reservoirs of hope. They practiced hope by putting their bodies on the line because they absolutely believed in the promises of God.

voyage in a leaky boat on behalf of a better future for their children.

Hope is both a noun and a verb. When we speak of hope as a noun, we are usually referring to hope as a feeling. In fact, we often use the word “hopeful” to indicate that in some meaningful way, the future will be better than the present. Hope as a noun

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Such hope is more rugged than simple optimism. It is more muscular. It is the choice to believe that even when things aren’t turning out the way we desire, we will endure through times that disappoint and threaten us. In a manner we can’t now imagine, we believe God’s infinite love and grace will prevail. Certainly, we will be changed in the process. Perhaps we will not live to see a better future, but we are sustained in our faith that there will be such a future. It is the story of Jeremiah telling the Israelites in exile to buy a field and plant. It is the narrative of John’s revelation of “a new heaven and a new earth.” It is the story of every immigrant who has walked across desert sands or risked an ocean

is a nice sentiment, but it doesn’t have much power.

Hope as a verb is potent. It is relentless. It calls for hard work. When we hope, we choose to believe and act as if the future will be better than the present. Hope as a verb is faith turned into action. In that sense, hope is a virtue we learn by practicing. Hoping is like practicing a difficult piece on a violin or learning a tricky dance step. Hope as a verb grows out of the faith that God hasn’t quit and that light does shine in the darkness. People of hope make a deliberate choice to move toward the light—they act. They consciously choose life over death. They act with resilience.



More than almost any other person in recent years, Congressman John Lewis embodied this resilient nature of hope. Arrested more than 40 times in the struggle for civil rights and nearly losing his life on the Edmond Pettus bridge, Congressman

Lewis spoke out again and again, “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month or a year; it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never be afraid to make some noise and get in trouble, good trouble.”

DRINKING DEEPLY FROM THE RESERVOIR OF PURPOSE

Everyone wants their life to matter—to make a difference in the world. For disciples of Jesus, that difference is found in the prayer we pray every day, “God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven.” How that purpose is embodied is the work of a lifetime, a calling. It is also the work of a congregation and the larger church.

In their first book, *Another Way*, young adults Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams, and Dori Grinenko Baker explore ways in which our culture has limited our understanding of purpose and restricted our ability to host meaningful conversations that help people clarify their own sense of purpose and call in life. Below are their eight limitations with the widened understanding that they propose:¹⁶

Limiting perspectives

- Call is individualistic
- Purpose is once-and-for-all
- Call is idealized and “safe”
- Purpose is about choice
- You can be anything you want to be
- Purpose is a privilege
- Calling is abstract universal categories

Widening view

- What is our shared purpose?
- Purpose is an unfolding journey
- Purpose involves risk in service to something larger than ourselves
- We sometimes choose purpose; purpose also chooses us
- Purpose is always mediated
- Purpose is grounded in daily realities
- Purpose is shaped by context
- Organizations have a purpose too

These limitations with their widened views are a starting point for expanding our capacity for clarity of purpose. They stretch us beyond our comfort zones to move closer to God’s purposes for a more just and equitable world. They invite us to shift our energy from asking “what must we preserve” to praying “what is God calling us to do”? They invite us to a deeper trust in God’s grace and mercy. They move our viewpoint from “I” to “we.”

The Latin root of the word religion is re-ligare which means to re-connect. Cultivating an imagination with this widening view of purpose and openness to God’s purposes means re-connecting with questions we might not have considered for a long time. In a context in which “every organization is now a start-up,” re-examining our personal shared purpose and the purpose of our congregations and conferences is to drink deeply from a vital reservoir of the Spirit.

Over the last few decades, particularly as part of the church growth movement, much pastoral work has focused around getting more people into church buildings—especially on Sunday mornings. Consequently, pastors spend much of the week getting ready for Sunday mornings. Church leaders—lay and clergy—invested significant resources in building beautiful worship and educational spaces. They are judged and judge themselves by the year-end report: the number of people who attend worship, Sunday School, small groups, and contribute financially, etc. We go outside our buildings to do good for others, but almost always with the goal of bringing people in. During the pandemic, it's no accident that issues regarding when and how to gather again on location quickly became political issues in a significant number of congregations. Our purpose was tied to our building rather than the work of Jesus.

As of this writing, the latest data indicates that in churches that have opened on location worship, the average attendance is about 36% of pre-COVID attendance. Many laity and clergy believe this trend will change when congregation members feel safer—following the availability of a vaccine and/or the decline of COVID. However, while there are reasons to project that while attendance may improve, it is doubtful that it will return to pre-pandemic numbers. Church attendance had already been declining for more than 40 years.

COVID has accelerated that trend. A third factor driving decline are the large generational differences in attendance. While 71% of Boomers indicate that they want to return to the building, only 41% of Gen Z and 42% of Millennials agree with that statement. **Like it or not, people of faith are leaving the building.**¹⁷



In this season in which our buildings are no longer so useful, what if Jesus is calling us to a higher purpose? Instead of bringing people in, what if our purpose is to go outside our walls and “Love our neighbors”? What if our purpose includes developing relationships with neighbors in their space, walking alongside them, and learning to love them?

The hardest change is to change ourselves.

It is much easier to do what we have always done—even when we are becoming more and more worn out and less and less in love with God and neighbor. As we mature, our calling matures as well. In a time of deep change in our context, drinking from the reservoir of purpose is an opportunity to listen anew to the Spirit and perhaps adapt our calling from God.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us, “On the one hand, it is the task of the prophetic community to show that the dominant

was to help his community of Judah face into the loss of the old world of king and temple in 587 BCE and to live into the new world—which was exile by the Babylonians. Jeremiah understands this loss as God’s will for Israel. On the one hand, Jeremiah is a pastoral presence, caring for the community in their grief and pain; on the other hand, he steps into a variety of conflicts.

Jeremiah has a robust sense of his own call. In using the language of “called,” I’m referring to Jeremiah’s own alignment with the purposes of God. This call is not a “one

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consciousness will indeed end and that it has no final claim on it. On the other hand, it is the task of the prophetic community “to present an alternative consciousness that can energize the community to fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality and bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God.”¹⁸ This is also the work of resilience, and it is deeply difficult work.

There is no better example of a prophet/pastor dealing with loss, uncertainty and change and adapting his purpose to a changing context than Jeremiah.¹⁹ His task

and done” event of Jeremiah as a boy, but an on-going relationship with One who calls him to yield up his life for the sake of his call. Like us, Jeremiah would prefer equilibrium and stability. Like us, God has something else in mind. The Book of Jeremiah says it this way, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:9-10)

During a time in pandemic when all church buildings were closed, a congregation in the Rio Texas Conference grew hungry for the

Eucharist. One of the members of the staff suggested the possibility of Front Yard Communion. They would ask some of the members of their congregation to host Holy Communion in their front yard on Saturday mornings. This family would invite other families up to ten people to their front yard for Holy Communion. Neighbors would be welcome. After all, they reasoned, Jesus often asked his followers for simple things—a donkey, food to share, and place to rest. Wesley taught that Holy Communion is a converting ordinance. People would socially distance and wear masks. The service would be simple—consecrated bread, grape juice in plastic cup, the words of institution. A card table was all that was needed.

Then the surprises began. Neighbors met each other for the first time. When neighbors further down the street who were not invited arrived, they simply waited their turn. New relationships began. People experienced a new dimension of Holy Communion, the Body of Christ. Then someone suggested that in a time of food insecurity in the community, people might be invited to bring non-perishable food to be dropped at the host family's door for distribution in the community. Over time, fifteen sites of Front Yard Community with collection for the food pantry continue to connect neighbors every month. It happened because the church—the living Body of Christ—was forced out of its beautiful building and began to re-imagine its purpose.



DRINKING DEEPLY FROM THE RESERVOIR OF COURAGE

Much has been written about courage. In 2019 Gil Rendle’s book, *Quietly Courageous*, helped us understand the importance of courage in a time of deep change. The shift from a convergent culture to a divergent culture, the reversal of institutional trust, the changing social contract, and the loss of identity have combined to make life much more challenging for pastors and leaders everywhere. In addition, some scholars are wondering if political affiliation is now a more accurate indication of American identity than religious affiliation. They are observing that ordinary conversations about such topics as racial equity, poverty, voting, gender, education and even masks are now viewed as “political,” rather than an extension of Christian discipleship. This is a tough time for Christian leaders. It is much easier for leaders to remain silent than to engage their followers in meaningful conversation about the relationship between discipleship and the challenges facing individuals, families and our society in this season.

In this unfolding context, “quiet courage” calls for leaders to be willing to speak and act in ways that followers will likely experience as uncomfortable—even painful—and will not reward the leader for seeking to help them step forward toward their new reality. Such courage is profoundly demanding and requires drinking frequently from a deep spiritual reservoir of courage.



Far too often we have defined courage as the warrior riding into battle or the fire fighters climbing the 300 floors of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. In Christian discipleship, those modeling

Courage is embodied in “taking the next faithful step” and moving forward.

Scripture speaks rarely of courage. God urges Joshua to be courageous and assured of God’s presence as he assumes leadership

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that understanding of courage live primarily in the past, the people we call the saints and martyrs: Stephen, Joan of Arc, and Bonhoeffer. Those singular actions of giving one’s life on behalf of others undeniably call forth bravery and courage.

However, I want to suggest that for disciples of Jesus in our day, courage is not the unique, the marvelous, or the exception. Rather it is ordinary Christians moving toward the pain and discomfort in our world instead of remaining comfortable in our safe places. It is our willingness to move toward mystery and deep encounters with the holy. It is risking the security of what we possess now to envision, create and build the world that God imagines. It is a readiness to endure the loneliness of leadership rather than “going along with the crowd.”

following the death of Moses. (Joshua 1:6) The Psalmist sings a quiet song of confidence in God’s presence even though external circumstances suggest otherwise. “Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.” (Psalm 27: 14) The Apostle Paul encounters new believers on his trip to Rome where he faces death and draws strength from them. Luke tells us, “On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage.” (Acts 28: 15)

Much more frequently we hear the words, “Do not fear” or “Be not afraid” in an encounter with the Holy One. The prophet Isaiah offers God’s vision of the return of Israelites to their homeland. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad and the desert shall rejoice and blossom...”

“Be strong, do not fear!” When the angel Gabriel appears to a teenage Mary to tell her that she will give birth to the Messiah, he encourages her saying, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” (Luke 1:31) We hear it again in another encounter with the holy at Jesus’ birth. The shepherds are terrified at the presence of angels, but the angels assure them, “Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of a great joy.” (Luke 2: 10) In his farewell conversations with his disciples, Jesus assures them of the coming presence of the Holy Spirit and says to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled; and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

In these encounters with the Holy One, leaders draw strength from a Reality larger than themselves. They enter a Relationship of infinite love, grace and mercy. They are reminded of the gifts of life—their blessings. Most importantly, they are reminded that they are not alone, but always in the presence of God. “Do not be afraid,” God reminds us, “I am with you.” These encounters with the Holy through prayer, meditation, Scripture, spiritual friendships and sometimes the surprise in-breaking of the Holy Spirit form a reservoir of courage that sustains us even in the most difficult times.

The root of the word courage is *cor*—the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, courage meant “to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.” Another definition of courage is “actions that spring

from an open heart without premeditation.” Brene’ Brown has captured the hearts of a generation of millennials and Gen Z by redefining courage as “putting our vulnerability on the line and speaking honestly and openly about who we are.”²⁰ It is this kind of courage to which all of us are called today. I believe it is most likely embodied in our young people. It is the responsibility of my generation to support them in that risk-taking work.

As the level of trust has declined in the denomination, annual conferences, and even congregations, many people have given up on investing in institutional reform in the church. We often refer to church structures and connections as “bureaucracy,” a word that describes a reality that we easily despise because it privileges form over purpose. Consequently, we fragment into smaller and smaller groups.

One of the ironies of weakened institutions is that those institutions also provide a foundation for risk-taking and innovation—creative ventures to meet both human need and systemic reforms. For example, within the United Methodist family, virtually every innovative non-profit in Texas begun in the last decade has been built on a foundation provided by an annual conference and often TMF. There is no doubt that our current church structures are inflexible, creaky and badly in need of reform. However, I would argue that reform is what is called for—rather than destruction. As Yuval Levin argues in his new book,²¹ I believe that at our best, we can

be a “both/and” institution that invests our resources to make a difference for good on behalf of God’s new creation by reforming what is and creating what can be. In between, naming what is ending and articulating what remains is not a role for the faint-hearted. Leaders will need to lean into conflict so that competing values and commitments can be exposed. They will need courage to take risks, fail and then try again. For example, leaders will face

current institutions and creating new ones will require drinking deeply from great reservoirs of courage.

In the first quarter of 2020, as the pandemic began to take hold, the Rio Texas Conference and four “pastores” — Hispanic clergywomen — began a collaborative called “Impacto” in San Antonio in the seventh poorest zip code in the state. This area of San Antonio is 90% Hispanic. Average household income



patterns of white privilege that have been woven into the fabric of our culture for centuries. These patterns will not transform easily. Leaders can expect to be wounded as they lead. They will need a high tolerance for pain and a large capacity for forgiveness and love. Rebuilding our

is \$35,000. Poor nutrition, poor health, and lack of jobs are systemic. The school system is home to some of the lowest performing schools in Texas. Many residents are immigrants and fear of deportation is high. Two former Southwest Texas Conference churches and two former Rio Grande Conference

churches are located in that area. The strongest church had an attendance of about 70; the others were much smaller. None had much impact on the community.

In July the Reverends Lilliana Padilla, Maribel Vazquez, Laura Dorontes, and Daisy Borrego were appointed to those congregations and to “Iniciativa de Impacto Comunitario,” the “Initiative to Impact the Community.” In less than six months, the four “pastores” created “Las Domesticas Unidas,” a support group of women who are housekeepers in the city. In

Bible School and youth activities that also provide snacks, school supplies, and books. Community leaders and the “pastores” are now working with the city to bring broadband WiFi to the area, with the Methodist Healthcare Ministries to bring a clinic, and with the Edgewood School District to improve schools.

“Impacto” is not a small undertaking for the annual conference, these four congregations, or these women. Like most start-ups, it is under-funded, but its purpose is clear: to work with God in creating the

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turn, these women are offering on-line job application assistance, assistance for rent from the city, assistance with utilities and more for over 200 families at this writing. It is their way of giving back to the community. “Impacto” provides ESL classes, guitar lessons for children, food distribution for over a hundred families per week and community laundry. The “pastores” created a “Impacto Virtual,” a weekly on-line worship service as well as

world that God intends. John Wesley would be proud. Without a doubt, there will be disappointments, conflict and failure. Clearly, these women, the conference and other non-profits that support them, are drinking deeply from the reservoir of courage.

We are privileged to live at a hinge moment in history. It is also a moment in which some pastors, congregations, and

institutions will have the hope, clarity of purpose and courage to increase their capacity for resilience. Others will cross a threshold and can no longer serve the purpose for which they were created. However, by the grace of God, other pastors, congregations and institutions will begin to see new visions of the world that God imagines. They will hope for a “new heaven and new earth” that most of us can

not yet see, and find the courage to step forward in that direction. I believe that God has already provided everything we need—deep reservoirs of hope, clarity of purpose and courage. The Holy One is inviting us to drink deeply from these reservoirs of the Spirit and then join hands with one another in repairing and creating God’s new creation.

BISHOP JANICE RIGGLE HUIE



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The hardest change is to change ourselves.
It is much easier to do what we have always done—even
when we are becoming more and more
worn out and less and less
in love with God and neighbor.

notes

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