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Journey, Friendship and Home
The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." Genesis 12:1 (JPS)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called, and went forth to the place he was to receive as a heritage; he went forth, moreover, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Issac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise; for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose designer and maker is God. Hebrews 11:8-10 (NAB)

By the Rivers of Babylon,  
there we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung up our lyres.  
For there our captors  
required of us songs,  
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How shall we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy!  
Psalm 137:1-6 (RSV)

It is the purpose of this paper to illustrate a personal theology of church and ministry formed from an examination of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Of these four, it is my own experience that sets this theology apart. Three key concepts for me throughout my own theologizing and Christian experience are, "journey," "friend," and "home."

It can never be easy task to leave the dwelling place of one's father and mother and begin the search for a home to call one's own. Abram knew this. It must have been difficult, even arduous, for him to leave the land of his birth and journey to a new country. And as the Psalm above bears witness, the Israelites also knew the feeling of being homesick. They had been forcefully taken away from their home, Zion, and carried off to Babylon. Their captors, we are told, mocked and tormented them. They demanded songs and laughter, as if these activities could be produced on command. The Israelites, incredulously replied, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

I believe I know how they felt.

In deciding to answer God's call to the ministry, I have had to leave my home, family and friends behind. And like Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz," I have often yearned the home of my youth and a return to simpler, easier days. But I have discovered that to go back home is not a simple assignment. Clicking one's heels together and
mouthing the sincere words of "There's no place like home; there's no place like home" will not suffice. In fact, backtracking would mean trying to both forget the unforgettable and resist the irresistible call of God. I can do neither, and indeed, I have come to the realization that "my arms are too short to box with God."

But the impossibility of turning back has not kept me from questioning the journey I have undertaken. Questions and uncertainties are much more frequent than my levels of comfort and security allow. Doubts plague my faith. My religious convictions seem full of holes and contradictions. I am even subject to attacks of atheism, which badger me in my weak moments.

Given this, it is not difficult to imagine that there are times when loneliness encamps around the tent of my soul, and I feel ultimately and totally alone (Eloi, Eloi Lama Sabacthani). And even in stronger moments I have often felt like another who struggled with the "seemingly" weak sustenance that has been provided for the sojourner.

My heart beats, my blood courses, I breathe, I live,
All on the nourishment of a memory.
Oh God, how long can I survive on a memory?
Already my soul feels the hunger pangs of starvation.
And the cannibals of self-doubt look at me
and lick their chops.
And God, I have to know where can I get strength to fend off cannibals.
To perish, stewing in one's own juice is such an ignoble end.¹

I have argued with and cursed at God. And I have felt that I could not sing in the strange land wherein I had wandered. Memories of the past choked off my voice. Fear of the future clouded my vision and choked the song off in my throat. How can I sing, O God, when I miss my home, when I am separated from my family, when the people I love most in the world are 700 miles away? How can I sing in a foreign land? How is it that I or anyone can sing when the journey only seems to take us further from home, the sincerest desire of our hearts?

Hebrews, chapter eleven, recounts the story of Abram and his journey. We are told he left his home and set out looking for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Abram was able to do this, even though he didn't know where he was going, even though he was old and childless, even though he would be a stranger and exile in the lands where he went. As Walter Brueggemann points out in his commentary on Genesis, to have taken up this journey, meant that Abram would be despised, at odds with the world, and certainly not understood. "The 'Abrahamic minority' [has always lived] as a threat against a world which has embraced barrenness and called it vitality."² And yet Abram set out on the journey. He did so because he believed God would walk with him; that God is a God who keeps promises and who could be trusted, that God would indeed "befriend" him.

And it is this idea that has kept me going. One translation of II Corinthians 5: 18 reads, "All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also" (TEV). Knowing God is my friend and journeys with me has sustained me even in the roughest times. I know I
am not alone, even at those times when God seems most absent from me, and this knowledge makes all the difference as I travel from one home to another. It is important for me to keep the friendship of God in mind as I journey through life. The certain knowledge that God loves me can help me not only persevere through hardships but also excel and find true joy in the journey.

Daniel Day Williams has said, "The hard fact, beyond all sentimentality, is that either we share suffering in love or outside of love, and it is not the same in one case as in the other." Taking up on this quote, Bob Mesle writes:

"It matters if someone loves us. No human experience is more fundamental to the Christian faith and tradition than the transforming wonder of being loved when we least deserve it. The very heart of the gospel is that the life and death of Jesus reveals the unconditional, gracious love of God. "By this the love of God is made manifest among us . . ." "While we were yet sinners . . ." "Beloved if God so loved us . . ." "We love because he first loved us."³

I have found this to be true. The religious experiences most influential in shaping and changing my life are those where I, though undeserving, have felt most powerfully the assurance and guarantee of God's love. The memory of those "beloved" times have sustained me and given me strength to carry on. I can assert that in such memories is nourishment enough to see me to journey's end.

But memories are not all that is needed. Although the Christian life is grounded in remembered experiences convincing to the mind and soul of a believer; this ground is not sufficient in and of itself. Memories are sweet nothings unless they lead us to the development of a life of faith. Faith is not the same as certainty, and to walk or journey in faith is not to be carried along by such an overwhelming experience of God that one cannot deny or question it. Faith is the ability to believe without seeing, to continue the journey when all seems lost or hopeless. Faith looks back to memory when the "cannibals of self-doubt" encamp about the soul, but it also gives one the strength to walk in the cold, despairing darkness as if surrounded by bright, warm and inviting light.

And so it is that God invites us to partake in the journey of faith.
From a garden called Eden to a new city called Jerusalem.
From the city of Ur to a camp under the glittering stars of Canaan.
From Pharoah's yoke of slavery to a land flowing with milk and honey.
From Bethlehem's straw-filled cradle to a terrifying cross and on to shout an Easter "Alleluia."
From an upper room filled with the Spirit of God, through the centuries of change and growth, faithfulness and failure, to where you are today with your local church.⁴

The metaphor of the Christian life as journey has survived through the years because it allows one to see the positive and negative aspects of Christian existence. Christians believe they are on a journey to some place - to a place they want to go, whether it is called heaven, nirvana or union with God. They also realize that the journey demands personal sacrifice, not only at the beginning, but also along the way. Although there may be many hardships, Christians believe that in the end the hardships and sacrifices will be counted small compared to the joy of reaching journey's end.
One word for "journey's end" is home. Home is a warm word, conjuring up images of love between father, mother and children. We see our families, the house(s) we lived in, the pets we played with, the cars we rode around in. We sense again the scents of our childhood - food being prepared and filling the home with wonderful smells, the muskiness of the basement, the water-laden air in the garden after a summer's rain. We hear anew the sounds and voices of the past, unheard in years - a baby brother or sister crying in the night, a mother calling out for us to come home to supper, conversations with family and friends replay in our minds. We remember childhood, the good and the bad, but mostly the good. And even though Thomas Wolfe told anyone who would hear years ago that "you can't go home again," we try to do just that. The view most have of home is an idealistic one, and this "rose-colored" vision finds its way into our literature, films and even our pop songs. Bing Crosby once sang:

I'll be home for Christmas, you can count on me.
We'll have snow and mistletoe, and presents round the tree.
Christmas Eve will find me, where the love light gleams.
I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.

This song was a big hit with GI's in World War II because so many of them were away from home for the first time - just young kids absent from home at Christmas time. Society was less mobile at this time, and a psychic nerve was touched by this song that is vibrating still, forty years later. This song has remained a favorite of many because it speaks a truth. All desire to go home, to be home in one way or another (and not just at Christmas time either).

What is it about being home that attracts, that fills the heart with such warm feelings? What does home promise us?

Home is where we find the peace, security and love we need so much. In his poem, "The Death of the Hired Man," Robert Frost says:

Home is the place where,
when you have to go there,
they have to take you in.5

Now this is a pretty slim definition of home, but it is truthful. Home is where you are accepted, no matter who you have become, or when you decide to show up, or what you have done. Home is where people love you, care about you, and where they have to "take you in." There is a hunger in each of us for this kind of home. There is a restlessness for such a place. Many see their childhood home in this vein and try their entire lives to recover the past, to recapture a home that probably never existed as whole or as good as it does in their minds. But this doesn't keep many from trying. After all, it is the "feeling of homelessness [which] testifies that there must be a home somewhere.6

Humans are dreamers of perfection. We have an image in our minds of the way home should be. This image is so firmly fixed that we can never shake it, and we are never satisfied when it is only partially met. Given this, one might very well ask where home is, or even if home exists at all.

It is my contention that for Christians home is a place that exists not only at the end of our faith journey, but also in the midst of our travel. Further, it can be posited
that the journey itself can serve as home enough. This is especially true when we allow God to journey with us and allow ourselves to become part of a community of travelers. Christians must realize that to be successful in their travels, they need to seek community with other sojourners. They also need to minister to those they meet along the road, for this is part of what all Christians are called to do. Further it is essential that one partakes of the benefits of community, including the food it offers through participation in worship, fellowship and the sacraments.

While all sojourners are called to ministry in one way or another, certain individuals are called to specialized ministries. These people serve as storytellers, the "living reminders" as Nouwen calls them, to the community. This remembering is done through their ministries of word, sacrament and order.

The metaphors for these particular travelers have varied over the years with the image of servant being predominant. This image was replaced in the minds of many clergy by a growing sense of ministry as profession - the storyteller becomes entertainer and star performer. There is a need to recover the positive aspects of a servant calling, with, however, a realization that servanthood alone is an inadequate metaphor for clergy and laity. It is my feeling the dominant motif for the minister on the journey should be friend, fellow traveler, perhaps even tour guide.

This paper will examine these views and will provide more detail on how these metaphors function in my life as well as in the life of the church.
My Story

Come, my friend!
Tell me your story,
I will tell you mine.
And we'll drink a toast
To God who loves us,
To Emmanuel, God with us.
We'll share our story
Of a Christ who died
And lives with us,
And how we live in him.
Come, my friend! L'chaiam!'

Rolling Back the Curtains: How personal experiences and memories affect theology.

Roll back the curtains of memory now and then.
Show me where you brought me from,
and where I could have been.
Remember I'm human and sometimes forget,
So remind me, remind me, dear Lord.

The knowing and claiming of the past is crucial to a knowledgeable understanding of the present. As one author put it: "there are places we all come from -- deep-rooty-common places-- that make us who we are. And we disdain them or treat them lightly at our peril. We turn our backs on them at the risk of self-contempt." I realize I have rebelled against much that was taught me in my formative years. But I also know that, even in rebellion, I have never been free of the past's influence upon me. My past has brought me to where I am now, and as I enter the future I know I will always be influenced (both positively and negatively) by what I have already gone through.

At 11:35 p.m. on November 9, 1961, I was born in the King's Daughter Hospital in Shelbyville, KY. Although I was the third child born in my family, I was the first to survive. An older brother and sister died shortly after their births. Edward lived for two days; Pamela lived for exactly sixteen seconds. My mother recalls the doctor counting off the seconds as Pamela lived her brief life. I believe this sound haunts her still, and I can recall vivid images from my childhood concerning this story.

Perhaps because of my siblings untimely deaths, and my parents strong desire to have children; I have always felt wanted. Even when my parents' divorce shattered my illusions of family and church, I continued to know and feel my mother's love. And this love has been central to my understanding of what family and church should be.

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I grew up in Bloomfield, KY, population 1100 (Bloomfield's only claim to fame being that it is the site of the World Championship Tobacco Spitting Contest - current record about 40 feet). Bloomfield was and is a small farming community nestled in the rolling hills of the outer bluegrass region of the state.

My family became involved in a local church about the time I entered second grade, and from then on my life became focused upon religious experiences and activities. We attended church every time the doors were opened – up to five services a week, each of which could run two or three hours in length.

My early religious development centered around my experiences in the Church of God (Cleveland, TN). This church is pentecostal, fundamentalist, and legalistic. Pentecostal churches emphasize the importance of the gifts of the Spirit, particularly speaking in tongues. Services tend toward informality and emotionalism. Fundamentalists believe in a quite rigid interpretation of scripture. The first statement in the Church of God's Declaration of Faith is "We believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible." 

This mechanistic understanding of divine inspiration leads to a very literalistic reading of the text. Premillenialism concentrates heavily upon the interpretation of scriptures concerning the Second Coming of Christ, and much time is spent teaching people concerning the events preceeding and following the Rapture event. Needless to say Biblical prophecy was stressed. The church's teachings and doctrines were legalistic in that they were full of specific do's and don't's. Certain activities (attending movies, swimming with the opposite sex, dancing, and women wearing men's clothing - i.e. pants) were forbidden through the "Practical Teachings" of the church.

H. Richard Niebuhr in his volume Christ and Culture outlines various ways in which Christianity has understood the relationship between Christ and culture. There are two primary views; one which sees Christ and culture in oppositional terms, and one which views Christ and culture as being more or less in harmony. Niebuhr further divides these two categories into five distinct views: "Christ against culture," "The Christ of culture," "Christ above culture," "Christ and culture in paradox," and "Christ the transformer of culture." Although Niebuhr posits that none of these views contains the definitive "Christian" answer as to how Christ and culture are related, these views can help one interpret how various individuals and congregations see this dilemma.

Given these perspectives it is apparent that the Church of God of my youth fits into the "Christ against culture" paradigm. This view asserts the sole authority of Christ and rejects absolutely any claims culture attempts to make upon an individual. This view was the position of the early church, and since the Church of God often sees itself as a back to New Testament Christianity movement, this view is it's own as well. Sin and evil are seen as being transmitted through society and culture (hence the Church of God's legalistic, anti-cultural "Practical Teachings), and even the church is seen as being a fallen institution (Many members of the Church of God explicitly reject the idea

4 Neibuhr, p. 231.
5 Niebuhr, p. 45.
that other denominations - from the "mainstream churches" like the United Methodists and Presbyterians to, and especially including, the Roman Catholic Church - are "Christian." 6

Another way of viewing congregations, and in particular the church of my youth, is provided by James Hopewell in Congregations. Hopewell spends a great deal of time in stressing how each individual and every congregation has their own story and world view. Basing his work upon the four forms of literature - comedy, romance, tragedy and irony, Hopewell comes up with four distinct categories of world view. 7 These categories are canonic, charismatic, gnostic and empiric. The charts in Appendix I show how these categories are differentiated.

The Charismatic world view is the category which best describes the church of my youth. As seen in the charts, this view places an emphasis upon the Spirit (Baptism of the Holy Ghost a third step in the salvation process), recognition of God's blessings (seen through the gifts of the Spirit), a theology which includes a demonology (I have attended a service where demons have been "cast out." ), and premillenialism. Hopewell quotes two people who are typical of this world view. The first person stated that she "wanted Jesus to be my Lord and not just my Savior." Going on she said:

Salvation is wonderful, but there was just something missing. I wanted very earnestly to do God's will. I wanted to glorify him. I realized that there was a deeper depth where I could get into the Lord. I hungered and thirsted for this. 8

This woman illustrates the feeling many charismatic or pentecostal people have. That is, they look for something more than what the ordinary church has to offer. Very often this "something" is categorized as being "deeper," and it often entails emotional experiences. This view will often lead to a kind of elitism where other churches are condemned or seen as not being wholistic in their ministry. Hopewell quotes Oral Roberts, who, like many in this world view, look upon conventional Christianity with disdain:

Words, words, words, we're sick of words. We've heard your theologies. We've listened to your sermons. Will you please now give us a demonstration? We want to see. Show us. 9

Hopewell's and Niebuhr's categories have helped me to objectively see my early faith development in the context of other viewpoints. The two categories I have mentioned do a fairly good job of summarizing the religious views and beliefs of the church of my childhood and adolescence. Naturally, these beliefs and views made their marks upon my religious and faith development. Early on I saw God as being a God of law, of demands, and I felt the Christian life should be concerned only with issues of

6 Niebuhr, p. 61.
8 Hopewell, p. 76.
9 Hopewell, pp. 76-77.
scriptural and personal petitism. I was very much sheltered from the world during my formative years. To say that I was in a shell is an understatement. I was not allowed to participate in any extra-curricular activities, and it seems most of my time outside of school was taken up by church. I did not resent this at the time because I sincerely enjoyed the church. I excelled in the activities there, and I was involved in almost every aspect of church activity at one time or another. This involvement was only heightened when my father felt the calling to be a minister and subsequently worked as an evangelist and local pastor.

The first and most dramatic challenge to my faith came when my father committed adultery with a woman in the church, left the ministry, and divorced my mother and by extension my brother and myself. The very foundations of my belief were shaken. After all, I wondered, how can anyone be a Christian if my father, my role model and guide, failed in his attempt to be one. I came to see the church as being populated with hypocrites only out to make themselves look better.

My mother, brother and myself moved back to Bloomfield and started to pick up the pieces. For the longest time it was as if my father had died - he did not visit, write or call, and I mourned his passing with my brother. After my parent's divorce my activity in the church declined over time to the point that when I went away to college it was at a zero level. I still had certain beliefs and ideas about God, but I could no longer bring myself to attend church. I can recall long theological discussions with friends, but these did not bring me to a realization of the need to be in a community of faith.

It was not until my Junior year of college that I began to realize the emptiness and loneliness I felt inside my soul. I came to see that there was a void in my life that only God could fill, and so I renewed my religious journey. I began by looking at different expressions of faith (from Mormonism to to the para-church campus groups like Crusade for Christ and The Navigators), but I did not find at first a place I could call home.

It was during this time that I was introduced to and began attending the Newman Center (the Roman Catholic Church on university campuses) with a friend. In the beginning I thought I had found a home. I studied and worshipped and grew in faith, in no small part due to Father Paul Prabell and Sister Clara Fehringer (the directors of the Center). But I found myself, in the end, dissatisfied with many of the teachings and views of the Catholic Church. After two years at the Newman Center I was no closer to a home than when I began.

It was only after I became involved at the Wesley Foundation that I began to feel I had found a place to call home. My work there gradually increased, I became more and more involved in the life of the Center, and I spent a great deal of time working through the doctrinal standards and teachings of the church. The United Methodist Church seemed to encompass the best of both my experiences and the beliefs of the Church of God and the Roman Catholic Church.

**Answering the Call: My calling into ministry.**

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 1 Peter 2: 21
As I became increasingly active at the Wesley Foundation, my spiritual awareness deepened, and for the first time since early adolescence I began to feel the stirrings of God's spirit actively working in my life and calling me to further work in the church.

I spoke with Rev. Mark Girard, the director of the Wesley Foundation, and he prompted me to look further at the United Methodist Church, its teachings and doctrines. He also helped me search out my feelings concerning Christian occupations, and I was led by my work and by the Spirit to an understanding that I might be called to the ministry.

To say the least, this was not a desired feeling at the time. I had worked for over six years preparing myself for doctoral studies in Social Psychology. In the fall of 1984 and spring of 1985, I had spent well over $500.00, and countless hours in applying to Graduate schools. I did not really want to seriously consider the ministry. But I could not ignore the feeling I had, and so I went with a young woman, who was also considering ministry, on an exploration of ministry at Drew Theological School. I don't know why we picked Drew; it was over 700 miles away, but we did. We drove for 14 hours each way in order to attend a 24-hour convocation on ministry. Part of me was hoping that this might prove my new sense of calling wrong.

This was not to be the case. I cannot recall a 24 hour period more exhilarating and filled with possibilities. I fell in love with the people and the campus, but more importantly I came to feel at this visit that my life's goal tipped from being a social psychologist to being a minister. The Chapel service was one of the most inspiring I have ever attended, the sermon moved me, and as the last song was sung I felt as if I belonged at Drew, studying for the ministry.

These experiences did not, however, lead me to immediately drop all in order to pursue my newly-found vocation. I struggled deeply with this for the next year. In many ways I was like Jonah in that I knew I was called to a task, and yet I tried my best to do anything but that to which I was called. I received an offer of a complete tuition scholarship and $5000 assistantship and fellowship to attend Miami of Ohio. I accepted this at first, thinking I could always pursue ministry if this did not work out. But as the spring and summer progressed I came to realize social psychology no longer drew me, that it would not be a fulfilling and enriching work, and that, as an old musical number attests, my arms were too short to box with God.

This realization prompted my going to Drew and subsequent work in local UMC’s. The past four years have been some of the most challenging and educational years of my life. My sense of calling has been confirmed, but at the same time I have been pulled away from the more legalistic and constrictive view of God, the Church, and religious life. I feel this is good. I like being challenged, and although there are times when the challenges are difficult to meet, I would not trade them for anything.

I have been greatly influenced by three ministers in my life. These are my father, Mark Girard and Bill McElwee. I learned something different from each of them, sometimes from positive experiences; other times from negative experiences.

From my father I learned much about dedication and hard work. There is no doubt that my father was, at least for much of his life in the church, very dedicated. The fact that he held down a full-time job which required two to three hours of commuting
time and pursued a vocation in the ministry, speaks to his dedication, as well as to his tendency to overwork and overextend himself.

This tendency probably contributed much to the decline of my parents' marriage and their subsequent divorce. As such, it should point out to me the need to pull in the reins at times and slow down. Burn-out is too present a danger in the ministry for a pastor to actively encourage its presence by constantly "doing" and never just "being."

Another positive aspect of my father's ministry was his preaching. I learned from my father that preaching can be exciting stuff. I can remember sitting through hour-long sermons as a child and never once being bored. I can recall a sense of excitement at the prospect of going to church, especially during revival times (once or twice a year events) and campmeetings. I knew I would hear some good preaching. I now realize that much of the preaching was in fact repetitive and theologically simple, but I feel that main-line pastors could learn much about how to keep preaching exciting, or at least not sleep inducing, if they would spend a few evenings attending more charismatic churches.

Mark Girard first led me down the road to thinking critically about God, scripture, and the Christian life. For this I am in his debt. I can also say that it is primarily his work that prompted my questioning concerning a vocation in the ministry. If it were not for him, it would have been much later on, if ever, before I discovered God's call.

Bill McElwee, the senior minister at St. Mark UMC where I worked as an associate my first two years of theological school, has also been influential in my envisioning ministry. I have learned about the administrative side of pastoring from him. I have also learned that theatrics and screaming (common to pentecostal and charismatic preaching) are not necessary for effective preaching. He has helped me make the connection between theological school and the reflection that comes with it and the local church.

Bill's openness towards my work at St. Mark was a constant source of encouragement to me as I tried new types and forms of ministry. He offered support constantly without being over-bearing, and allowed me to preach and lead worship frequently. I hope that his attitude in this area will serve as a model for my ministry if I am ever in a "Senior Minister" position.

The only fault I saw with Bill's ministry has, however, to do with his position as a "Senior Minister." So much of his time was spent in administration that frequently other areas of his ministry took a back seat. While administration is important, it is not the primary task of a pastor as I see it. This primary task is much more related to the acts of caring and loving human beings, rather than spending hours behind a desk filling out reports or staring at a computer screen.

One of my favorite films is entitled Mass Appeal. It is the story of a brash young man who wants to become a priest. I feel a ready identification with Mark Dolson, who has just been ordained a deacon. The journey that Mark makes is similar to my own. Both of us have at one time left the Church, only to find that we were drawn back into it by God and God's desire for us to work in ministry through ordination.

Mark gives two sermons in the film which are illustrative of two very distinct attitudes towards the Church. The first one is a total flop. He accuses the
congregation of a variety of sins, he rakes them over the coals, and alienates himself from the people. But over the course of a few weeks some rather dramatic changes occur. Father Farley, who is assigned to work with Mark, sees an angry young man and asks him why he wants to become a priest anyway. Mark seems so full of hate, and Farley asks if he does indeed hate the people - that would seem to be the only reason for saying some of the things he says. Mark says that he doesn't hate them; he loves them. Father Farley then tells him to show the people his love.

In his second sermon, a changed Mark Dolson tells the story of why he decided to become a priest. He tells a story about his fish tank and tropical fish. In concluding this section, I quote his words, for they say much about my own decision to enter ministry and how my religious development has occurred. Mark begins to preach . . .

I had a tank of tropical fish. Someone turned up the tank heater and they all boiled. I woke up on a Friday morning and went to feed them, and there they were. All my beautiful fish floating on top. Most of them split into, others with their eyes hanging out. It looked like violence. But it was such a quiet night. And I remember wishing I had the kind of ears that could hear fish screams, because they looked as if they had suffered, and I wanted so badly to save them.

And that Sunday in church I heard that Christ had told his apostles to be fishers of men. And from then on I looked upon all the people in the church as fish. I was young, so I saw them as beautiful tropical fish, and so I knew they were all quiet screamers. The church was so quiet. I thought everyone was boiling, and I wanted the kind of ears that could hear what they were screaming about, cause I wanted to save them.

As I got older the people lost the look of tropical fish. They became catfish to me - just overdressed scavengers. So I drowned out whatever I might be able to hear, and made my world my tank, so hot that I almost split. And so now I am back listening, listening for the screams of angels.

And so it is that I am also back, listening and hoping to do my part to minister to those in need.
The Christian as Wayfaring Stranger: 
The Priesthood of All Believers

I am a poor wayfaring stranger
While traveling through this world of woe
Yet there's no sickness, toil or danger
In that bright world to which I go

I'm going there to see my father
I'm going there no more to roam
I'm only going over Jordan
I'm only going over home

I know dark clouds will gather round me
I know my way is rough and steep
Yet beauteous fields lie just before me
Where God's redeemed their vigils keep

I'm going there to see my mother
She said she'd meet me when I come
I'm only going over Jordan
I'm only going over home

My Father used to sing this song at times when he was feeling down or a little sad. The song speaks of the Christian life in terms of journeying, and it also reminds one that home is not a place that can be found on earth. The song has renewed meaning for me as I prepare for graduation and for yet another "leave-taking." My thoughts have been filled with remembrances of beginnings and endings, arrivals and departures. The old sense of homelessness I have felt at other times such as this has crept back into my psyche. The desire to be at home is strong in all Christians. Joyce Rupp, in her book Praying Our Goodbyes, has captured this feeling. She quotes Rabindranath Tagore:

Like a flock of homesick cranes
flying night and day back to
their mountain nests, let all my
life take its voyage to its eternal
home in one salutation to thee.

As stated earlier, all Christians are sojourners looking for a home. Rupp in exegeting the above poem says that "the homesick crane in us is the pilgrim who never arrives, who is always going home." And this feeling has its roots far back in the Christian experience. Paul, one of the original itinerents, writing his second letter to the

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12 Rupp, p. 63.
Corinth church gives some details concerning his future travel plans:

I shall come to you after I pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I shall stay or even spend the winter with you, so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go. For I do not wish to see you now just in passing, but I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits (II Corinthians 16:5-7).

It seems to me that here Paul sums up the human experience. People are transient; never staying long in any one place. This is especially true for our society today. Likewise, on the journey of faith, there are short pauses for reflection and growth; time to put down a few tentative roots; but then as often as not one has to pull up stakes and move on. It's just the way of things.

But the motif of being on a journey predates a decision to follow Christ. The biblical story of the "prodigal son" is an apt illustration of this. The prodigal's journey began when he left home, not just when he started his return trip. And scripture states in no uncertain terms that all are prodigals, separated from God by sinfulness. As Laura Smit writes, "We are runaway children, estranged from the God who loves us and wants us." For this reason, we are told, Christ came into the world. Ephesians 1: 9-10 reads, "For God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which is set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." In this respect then, it is evident that God desires a homecoming, a reunion with us. Smit goes on to say, "We are promised acceptance back home. We can get back on speaking terms - even on hugging and laughing terms - with Dad [or Mom] again."

Walter Brueggeman makes a similar point in his text The Bible Makes Sense. He starts by talking about covenants, but then he moves on to speak of how we can become children of God. In summary he states that:

1) God is a God of covenants, God wants to covenant with us, and any covenant with God is a covenant in community.

2) This covenant community gives its members new identities and destinies; it provides us with a reorientation of all our existing loyalties.
3) God works in this community through Jesus Christ in order to empower us to become children of God - God gives us a new status. Slaves become sons and daughters of God. Orphans become the adopted children of God - sons and daughters in their own right.

4) Sons and daughters have a future, thus, hope in a hopeless world.

5) Sons and daughters have a vocation - they are called to a new work, a work identified with God's own work.

6) God's own work is reconciliation, which entails:
   a) the ordering of the family of faith into an united family.

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13 Smit, p. 306.
14 Smit, p. 306.
b) an action of solidarity with the "little ones" in society - working to empower the powerless.
c) a radical address to public institutions which may enslave or estrange persons in addition to individual acts of charity.
d) a concern not only for individuals, but for all of "God's good earth."  

Bruggemann carefully fine-tunes liberation theology in his outline of how one becomes a child of God. While identification with the poor and weak is important, it is also plain that all people are poor and weak in one sense or another. All are slaves in today’s world; slaves to money, career, family, education, etc. Likewise, all experience the sense of being an orphan, of being alone, out of place, deserted. The feeling of being in exile is as strong today as it was when the people of Jerusalem sat besides the waters of Babylon and wept in remembering Zion.

This point - that all are slaves or orphans - is illustrated rather clearly in the Zacchaeus story. "Zacchaeus was surely an orphan, alienated from the family of God," states Bruggemann. He had allowed himself to become enslaved to various other gods. Yet Jesus spoke to him, called out to him; just as he does to all the enslaved and orphaned people today, regardless of their social status, wealth or class. All are called to become children of God. The truth is that "we are God's. Despite both our infantile incontinence and our adolescent rebellions, God claims us. God welcomes us home, as parents joyfully receive a long-awaited infant and also as a father staring down the road sights the figure of his humbled, broken son.

And I will also add that God awaits our return as one who anxiously awaits the moment of meeting with a best friend from the past. Steve Chapin used to sing a song that says, "Old friends they mean much more to me than the new friend. Cause they can see where you are, and they know where you've been." God is my oldest friend - a friend to me even before I knew God’s name or that such a being existed. Being a friend, God desires reunion with us, and in this reunion one finds fellowship in being the people of God. As I Peter 2: 9-10 says,

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who has called you out of darkness into the marvelous light. At one time you were no people, but now you are God's people; at one time you did not know mercy, but now you have received mercy."

II Corinthians 5: 17-19 develops this idea as well when it states that “When anyone is joined to Christ, he or she is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. All this was done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into friends and gave us the task of making others God's friends also. Our message is that God was making all humankind his friends through Christ.”

\[16 \text{ Brueggemann, p. 127.} \]
\[17 \text{ Brueggemann, p. 135.} \]
\[18 \text{ Smit, p. 314.} \]
These two passages speak of the ministry of reconciliation, which first of all is God’s work for us. Paul writes primarily not about “the reconciliation of people with one another but [about] their reconciliation with God.”¹⁹ Now the gracious act of God in reconciling humankind with God’s self through the gift of Christ naturally entails a response on the part of humanity. As Ernest Best states, people’s “reconciliation with one another should then follow.”²⁰ This reconciling response takes form as ministry to others, and specifically for laity this is known as the general ministry.

The general ministry is the primary form of ministry apart from which no other Christian ministry can be described. The general ministry is the foundation upon which all other ministry is built.²¹

This ministry is doing Christ’s work, work to which all God’s people are called, not just clergy. II Corinthians 12: 4-6 reads, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one." As the Disciplinestates "there is but one ministry in Christ, but there are diverse gifts and evidence of God’s grace in the Body of Christ," and every Christian as a child of God is called to ministry in one form or another.²²

What does it mean to be a child of God called into ministry? First and foremost, it is to identify with the reconciling work of God.²³ This reconciliation is between God and humanity, and humans in relationship. It entails uniting the church, the body of Christ, which is severely and sinfully divided into small denominational pieces. Reconciliation also involves empowering those with no power at all; those at the bottom of the scale. It means being in solidarity with the "little ones" of today’s world²⁴, just as Jesus was in solidarity with the weak, the outcast, and the poor of his own day.

The work of reconciliation must challenge institutions that enslave and estrange the little ones of our time. It means standing up to these hierarchical towers of power and bringing down their walls. And finally, it is being concerned with how these same institutions have abused our world - the good gift of God to us.

All of these grandiose ideas and plans are based upon accepting the premise that power is not found in traditional, coercive outlets. "True power" is found through giving up all claims to strength and identifying totally with those who suffer.²⁵ In this way one becomes like Christ, and sees with new eyes things the world misses due to spiritual blindness. It then becomes clear that it is not the powerful Son of God,

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²⁰ Best, p. 58.
²² The Discipline, p. 106.
²³ Brueggemann, p. 130.
²⁴ Brueggemann, p. 130.
²⁵ Brueggemann, p. 131.
Messiah of the ages, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who saves us, but that salvation comes by way of a suffering servant who was spat upon, beaten, scourged, spurned by all, and crucified. Through identification and solidarity with the suffering, transformation of people's lives and the world can occur.

This abstract identification with Christ and the suffering will lead Christians into concrete forms of ministry. Part IV of the Discipline deals with "The Ministry of All Christians." In the section entitled "The Churches," the covenanting nature of God is discussed, with specific mention of the new covenant made with humanity through Christ. This becomes the ground of our hope and summons the Church to engage in ministry. This ministry is done through both witness by word and deed, and it "affirms the worth of all humanity and the value of interrelationship in all of God's creation" (Par. 103). The mission and ministry of the Church includes worship, fellowship, work toward unity, the building up of disciples, the struggle for justice and peace, and the revelation of God's love to all people regardless of who they are or what they have done. The ministry of Christ's love through us is the heart of Christian ministry.

Ministry in the Christian church is derived from the ministry of Christ, the ministry of the Father through the Incarnate Son by the Holy Spirit. It is ministry bestowed upon and required of the entire church. All Christians are called to the ministry, and theirs is a ministry of the people of God within the community of faith and in the world.

The Discipline asserts that "all Christians are called to minister wherever Christ would have them serve and witness in deeds and words that heal and free" (Par. 105). This ministry is a gift of God's grace and a call to continual service - a call originating the baptism of an individual into the Church. Theodore Eastman tells us that baptism incorporates one into the Christian community "whose purpose is to bring its members to spiritual maturity. It also prepares and supports and commissions the recipient for ministry to all the world and entry into the priesthood of all believers."²⁶

The Discipline makes a similar point when stating: "Baptism is followed by nurture and the consequent awareness by the baptized of the claim to ministry in Christ placed upon their lives by the Church."²⁷ Baptism also gives our journeying a sense of purpose.

Through baptism, God tells us that history is headed somewhere. We are now between the river of Eden and the river of the heavenly city; but we are not wandering aimlessly. We are moving from one to the other. God has a purpose and pursues it relentlessly. In the end, that purpose will be accomplished. In this assurance we have hope and life.²⁸

Before moving on to what the ministry of all Christians is about, it is necessary to speak to the issue of ordained or representative ministry. The section which follows does just that.

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²⁷ The Discipline, p. 114.

Representative Ministry and the Minister as Friend

God calling yet! I cannot stay; My heart I yield without delay; Vain world, farewell, from thee I part; The voice of God hath reached my heart.

And I heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me!" Isaiah 6: 8

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah 1: 4, 5

Each and every Christian is called to be a minister and to be in ministry to the world. In this sense all are called to reach out and address human needs. All have been sent out to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom, both present and yet to come. All have been called to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and those in prison." All have been called to do justice, to work towards peace, and to walk humbly with the Lord our God. I could go on, but I think the picture is clear. There is a general ministry into which each Christian, by virtue of his or her accepting Christ as Savior and their baptism into the community of faith, is called. Thus, as Christians journey down the path to home, they are continually called to "service in the name of the Lord".

Representative Ministry

There are some on the pilgrimage, however, who are called to specific duties and responsibilities. The UMC defines this specialized ministry as being representative in nature. The following paragraphs in the Discipline are formative.

402. There are persons within the ministry of the baptized who are called of God and set apart by the Church for the specialized ministry of Word, Sacrament and Order.

432. Ordination is a public act of the Church which indicates acceptance by an individual of God's call to the upbuilding of the Church through the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order and acknowledgment and authentication of this call by the Christian community through prayers and the laying on of hands.

These paragraphs outline the various "broad" functions of representative or ordained ministry. The first mentioned is the specific ministry of sharing the Word of God through proclamation. In other words, the pastor tells the story - the great story

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29 Nouwen, The Living Reminder, p. 12.
30 The Discipline, p. 207.
31 The Discipline, p. 239.
found in scripture, in such a way that it relates dynamically to individual congregants' stories. It has been said that, "Whoever can give . . . people better stories than the ones they live in is like the priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul."  

Elie Wiesel recounts a tale which shows the importance of telling the story. It concerns the great Rabbi Israel Ball Shem-tov.

The Rabbi made it his habit to go to the forest to pray when some misfortune threatened his people. He would make there an altar for himself, light a fire, and say a prayer. After this a miracle would occur and disaster would be avoided.

Later, his disciple, Rabbi Magid of Mezritch tried to emulate his teacher. He would go to the forest and say to God, "Master of the Universe, listen to me! I don't know how to light the fire, but I can still say the prayer." And for him a miracle would also happen.

Still later, another Rabbi, Moshe-Leib of Sasov, had reason to save his people. He went to the forest and said, "I don't know how to light the fire, and I don't know the prayer, but I know this is the place and this must do." And this was enough and the miracle was accomplished.

Finally, after many years, it happened that Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn had to intercede for his people. Sitting in his chair at home, head in his hands, he spoke out to God, "I am unable to light the fire, and I don't know the prayer; further, I can't even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story and this must be enough." And it was.

This "giving of stories" is done through both preaching and teaching. First, let's examine preaching. For better or worse, preaching is perhaps the one activity of the minister that everyone in the congregation observes regularly. Preaching must be relevant and meaningful to individual congregants. Scripture can be made alive through an invigorating sermon, or it can be beaten to death by a heavy-handed, dull or boring presentation. Needless to say, the former is more desired than the latter.

But preaching is not the only form of proclamation. It is also essential that ministers engage in teaching. The Discipline includes several aspects of the teaching office in its description of the responsibilities and duties of a Pastor. These include giving oversight to the total educational program of the church, instructing candidates for membership, and the selection, training and deployment of lay leadership. But above and beyond these, I feel it is necessary for an ordained minister to teach and to teach constantly in a local church, particularly Sunday School classes where possible and especially in Bible Studies.

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34 The Discipline, pp. 244-246.
In conjunction with this teaching ministry, a minister should be at least one person in the church who is able to effectively communicate the Christian faith to others. He or she should be trained in an understanding of Church doctrine and polity. Further, a minister should be a person seriously and continually engaged in study and reflection of the Bible. As such persons, ministers should exercise the teaching office in such a way as to see that the members of a congregation are given opportunities to learn and to grow in knowledge and faith of God and God's word. I feel a most effective way of doing this is to encourage the development of small group ministries, particularly Bible study groups, encounter groups, and Covenant groups. These kind of groups have the potential to revitalize a local church and our entire denomination.

The representative ministry also includes the interpretation of the sacraments to the congregation. The pastor needs to see that the sacraments are understood and properly administered. This does not mean a pastor is the only one who should ever administer baptism or eucharist to the community. My own theology is such that any one of the "priesthood of all believers" has the ability and right to celebrate the sacraments. The idea that only ordained clergy can say the words of consecration or institution is a restriction imposed on the sacrament of Holy Communion not originally intended.

The interpretation of the sacraments to the church can be done through exercising the teaching ministry mentioned above. All too often laity have little or no comprehension of what the sacraments mean, and they perceive them as being of little value. In fact, many may see the sacraments as a chore or duty, something to be endured, an activity that adds too many minutes to an already overlong and boring service. Pastors should struggle to overcome such denigrative perspectives through teaching and preaching.

Last of all, the pastor is one who sees that the church life and program is administered and ordered. He or she needs to be an effective administrator, one able to view the entire church and sense its strengths and weaknesses, and is then able to challenge the congregation to improve upon its programming, administration, or attitude. This entails the development, on the pastor's part, of leadership skills. The church needs pastors who are leaders. This doesn't necessarily mean a dictatorial, "I'm-going-to-do-it-all" style of leadership either. But the fact remains that "diligent pastoral leadership...[is necessary for ordering] the life of the congregation for discipleship in the world."\(^{35}\) It is "through these distinctive functions ordained ministers devote themselves wholly to the work of the Church and to the upbuilding of the general ministry."\(^{36}\)

I very much like the statement found on page 115 of the *Discipline*. This statement makes it clear that the ordained ministry, although different in some ways from the general ministry of all believers, is in no means superior to it. It states that "the ordained ministry is defined by its intentionally representative character, by its passion for the hallowing of life, and by its concern to link all local ministries with the widest boundaries of the Christian community." The *Discipline* goes on to say: "the general and representative ministries in the United Methodist Church are complementary.

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\(^{35}\) *The Discipline*, p. 223.

\(^{36}\) *The Discipline*, p. 108.
Neither is subservient to the other. I do not look upon the ordained ministry as being a more holy or sanctified branch of the general ministry. It is just one way of doing ministry for God among others. If anything ministers must remember that they are first ordained to service and not to rule. More and more I see the need for lay and clergy to engage in ministry together.

Through preaching and teaching, pastors proclaim the Word, and instruct the members of the Church as to its meaning for their lives today. The Pastor calls him- or herself and others to examine their failings through exercise of the prophetic role, but this is tempered by ministering to the needs of the people through counseling and other pastoral tasks. Pastors, like every Christian, are called to the priesthood of all believers. In fulfilling this role, pastors intercede with God through prayer for the needs of the people, the church and the world.

I feel that too much is made of the differences between clergy and lay ministry. This is particularly true in the minds of many clergy who would primarily characterize their ministry as being "set apart" rather than a representative or servant ministry. The calling of all Christians to ministry needs to be stressed, and specifically the commonalities of the two forms of ministry need to be pointed out. The bulletin in my church, for instance reads, "The ministers of this church are the members of the congregation.

My core understanding of ministry is summed up in Micah 6:8, which reads, "This is what God asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God." The similarities between this, the ten commandments and Jesus' summary of the commandments in his saying, "Love God and Love your Neighbor" point out the basic thrust of God's desires for us.

This is exactly the point H. Richard Niebuhr makes when he says that the primary purpose of the church is to increase the love of God and love of neighbor. This definition of ministry makes no distinctions between lay and clergy, and instead points all to a common understanding of what the Church should be about. But before I get too carried away with talking about ministry in general, let me address a problem the church faces at this time that needs to be examined carefully.

**Clericalism**

For at least a generation the minister has been caught in a false professionalism, one that imitates secular counterparts instead of forging an appropriate profession: that is, defining the work of one who has been called by God. The consequence of this diversion has sometimes been the creation of clergy who are entertainers in the pulpit, managers of religious organizations, consultants to spiritual practitioners, therapists for the hurting, ambitious career seekers. This perversion of the ministry cannot save a church from irrelevance or its members from meaninglessness (emphases added).

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37 The Discipline, p. 115.


39 Johnson, Pastoral Spirituality, p. 7.
A very real and present danger in the church today is the growth of what Johnson has called "false professionalism." This professionalism, as I see it, is found whenever and wherever ordained clergy begin to see themselves as the center of attention in the local church. It is seen in long discussions at annual conference meetings concerning parsonage standards and other clergy benefits. It raises its head at ministeriums and other gatherings of ministers where the work of laity is cut down or denigrated. Most importantly, however, this "false professionalism" is seen by the growth of another "ism" - clericalism.

Clericalism is an unequal division of ministry and power between laity and clergy, whereby clergy end up with most of the power and most of the ministry. It is, as one writer stated, "a caste system, a power system, in theological fog words and structures impenetrable except to the elite power caste -- those who rule the Churches: bishops, executives, clergy, professors, pet lay people." 40

To put it simply, clericalism and its antecedent, false professionalism, are sinful in that they separate clergy from laity, and even promote separation of both clergy and laity from God. When clergy are engaged in doing all or most of the ministry, their spiritual lives suffer from a lack of time to devote to solitude, reflection, prayer, etc. Likewise, laity, deprived of ministry by clericalism, can never be as close to God as they would be if given the chance to minister in Jesus' name to others.

It has already been stated that all the people of God are to be in ministry. By virtue of incorporation into Christ every Christian has a priestly work to do. Under the ministry of Jesus Christ, the great high priest, all Christians offer to God the joys and concerns of the world, all pray and make offerings on behalf of the world. 41 Kung flatly denounces clericalism and its implications by saying, "all the faithful belong to the people of God; there must be no clericalization of the Church." Kung goes further and states, "If the Church is the true people of God, it is impossible to differentiate between "Church" and "laity," as though the laity were not in a very real sense "laos." 42

The idea that the church is in actuality the "priesthood of all believers" is central. This means that all have direct access to God; that there is no further need for sacrificial offerings to be made on behalf of the people by a priest; that all are called, to one degree or another, to spread the good news; and that "every Christian is fundamentally empowered to take an active part" in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. 43

Towards Mutual Ministry

The greatest single obstacle to the genuine renewal of the church is the lack of mutuality that exists between the clergy and the laity." 44


41 Stookey, p. 39.

42 Kung, p. 169.

43 Kung, p. 485.

Moltman has stated that "the local congregation is the future of the church, and renewal [of the church depends upon] the conscious reclaiming of the gifts of the Spirit on the part of the laity." I believe this is true, and I further believe that there is a increasing need for clergy to affirm that the laity minister beside them and not separate from them. It is helpful to view clergy and laity as having different ministries rather than cate-gorizing one or the other as being a higher form of ministry above the other. This point is aptly made by Urban T. Holmes, III. In his book Spirituality for Ministry, he writes:

...I am convinced of the validity of the concept that by virtue of our baptism all Christians are called to be ministers, a concept variously described as mutual ministry, total ministry, or shared ministry. Such a notion of ministry is a source of hope for the contemporary church, but the mutual ministry is not a realistic possibility if we do not differentiate between the functions of the ordained and the lay.

Having previously spoken to the functions of the ordained minister, it is important now to consider how one makes mutual ministry not just a possibility, but a reality. First of all, mutual ministry requires laity to grow in ministry. This, however, is stifled at times by both "the unwillingness of clergy to relax their need for control," and the "unwillingness of the laity to claim and act on the gifts of ministry given them in baptism."

For their part ordained ministers need to assume, as Paul does in I Corinthians 12-14, that everyone has a gift or gifts. Next they should attempt to make the climate of the local congregation such that one would want to share his or her gift(s). Lastly, an ordained minister needs to get the laity in the congregation to become dreamers for the future, not just repositories of past memories. Without a dream or vision for the future people quickly lose hope, and a people without hope are people for whom mutual ministry has no meaning.

In his clear and concise volume Mutual Ministry, James C. Fenhagen outlines some elements that need to be built into the life of the church if the move towards mutuality is ever to succeed. These include:

- The realization that to be on a pilgrimage is of greater value than having all the answers. In this context clergy and laity are fellow pilgrims. When clergy are free of the "answer man" role, they are more able to hear.
- A system of accountability where both the ordained and lay leadership of the congregation are given feedback on the quality of the work they do.
- Opportunities for the clergy to learn from the laity at sufficient depth so as to be able to offer support in the exercise of their ministries.

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• Carefully designed and seriously pursued programs of lay theological education which is aimed at enabling laity.

• Recognition by clergy and laity that most of the crucial issues of mission are those which confront laity in the context of their daily lives, and that laity have both the credibility and the opportunity to exercise ministry in ways that clergy often do not have.\textsuperscript{48}

All this is done in order to equip those in the church - clergy and laity - in a way that both are enabled to be in ministry to the world in a more effective way. This enablement process takes time, and it involves large scale attitudinal and value adjustments. Fenhagen lists some of these as well. First, he states that "it is more important for ordained ministers in a congregation to enable others to identify and carry out their ministries than to do it themselves." He feels the best use of the skills and gifts of the minister entails "extending the ministry through others." Second, ministers must not recruit laity for ministry, but they also must offer consistent support for those in ministry. Third, Fenhagen emphasizes that "interdependence is preferable to dependence." Fourth, he stresses the need for the pastor to be authentic in his or her own faith journey. Having all the right answers is not nearly as important as being authentic in the search.\textsuperscript{49}

Mutual ministry is not a goal that is easily achieved. This is especially true given the present very "clerical" environment of the church. It is, nevertheless, essential for the church to strive for mutual ministry. Only by achieving a ministering mutuality can the church most fully utilize the gifts and graces of all its members, not just the clergy. If the church is to continue being an active and transforming agent of God's love in the world, then it must begin its own transformation towards mutual ministry.

\textbf{Minister as Friend}

This brings me to the last portion of this section - the minister as friend. There have been many different ways of viewing the ordained ministry over the years. These have included the minister as a reconciling agent of Christ, the wounded healer, an enabler, a student-teacher, and most frequently the minister as servant. I do not mean to take away from any of these models of the ordained ministry - they are all needed in order to have a holistic view. I do, however, want to propose a different understanding of the ordained ministry that helps to balance out the present concentration on ministry as servanthood.

Servanthood is not enough, or rather it is not a fully adequate view of ministry. In fact, servanthood can become rather bad for many people, especially those who are constantly striving to do more and more. John McKnight has written about the importance of building a true church community rather than a dispenser of services. It is not enough to take care of people's physical needs, to wait upon them, to provide them with food and clothing. One must be more if one is to truly follow Christ. McKnight writing on "Why \`Servanthood' is Bad" states,

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\textsuperscript{48} Fenhagen, pp. 25-26.
\textsuperscript{49} Fenhagen, p. 105.
\end{flushright}
We all know that at the Last Supper Jesus said, "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." But for mysterious reasons, I never hear the next two sentences. "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know the business of the one they serve. But I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything I learned from God." It's not right to be hung back by service and servantry. The goal is to be a friend. I'm consistently impressed by how dangerous people are who want to serve others.50

Thomas Maeder in "Wounded Healers," an article about the helping professions of psychotherapy and ministry, makes a similar point when he writes:

Something is a bit odd about people who proclaim "I want to help other people" -- the underlying assumption being that they are in a position to help and that others will want to be helped by them. Such people may be lured, knowingly or unknowingly, by the position of authority, by the dependence of others, by the image of benevolence, by the promise of adulation, or by the hope of vicariously helping themselves through helping others.51

There is little doubt that such an attitude can quickly lead one down a path of disappointment, delusion and failure.

I believe, as McKnight stated, that the goal of ministry is to be a friend, not just a servant. A friend is one who walks with you, helps share your burdens, talks to you when conversation is needed, is silent when nothing needs to be said or when solitude of the heart is desired. A friend is someone you turn to in time of need, he or she provides the shoulder to cry or lean on, and the presence of a friend makes the journey easier, even in the most difficult of times. The minister as friend parallels the model of God or Christ as friend. In being a friend, the minister truly offers the other Christ.
Welcoming the Stranger:
The Church as Inclusive Community

But let me tell you
that to approach the stranger
Is to invite the unexpected, release a new force,
Or let the genie out of the bottle.
It is to start a train of events
Beyond your control . . .

It is one thing to say, "Let the Church be the Church, and the people rejoice." It is another thing altogether to define what it means to be the Church. It must be remembered that God created the Church, sustains it and ultimately redeems it through the reconciling work of Christ. The grace of God keeps us and works through us to affect change: We do not do this alone.

The Discipline of the United Methodist Church has a rather classic but useful definition of the church.

The Church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the Sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world. (Emphases added)

Central to this definition is the understanding of the church as community. Before the word can be preached and the sacraments administered, before believers can be edified or the world redeemed; there must first be a community.

Earlier, Abraham was used as a model for the "Christian as wayfaring stranger." It is important to realize, however, that Abraham was not called to journey alone. It is easy enough to see that "Abraham was not a solitary knight of faith, but was called to be the father of a great people, a nation, a corporate body." It is perhaps more difficult to recognize that "God's call is a call into peoplehood and whenever individuals are chosen it is for the sake of the corporate call of God, not their individual blessing."

God calls us into community precisely because there is a great need for community, even if it is composed of only two people. Henri Nouwen, at a lecture in Morristown in the fall of 1988, pointed out that when Christ sent out the seventy-two, he sent them out two by two. He went on to stress that one should not go out into the world alone. "The world is too powerful for you alone. It is too strong for a single person, but maybe together you can make it, you can overcome."

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So the church exists as a community, a group of people called by God who sense the need to gather together. Having established this, however, is just half the battle. A more concise picture of the church remains to be drawn. But how can one describe the church in terms other than the purely functional ones found in definitions from the *Discipline*? One way of doing just this is through the use of metaphors.

There are a host of metaphors which have been used to describe the church, many of them biblical in nature. The most common, perhaps, envisions the church as the body of Christ, and its referent point is found in II Corinthians 12-14. Here the emphasis is less upon the functioning of the various parts of the body as it is with stressing unity. With Christ as the head, there can be no squabbling over which part of the body is most or least important. All parts are necessary and are inter-related.

Without playing down this view, the metaphors I find most helpful in describing the church are the "family of God" and the "household of faith." The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* refers to the church as "the eschatological gathering of God's people into his household, to become his 'house' and his family." Donald P. Smith affirms this as well: "Members feel that the congregation is a family that supports and cares for one another."

This perspective views the church in terms of forming of a new community or family. Old communities and families are superceded. The basic social unit no longer remains the traditional family, but becomes the gathering of the sisters and brothers in Christ. Nuclear families are then "placed always within the extended context of the church, the new family to which we owe first loyalty."

The need for the so-called "nuclear family" to be subsumed into the larger family of God was developed in a presentation Dean Thomas Ogletree made in a chapel service at Drew Theological School last year. Taking as his text, Matthew 12: 46-50, Ogletree spoke on why Christ seemed so hard on the family. This hostility may have been the result of the promotion of exclusionism, due to family groupings determining who the insiders and the strangers are, who can be accepted and who must be turned away. Christ flatly rejected this notion when stating his natural relatives were no longer family, rather his family consists of those who hear and do God's will. The household of faith/family of God replaces the "natural" family. Ogletree concluded by saying that although this does not preclude meaningful family relationships, it does mean that our "natural families" gain their meaning and significance only within the larger family of God. In this vein Erik Erikson can say:

The true saints are those who transfer the state of householdership to the house of God, becoming father and mother, sister and brother, son and daughter, to all creation, rather than to their own issue.

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If the church, the family of God, takes precedence over the natural family in part due to exclusionism, then the church must be concerned with inclusivism. The *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church, for instance, issues a mandate for inclusiveness in the life of the church (Par 524.3 and others). The church is called to be open to all people, regardless of gender, race, culture, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or any other division that separates the world into groups of "us" verses "them." Fellowship and communion in a church body is open to anyone desiring it - whether or not they necessarily mirror my own or anyone else's image of what people should be, look like, or act.

It would seem to follow naturally then that the church should reach out to all people, period. There are no ifs, ands, or buts here. This means the church must seek to minister to people of all races, to people of all creeds, to people whose lifestyles are at odds with our own, to outcasts as well as to those in positions of power. Christ has called us to "go into all the world proclaiming the gospel." Further, scripture states that "whosoever believes will have life eternal," as well as "Christ died once for the sins of the whole world." The church must reflect the inclusive and all-encompassing love and grace of God. It is only by being an open and inclusive community we can experience the fullness of God's love and mercy and grace.

One of the most poetic of American writers for me is John Steinbeck. In his introduction to *Cannery Row* he writes:

>Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, honky tonks, restaraunts and whorehouses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories, and flophouses. Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, "whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches," by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, "Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant he same thing.\(^59\)

One measure of a church is its ability to see things from a different perspective than the world. And let there be no mistaking, this church vision will seem a bit odd to outsiders. Where else but in the church, for instance, could one look at a lowly carpenter from Galilee and see the son of God, full of grace and glory? And it gets even better: A carpenter becomes the Christ, whores become saints, gamblers become martyrs, and sons of bitches become holy men. The pews of any church are filled with both kinds of people, and whether one sees hypocrites or children of God depends upon whether one sees with the eyes of Christ or with the eyes of the world.

The inclusive and open nature to which the church is called must at times be very radical. This is seen most clearly in the church's need to be forgiving, as forgiving as Jesus, who upon the cross could say, "Father forgive them." My experiences in the Church of God have shown me how quickly a church can turn its back upon one of its own (my father). And this is not limited to legalistic churches either. There are people at Mount Hope who have not spoken civilly to one another for years because of a past misunderstanding.


If the church is truly a community wherein Christ can be found, then it must possess a radical forgiveness. The call to this type of forgiveness is found in many places. Karl Barth in writing on how the German people should be treated after the holocaust, pointed out the path Christ has asked the church to take. Barth stated:

Jesus Christ is for them, unconditionally for them. He is for them exactly as he is for us. He accepts the shame that covers us when he calls us friends. If even for the best of reasons we resist and say that unconditional friendship for the Germans is too much to ask of us, then we must be careful lest the Savior's call, "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden," instead of passing through us, goes out to the Germans without applying to us at all.

He goes on to write about what Jesus might say to the Germans.

Come to me, you heartless ones, you wicked Hitler youth, you brutal SS soldiers, you vicious Gestapo villains, you sorry compromisers and collaborators, you mass men who for so long patiently and stupidly followed you so-called leader. Come to me, you guilty ones, you who share the guilt and who are now learning, and have to learn, what your deeds are worth. Come to me, I know you well, but I do not ask who you are or what you have done. I see only that you are at an end and for good or ill must begin again; I will refresh you, I will now begin again from the very beginning with you.60

The church must be willing and able to stand with such a forgiving Christ and ask God for the strength to become more like Christ in this respect. By emphasizing inclusiveness and forgiveness, the church is able to reach out to all who would seek God. The ability to see all people as neighbors is enhanced by such an attitude. H. Richard Niebuhr, in moving fashion, defines the neighbor.

He is the near one and the far one; the one beside the road I travel here and now; the one removed from me by distances in time and space, in convictions and loyalties. He is my friend, the one who has shown compassion toward me; and my enemy, who fights against me. He is the one in need, in whose hunger, nakedness, imprisonment and illness I see or ought to see the suffering servant. He is the oppressed one who has not risen in rebellion against my oppression nor rewarded me according to my deserts as individual or member of a heedlessly exploiting group. He is the compassionate one who ministers to my needs: the stranger who takes me in; the father and mother, sister and brother. In him the image of the universal redeemer is seen as in a glass darkly.61

Given all this, the church and the people in it have no choice but to "welcome the stranger." The inclusive community makes it presence known to the world not only through its witness to Christ, but through its hospitality to those both inside and outside its walls. Matthew Fox makes the very valid point that "Holiness" is a word worth retrieving" in his text Original Blessing. Recovery of the word "holiness" from misuse or even nonuse entails relating it to hospitality.(113).
Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way.\footnote{Henri J. M. Nouwen, Reaching Out, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 51.}

Hospitality needs to be cultivated as a way of life, and again Abraham is a model.

Abraham, the head of a tribe, decided to follow a God who claimed to be the only God. That made Abraham and his people strangers in their own land. They journeyed as strangers through the world. And they developed some unique ideas about responsibility to strangers because they were strangers themselves.\footnote{John McKnight, p. 40.}

The church needs to become responsible to the strangers that cross its doors. No less, however, is this true for individual Christians. There may be times when Christians need to open their homes to others. More frequently though will be the times when Christians need to show the hospitality of the heart by opening their hearts to those who are in need. Elsie Lewis has said that "opening one’s heart often means opening one’s ear for listening. Just being present may be what the grieving or lonely or even hostile person may need." While it may be that the hostile person reject our hospitality momentarily, at a later time he or she might be eager to trust our offer. In the end, "offering it may be worth the rejection. So, in a world full of strangers, this is what we can offer - an open mind, a listening ear, and a caring heart."\footnote{Elsie Lewis, Alive Now, November/December 1988, p. 25.}

This may not seem like much, but it is, especially in a world filled with closed minds, deaf ears and hardened hearts. And the church that combats these attitudes with a ministry of hospitality will find plenty of opportunities to be hospitable. It will also find that it will have to come to grips with how its activities bring it into conflict with the world. John McKnight writes:

You must struggle with all your might to reclaim the central act of Christian hospitality. You will have to fight your local hospitals. You will have to fight Humana. You will have to fight the United Way. You will have to fight the social services. They have commodified hospitality and called it a service. They have made a market of the temple. And you know what you are supposed to do then. Get ‘em out! Or bring into the church the hospitality that is at the center of understanding a relationship as a friend and not a servant. A church’s response to people without should be hospitality not service.\footnote{John McKnight, “Why ‘Servanthood’ is Bad,” The Other Side, January/February 1989, pp. 38-40, p. 40.}

This hospitality is demanding in its call for inclusiveness, as well. If God desires all to become her/his sons and daughters, then Christians must accept the fact that God would have us be sisters and brothers to each other as well.

\footnote{John McKnight, “Why ‘Servanthood’ is Bad,” The Other Side, January/February 1989, pp. 38-40, p. 40.}
An old rabbi once asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins. "Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?" one student asked. "No," said the Rabbi. "Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?" another student asked. "No," said the Rabbi. "Then when is it?" the students asked. "It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or sister there. Until then, night is still with us."  

The family of God must be open to everyone. And this is nowhere seen better than in the practice of Holy Communion. The table must be open to all, after all, there is enough for everyone. Matthew Fox, quoting Shillibeexck, makes the same point:  

Meal-sharing in fellowship, whether with notorious tax-collectors and sinners or with his friends, casual or close, is a fundamental trait of the historical Jesus. In that way Jesus shows himself to be God's eschatological messenger, conveying the news of God's invitation to all - including especially those officially regarded at the time as outcasts.

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68 Fox, p. 136.
Food for the Journey:  
The Church as Waystation

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2: 46-47

What can Christians do to prepare themselves for their journey of faith? What nourishment can the church provide for the sojourner? Where does one find food for the journey?

The church has provided various means for feeding the wandering Christian. These include means offered only by the church in the context of its weekly gatherings as well as the knowledge needed to use other sources during the week. This section specifically lifts up the sacraments, worship, solitude and silence, and prayer as ways of obtaining sustenance for the journey.

The Sacraments - Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Baptism

The sacraments are important for Christians to observe because they have been ordained by Christ Jesus. They are two in number - Baptism and the Eucharist, and in partaking of them we allow a channel of grace from God to enter into our lives. The sacraments are a sign of God's love and grace towards us, and means by which God strengthens, confirms, and deepens the relationship between God's self and Christians. The sacraments are signs that point to a reality, though not seen, is nevertheless very real. By this I mean that the ordinary elements of water, bread and juice become extraordinary channels through which God can work.

All Christians should partake of the sacraments. Hans Kung makes an interesting and correct point when he states in his book The Church that there can be no church without baptism or the Lord's Supper.69

In baptism we are initiated into, grafted onto, the body of Christ in this world - the church. Through baptism we enter "into the household of faith;" baptism is the sacrament of entrance.70 Further, it is a sign of our acceptance of the grace of God, as well as evidence of a new birth through Jesus Christ.

Baptism is not, however, just a human activity of sprinkling or pouring with or immersing with water. Baptism is more than confession, and it goes beyond the mere repetition of certain key words or phrases by a minister. Baptism is first and foremost an activity of God.71 And there is more. By being baptized, one becomes a "member

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69 Kung, pp. 266 & 275.
70 Suchocki, p. 148.
of the community

The communal aspect of baptism is most important, for in the community of faith we find strength, support, concern, compassion and healing. Baptism not only connects us with people in the present, but it also connects us with the past, with the apostolic community gone by. Baptism also conveys our openness to Christ, and it links the future of each Christian with the mediating work of Christ. In conclusion, baptism provides the grounding for all the rest of the Christian journey. Without baptism, Christians have already missed a central means of God's grace and care for us.

The Lord's Supper

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
Let every soul be Jesus' guest;
Ye need not one be left behind,
For God hath bidden all mankind.

William Willimon in Sunday Dinner writes of how our various names for the Lord's Supper describe what takes place during our celebration of this event. He states:

We call it the Lord's Supper, reminding ourselves of that primal experience of table fellowship which was enjoyed by Jesus and his disciples and continued in the church. We call it Holy Communion, reminding ourselves that in this eating and drinking together we are in the presence of Christ and our brothers and sisters in Christ. We call it the Eucharist, coming from the Greek word Eucharistein, meaning "to give thanks." This reminds us that the Lord's Supper is an act of joy and thankfulness for the work of God in Jesus Christ. We have also called this meal the Mass. This designation comes from the words at the end of the Lord's Supper as it was celebrated in the medieval church, "You are sent out," (Ite Missa Est). In the Mass, Christians receive the nourishment and sustenance they need in order to go out into the world to do the work that they are supposed to do.

The Lord's Supper is a sign of the love of Christ towards us, as well as a service of remembrance of the actions of Jesus Christ on our behalf. The presence of Christ is with us at the breaking of the bread and drinking of the cup, and this same presence enters anew into the lives of those partaking of this sacrament. This is not just a meal of remembrance - long on memories, but short on the ability to affect real change in the heart of the person communing. Kung states "In the Lord's Supper I encounter not merely bread and wine, not merely body and blood, but the Lord acting in the present time in the community and thus in me." (emphasis added)

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72 Kung, p. 273.
76 Kung, p. 288.
The sacrament of communion is extremely important to me and my Christian faith. It readily calls to mind the sacrifice Christ made for me, and to which he also calls me. Some of my most memorable moments in my journey have faith have been at the table of fellowship which the Eucharist provides. I know that the Lord's Supper has brought me closer to God and to other people. It can and should be a highlight in worship, and it should be practiced frequently be all Christians - at every gathering of Christians in worship if possible.

It is absolutely essential that the practice of open communion be maintained and proclaimed in the church, for it serves as a model for the inclusive church that we should, but so often fail to, be. Much needs to be said in many local churches about being open to those outside the community, especially those the church labels "unacceptable." As Wesley's song above tells us, sinners are welcome at the gospel feast. Karl Barth likewise has said, "Christians who refuse to sit with their Master at the table of publicans and sinners, are not Christians at all." 77

Like Baptism, the Lord's Supper is also an unifying event, where "the many are one in their mutual participation in the sacrament." 78 As the communion ritual and Bible state, "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one." Communion unites us with each other and with Jesus Christ, and these "ties that bind" help us in our struggles to "keep on keeping on" in the faith.

Kung summarizes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper by delineating the various ways the Lord's Supper works through the human conception of time. The Lord's Supper, in looking back to the past, is a meal of recollection, remembering and thanksgiving for what has gone on before. For the present, the Lord's Supper serves as a meal of fellowship and covenant. The perspective of the future sees the Lord's Supper as a trial run, an anticipation of "the eschatological meal of the Messiah." 79 Through participation in the Lord's Supper we can see where we have come from, where we are going, and who it is that walks with us.

Worship

"In our worship, we retell and are held accountable to the story about what God is doing with us in Christ. All ministry can be evaluated by essentially liturgical criteria: How well does this act of ministry enable people to be with God." 80

Worship is the central act of the Christian community. During worship believers come together to pray, sing, and listen. But for some worship is anything but an invigorating experience, and for perhaps even more it is an increasingly infrequent event. The church needs to recapture the sense of excitement that worship can offer those attending. It needs to make the worship experience meaningful for people, so

77 Willimon, p. 51.
78 Suchocki, p. 148.
79 Kung, pp. 283-284.
they will see the need and benefit of coming together on a weekly basis. Abraham Joshua Heschel points out perhaps the significant problem for today's church. He feels much of religion and ritual has become meaningless and void. He writes:

Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, stupid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit, when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion - its message becomes meaningless.\(^{81}\)

Worship, and religion, should be anything but irrelevant, dull, oppressive and stupid. It should touch the hearts of those attending, and give them strength to get through the next week's trials and temptations. Worship should put people into contact with the faith of the past, the hope for the future, and the way of love in the present.

Worship should be the time when it is most apparent that the congregation is in fact the "family of God." Donald P. Smith, writing in *Congregations Alive* states:

Frequently the sense of being a family is obvious to the visitor on a Sunday morning in warm relationships which are expressed within the worship service and in times of fellowship before and after it. Laughter, friendly conversation, earnest dialogue, the clasping of hands, the catching of the eye of someone across the room.\(^{82}\)

Smith goes on to detail how worship can nurture the family of God through the singing of choruses, symbolic acts of partnership, the sharing of joys and concerns, active lay participation in worship, the development of an effective worship committee, and preaching that is inspirational and relevant to the congregation's life.\(^{83}\) If a congregational worship experience includes these things, then it is very doubtful that the experience provided will be meaningless. Indeed, it will nourish people throughout the week.

### Solitude, Silence and Prayer

In *Reaching Out*, Nouwen outlines three movements each person needs to make in order to lead a good spiritual life. These are the movements "from loneliness to solitude," "from hostility to hospitality," and "from illusion to prayer." Since the issue of hospitality has already been addressed, the other two movements will now be examined.

There is no question that life is akin to a storm, tossing people to and fro like so many tiny boats out during a hurricane warning. Distractions are the norm. Noise surrounds us and has become such a part of our lives we have even coined the phrase "background noise." Urban Holmes makes this point when he says, "Many persons . . . live in a fairly constant state of noise, with their unresolved past and uncertain present.

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\(^{81}\) Jones, p. 42.


\(^{83}\) Smith, pp. 70-77.
breaking in upon them. They lack a still center and it is only for such a quiet point that we can listen attentively.  

Many are constantly surrounded by both other people and their material possessions. Their material and physical successes are obvious, but a loneliness haunts their lives. Nouwen points out the benefit, even the necessity of cultivating a life where solitude can replace loneliness. A solitude of the heart is a receptive mode of being where we both empty and open ourselves so that God can enter into dialogue with us.

Nouwen plays up the importance of a life of prayer as well. He points out three "rules" which need to be observed in order to develop one’s prayer life to its fullest potential. These include contemplative reading of scripture, meditation upon the word through silence, and the utilization of a spiritual guide whom one can trust and turn to for direction. Nouwen states that "without the Bible, without silent time and without someone to direct us, finding our own way to God is very hard and practically impossible."

But if we practice these rules, our lives will be enriched immeasurably. John Wesley devoted a period of time each day to being alone with God and the scripture. In doing so he found the active presence of God nurturing and teaching him.

I sit down alone,  
Only God is here;  
In his presence I open,  
I read his books;  
And what I thus learn,  
I teach.

We too can echo Wesley's sentiments through the practice of meditation, silence and contemplative prayer. Through this type of praying, we can obtain the nurture and sustenance we need. Rabbi Harold Kushner has said,

"We can't pray that God will make our lives free of problems; this won't happen, and it is probably just as well . . . But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered. They discover that they have more strength, more courage than they ever knew themselves to have. Where did they get it? I would like to think that their prayers helped them find that strength. Their prayers helped them tap reserves of faith and courage which were not available to them before."

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84 Urban T. Holmes III, quoted in Job and Shawchuck, p. 137.
86 Nouwen, p. 96.
Nouwen, in a lecture at Morristown, NJ, also made connection with the importance of prayer. He stated that the continuing presence of God in our lives is brought about and maintained through a life of prayer. Going on he said:

Life without prayer becomes constant busyness. We must leave space, empty space for God to touch us. The demon's plan is to fill up all our empty spaces.

The need for emptiness is so great, Nouwen claims, that originally churches were built as empty spaces. Here people could empty themselves of all unnecessary distractions to the point of being able to hear God speak in a little song, or bread or wine.

In conclusion, perhaps Christians need to see prayer as being less a way to get to God, out there in never-never land, "as it is our hearing and responding to God as he reveals himself to us in the ferment of our interactions with others in this life."\(^\text{89}\)

Ministry in the Interim

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart;
Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart,
Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart.

We are an "between" people, between the first and second advents of Christ, between the "at once and yet to be Kingdom of God," and between our first and final homes. This section will focus on bringing together the various strands of the previous five sections into a complete and unified whole, a focused vision of ministry on the journey. We begin by quoting (again) from the Discipline's description of what the Church can be:

The Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. . . . It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by [those] divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the World (emphasis added).

That last phrase encompasses a great many things, and I believe serves as a sufficient definition of the Church's mission. The church, to be the church, must attempt to fulfill the last three statements. The church must be a worshipping community where the people can come together and worship the God of their salvation. The church must provide means for the edification of the believer as well. This can be done through worship, Bible studies, encounter groups, fellowship activities and groups, training and education, and the administration of the sacraments. The church must also, however, work toward the redemption of the world. That is to say, the Church is responsible for ministry to its members and those attending it, as well as evangelism and missional outreach to those outside the community of faith.

Neill Hamilton has referred to the church as being "the inn where one goes to receive healing strength for growth in maturing."90 The key here being that in maturing one ultimately is able to leave the church and to go out into the world and do ministry:

Whether gathered with a body group on a Sunday morning in a sanctuary or on a weekday evening, the sojourner in maturing only pauses there. Church gatherings are not the final destination of the journey of faith. The journey of faith is ultimately a journey in mission. The church is a training facility or staging area to launch members into mission, a M*A*S*H unit to return them to service when they are wounded in the line of duty, a rest area in which they can catch the breath of the Spirit when fatigue in mission sets in. There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God, says the writer of Hebrews, but that final rest is not here, not now.91


91 Hamilton, p. 126.
The Discipline makes the same point when it says that although "entrance into and acceptance of ministry begin in the local church, . . .the impulse to minister always moves one beyond the congregation toward the whole human community."92

What exactly is the mission of the church? The mission of the Church is to continue the work that Jesus began in his ministry, to continue the work of proclaiming the kingdom of God and its relevance for the world. In Luke, chapter 4, Jesus proclaims his mission by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to  
preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release  
to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are  
oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of  
the Lord. (15-19)

It is becomes obvious from this passage that the church should be concerned with both the physical and spiritual needs of people. The Church should not have to decide between "picketing" and "prayer," but it should be involved in both social activism and the promotion of scriptural holiness and personal pietism. The Church must be involved in a ministry of mercy and compassion for all, as well as demonstrating its concern for and commission to make disciples of all people. It is amazing to me to see how, in most congregations, the desire for bringing spiritual salvation to people is directly and negatively correlated to work in meeting people's physical needs.

The truth is that many of the congregations I will serve in my years in ministry, will primarily or exclusively view the church as an agent of spiritual change. In his commentary on Luke, Fitzmeyer says that the above passage and subsequent rejection story symbolize "the opposition [Jesus'] ministry will evoke among his own."93 The same can be said of any ministry that attempts a wholistic approach to the physical and spiritual dimensions of a person - it may spur opposition and rejection.

In the same vein it must be said that ministry is not about looking to the future and the coming "Kingdom." One Christian writer, Louis Evely has said:

Bad religion has always favored escape, passivity, irresponsibility. By fixing one's eyes on the heaven above, one does not see what takes place on earth here below.

This is exactly the problem with many of our religions today.

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92 The Discipline, p. 114.

There needs to be a creative tension in the church gathering that keeps one eye focused toward the hope represented in reaching journey's end and keeps the other eye open to the reality of sin and suffering and pain that needs to be alleviated in this world. This is a kind of cross-eyed Christianity. Too much time is spent speaking of the second coming of Christ, and too little time preparing the way for the Lord and for the Kingdom of God. There are very few who cry out, as John the Baptist did: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." Instead of working towards the day when justice will flow like rivers and goodness like neverending streams, we have anger and even hatred preached from some of our pulpits. This is not the faith that Jesus taught or practiced. Louis Evely goes on to write that

The upward looking must come to an understanding with the forward looking. We believe that our God (up above) calls us to go forward. Our faith in an absolute does not immobilize us, but invites us to discover God by creating a world inspired by God's love: a world where justice dwells and where people love one another.

The centrality of love is an important concept for Christians. H. Richard Niebuhr has said that the best "definition of the goal of the Church [is to] increase among men of the love of God and neighbor." He goes on to say:

"When all is said and done the increase of this love of God and neighbor remains the purpose and the hope of our preaching of the gospel, of all our church organization and activity, of all our ministry, of all our efforts to train men for the ministry, of Christianity itself."

One of my favorite devotional poems points to the absolute necessity for Christians to demonstrate to the world the love of God through love of neighbor.

"I've been witnessing for fourteen years," the man said sadly, "and I've yet to win one soul for Christ, just one soul. I've memorized and studied and spoken out boldly. I've corrected and chastized and pointed out the higher ways." Not one. A single question: "Have you loved just one?"

As Paul states in I Corinthians 13,
If I speak in tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1-3)

Likewise, one can witness, preach, teach, etc., until he or she is blue in the face, but it will make no difference at all unless these activities are performed with love.

Love becomes flesh and dwells among us through the activities we do on behalf of others. One of the passages where we see love become concrete is in Matthew 25: 31-46. Among other things we read of how our action on behalf of others is in reality action toward the Christ found in them. Jesus tells the righteous,

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and in prison and you visited me. Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my children, you did it to me.”

The film The Color Purple has an interesting character named Sophia, a bold woman who will take "nothin from no one." She is proud and will not sit still for others to commit injustice – she prefers to fight back. There comes a time when Sophia stands up and strikes back at the wrong she sees. She is jailed because she could not stand for the white mayor of her town to strike her, so she hit him back. And she paid the consequences. The time she spent in jail aged her far beyond the eight actual years.

When Sophia leaves prison, she is a woman whose spirit has been beaten down and defeated. She even becomes the Mayor's maid. One day, near Christmas, Sophia enters the small grocery in town. She is physically and spiritually drained. It is a wonder that she can move about, she is so down. Celie, the main character in the film, is in the store and sees her. She comes over, reaches out and takes the shopping list from Sophia's hand, and picks up the groceries that Sophia needs.

This was a very simple act, a natural response, plain old human kindness - one person reaching out to another in the time of need. Celie only did what she thought she should do. But to Sophia her act of kindness signified much more. Sophia later tells Celie that she understands how very terrible and wonderful life can be:

I sat in that jail, till I was about to rot to death. I know what it's like to wanna go somewhere and can't. When you wanna sing and you have the song beat out of you. I remember that day in the store. I was feelin bad, real low, but when I saw you - I knowed there is a God, I knowed there is a God.

The truth is that one rarely knows the impact he or she has on the life of another person. Small acts of love and kindness go far beyond our imagination in their power to change peoples' lives. The truth is that the gospel rarely calls on us to work miracles. It does not always call us to great sacrifice. No, the gospel has been made too complex. We have created denominations and doctrines that cloud the issue and stress everything but what should be stressed. We have our liturgies - our prayers, songs, acts of praise and even sermons - plenty of sermons - but we miss what is essential. The essential message is that "the world will know we are Christians," not because we say the right words or confess the right beliefs, but because we have love.
And this love is shown by how we treat others, especially those who are hungry, thirsty, poor, naked, the stranger, the ill, and those in prison. Jesus tells us that there are ways of telling the righteous from the unrighteous, and the basis for this judgement isn't whether or not one has been born again, but one's response to human need. The needs are not unusual - poverty, hunger, thirst, loneliness - and they are with us always. This fact surprises both the unrighteous who are too caught up in their own lives to see the needs of others, and the righteous who do not suspect that what they were doing was anything special. And while Christ is not physically present with humankind anymore, he is with us by dwelling within us. Christ tells us that as often as we do it to the least of these, we do it unto him. Christ, for the Christian is found in the poor and in the hungry, and in those needing our care and love. Christ is the stranger in our midst. And we are called to minister to those in need, regardless of their status, skin color, religion, or whatever factor makes them different from us.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta has suggested a two-fold path to salvation. The first part entails holding onto Jesus' hands with such a grip that one is obliged to follow his lead, where ever he might go. The second part is then to begin obeying Jesus in every way one can, i.e., to be in mission. In the same way, Hamilton states, "mission engagement is an obligation in every phase of the journey of faith." This mission engagement takes many forms, and the functions of the people of God have been outlined in various places. Dieter T. Hessel, however, in quoting from PCUSA Form of Government has come up with a good summary statement. The church, laity and clergy alike, are to share the ministry of proclamation by their life in the church and witness to society. This entails faithful members of the community to join in:

a. proclaiming the good news;

b. taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church;

c. praying and studying scripture and faith heritage;

d. supporting the work of the Church through giving money, time and talents;

e. participating in governing the [local] church;

f. demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church;

g. responding to God's activity in the world through service to others;

h. living responsibly in personal, family, work, political, cultural, and social relationships of life; and

i. working the world for peace, justice, freedom and human fulfillment.

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96 Mother Teresa, quoted in Job and Shawchuck, p. 93.

97 Hamilton, p. 128.

All of this sounds good, but it is impossible for Christians to even begin carrying out the ministry of the church without the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, as Article III of The Confession of Faith states, the one who "convinces the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgement." The Article goes to say that the Spirit leads people to a faithful response to the gospel and into the fellowship of the Church. The Spirit comforts, sustains, and empowers Christian believers.\textsuperscript{99}

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God with us. It is a comforter and sustainer; the tie that binds the hearts and minds of people into a community, and the instigator which prompts individuals and communities to action. The Spirit is what makes God "real" and "accessible" to us in our day to day life. As comforter and sustainer, the Spirit ministers to us in our times of need, in our moments of loneliness, and lets us know that we are never alone, that God is with us still and will always be with us. But this everpresent Spirit of God has functions other than just comforting us when in pain or sorrow or sustaining our faith through good times and bad. The Spirit binds people together into a community of faith, and this community is absolutely essential for the maintenance of a life in the Spirit. One cannot be a Christian in solitude, it requires Community. At the same time, true community is difficult and even impossible to maintain through human means alone. Through the work of the Holy Spirit our lives can become intertwined into a true community, the church, the family of God.

In addition, it is the Holy Spirit which cajoles us, first into a recognition of our need for reconciliation with God and others, and second into a practical living out of our faith convictions through creative action in the world. The Holy Spirit is the agent by which the prevenient grace of God works in our lives to draw us to God. We come to realize that we are separated from God, and that there can be no peace without God in our lives. The Holy Spirit prepares us to gratefully receive the saving and transforming grace of God into our lives, and it is the Holy Spirit which assures us that we have been redeemed, and it therefore enables us to "live by faith alone," Romans 1:17.

The Spirit then prompts us to live out our faith through work in the world by spreading the good news of God's love and grace and desire to be at one with humankind. The Spirit empowers us for service, and gives us grace sufficient for our needs in carrying out this service. This is done, in part, through the administration of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit into the lives of individuals. These gifts, as outlined by Paul in I Corinthians 12 and fruits shown to us in Galatians 5:22ff, enable and empower Christians to do ministry.

The fact is, that if they allow and promote the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, through the means outlined in the section entitled "Food for the Journey," then Christians will be able to carry out the tasks of ministry listed above.\textsuperscript{100}

I close by quoting from a saint of the early church, as well as one from the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Teresa of Avila, wrote about the need for Christians to minister where ever they are:

\textsuperscript{99} The Discipline, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{100} Hamilton, p. 109.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
No hands but yours;
No feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes
Through which is to look out
Christ’s compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet
With which he is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands
With which he is to bless now. ¹⁰¹

I also acknowledge with Niell Hamilton that:

Ultimately the ministry belongs to the laity. The site of their ministry is not the institution but the house where they live, the place where they work, and the political communities represented on the ballots in their voting booths. The Spirit is encouraging them to minister there.

Joy in the Journey

There is a joy in the journey.
There is hope for those on the way.
There is a wonder and wildness in life,
And freedom for those who obey. 102

"The journey is home."
Nelle Morton

Nancy Pierson, a colleague in ministry at St. Mark United Methodist church, once spoke about one of her talks with Matt, her five year old son. She was tucking him in bed one night when he said, "I like my bed."

Nancy, thinking Matt was stalling for time, agreed that it was a nice bed and told him to go to sleep. He then added, "We're awful lucky aren't we mom?" Still trying to end the conversation, she said, "Yes we are lucky. We have a nice family and a nice home. And you need to go to sleep now."

Matt then looked up at her and said, "But this really isn't our home, Mom." Well this caught Nancy's interest, and so she asked him why he had said this? What did he know that she didn't?

Matt answered both simply and truthfully. "We won't really be home, mom, till we're with God," was his reply.

The search for home can become an obsession. We all want to go home, and in our hustle and bustle we forget what are hearts know - Our only real home is with God. The Psalmist knew this and wrote, "You, O God, have always been our home." The apostle Paul knew this and once said our desire to be home with God is so great we groan, we sigh with anxiety to be in our heavenly home.

The wayfaring stranger realized that the only true home he would ever have could be found only with God. And we know "this world is not our home," and as the song says, "we are only passing through."

There is no need, however, to kid ourselves into thinking that this journey will be easy. All soujourners know the road can get quite difficult. What else could one expect following after a wanderer whose journey ultimately led him to a cross. This fellow sojourner also calls us to pick up our own crosses, never mind the fear of the unknown that lies ahead on the road.

One of the most important messages of the gospel is that we have nothing to fear if we are in Christ. This is nowhere more aptly seen than in Mark 4: 35-41. Here the disciples are making a little journey of their own across the sea of Galilee. Jesus had just finished teaching one of the many multitudes he would face throughout his ministry, and he had taken advantage of the quiet by taking a quick nap in the stern of the boat.

A storm came up, however, while Jesus slept. And it became so severe the disciples feared for their lives and cried out, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" For an answer Jesus calmed the storm and asked a question of his own - "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

The message is straightforward. Those who have faith in God have nothing to fear. Now it is one thing to have faith in the in the everyday. It is easy to have faith in the sturdiness of a well-built boat. It is easy to believe that the dock and the snug, calm harbor are safe places. But it is another thing altogether to believe in God - to believe that God is there with us.

On a personal note, I can remember times as a child I would wake up, scared to death, chill bumps running up and down my arms, hair tingling with the fear and knowledge that the monster in my dreams had just gobbled up my brother (which wasn't a bad idea to me at times) and was about to have me for desert (a not so good idea).

I would cry out in the night and mom or dad would run into the room and reassure me that all was well. My brother was still alive and breathing and no monster would touch me tonight. In a few sleepy, silent moments my mother or father would love away the noise, the shadow, the fear.

The gospel awakens its hearers to the knowledge that God has done this for them as well. God has met them in the awful night. God has journeyed with them, and has wrapped them up in love. God assures them that we can trust the love of the eternal more than any darkness. Those with ears to hear the good news are assured that there is no place one can go where God cannot be found. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Is there anything to fear? God walks with us, and ultimately the pilgrim can be at home walking with God, a God who is our friend.

Sally McFague, in Models of God, interprets what it means to be friends with God.

The model of God as friend says that we are not our own, but also that we are not on our own; as friends of the Friend of the world, we do not belong to ourselves nor are we left to ourselves. It is in this context of God as present with us as we work together to feed, heal and liberate the world that prayer becomes both natural and necessary. We ask God, as one would a friend, to be present in the joy of our shared meals and in the sufferings of strangers; to give us courage and stamina for the work we do together; to forgive us for lack of fidelity to the common vision and lack of trust in divine trustfulness. Finally we ask God the friend to support, forgive, and comfort us as we struggle together to save our beleaguered planet, our beautiful earth, or blue and green marble in a universe of silent rock and fire. Just as betrayal is the sin of friendship in which one hands over the friend to the enemy, so intercessory prayer is the rite of friendship in which one hands over the friend to God. When we pray for our friend the earth, for whose future we fear, we hand it over not to the enemy but to the Friend who is freely, joyfully, and permanently bonded to this, our beloved world. The model of God as friend defies despair.  

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And so it is that roads and journeys and home have come to occupy my mind of late. The road is long, the journey rough, and we often come to wonder if we will ever find a home that will be home for good. In many ways we are like the poor wayfaring stranger, but there is a difference. A friend walks with, comforting us, urging us toward home. "We can dare throw ourselves into the journey, the pilgrimage, even the adventure, because the basic message of Christianity is that God has fallen in love with us. So much in love, that God has even sent the Christ into the world to bring us home." One writer has put it very well:

It was once claimed that all roads lead to Rome.
But that was in Rome's day in the sun, long gone
Then some lost vagabond,
c caught looking back on a lonely life, wailed,
"All roads lead home."
Not so the poet countered, "You can't go home again."

True, but where then can one go?
Must there be some destination one can name?

Confused, lonely, bewildered, beaten wanderers in the wasteland world someday in their sorrows hear a Pilgrim's voice they only half believe, calling out to them across the distance and the years.

I am the way, he says, Come this way home.

I find assurance and even joy in knowing that Christ welcomes as fellow-travelers the whole train of half-believers, outcasts, prodigals and sinners, as ordinary and average as I am. In this company with Jesus and other pilgrims I can discover that even the road itself is home. As Nelle Morton once attested, "the journey becomes home."

To close this section and the paper, I return to Rupp's exegesis of the poem "Homesick Cranes." She writes:

The homesick crane in us is the pilgrim who never arrives, who is always going home, sometimes not having any idea of which way to turn but knowing deep within that there is a goal awaiting and that it is well worth the journey with all its ups and downs, with all its hellos and goodbyes. To this I say, "Amen."
We must go home.
No simple trip,
ticking off landmarks,
rewinding the cord
of our travels.
The string's been cut
that measured out our miles.
We're shaken loose by Truth
which throws us back
toward the neglected,
too familiar place
where incarnation's to be lived.
Emboldened by encounter
we set forth
toward the unknown,
toward home.\footnote{Ellen Roberts Young, "The Kings' Return," \textit{Alive NOW}, November/December 1981, p. 65.}

God of our journeys,
we thank you for the trails that bring us home again,
for life coming full circle,
for births and deaths,
for memories of times and places
that you have made holy in our minds.
Lead us back to those who have touched us,
and loved us,
and set our feet upon the pathways of faith.
Let us touch them in return. Amen.\footnote{Bob Cagle, \textit{Alive Now}, September/October 1986, p. 60.}

Footnotes from Introduction

1. From the unpublished poetry of Mary Ratz.


