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HARVESTING HOPE:  
BIBLICAL PREACHING WITH PEOPLE OF THE LAND

by

CATHERINE BELLES

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2020

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## ABSTRACT

*Hope Harvest: Biblical Preaching with People of the Land*

by

Catherine Belles

This project seeks to customize generic preaching skills to better serve rural Midwest churches in a time of great transition. “What seeds are we planting that our harvest will be hope in Jesus Christ? Does the Word of God affect our response, and are we transformed by that change, so that hope becomes part of our faith DNA?” Seeking to encourage prophetic visioning, preacher, leaders, and members to live into God’s ongoing new creation.

Harvest is a major theme in rural communities and biblical narrative, a metaphor of grace and judgement. Preachers are encouraged to glean the faith stories of the members and leaders of their congregations. Those faith stories then become evidence of our participation in God’s works. Linking harvest and hope, these Spirit filled narratives inspires a more purposeful theology of hope and realized eschatology. There are few contemporary resources focused on preaching for decentralized rural congregations. Congregational and regional contextual understandings, together with transitional preaching resources develop unique tools for this distinct community. Seldom do people of the land receive honor and respect for their persistent faithfulness. Lifting those up in worship especially in sermons, becomes a celebration of God filled moments. If we do not celebrate the small dailiness of authentic Christ centered discipleship, we lose heart and hope.

Personal, congregational, and community narratives are interwoven with scripture and theology. Using less familiar scripture texts encourages a wider view of God's present activities. The decentralized status of these congregations is grieved. Yet a new hope arises in participating in God's kingdom here and now, rather than waiting for the kingdom to come.

Rituals and congregational values assisted in evaluation of responses to the sermons and the sermon series. Survey results from 2014 and 2019 were integrated suggesting a new vision of the core mission theology for one congregation. Intentionally seeking response to sermons encouraged greater discernment within both congregations and motivated this preacher to greater reliance on God's truth.

There is value in intentional listening to contemporary faith stories. Life experiences of the faithful are then laid beside biblical narratives pointing to God's ongoing activity. Use of specific discernment tools for evaluation of a community's diverse preachers will nourish preachers' skills and theological language.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks, and praise to the good Lord who has brought me to this place and time. Thanks to my loving husband Richard and supportive family: Rykie, Caitie, Chris, Sandy, Sarah, and Jim. This last year has been the worst of times and the best of times. Eden and First Presbyterian Churches have proven their strong belief in holding up those who are falling. My brothers and sisters in Christ, Thank you.

Mom and Dad, I thank you for the work ethic that drives me along like the Little Engine that Could. Dick and Karl, I imagine you are glad to see us all gone, but you are never far from my prayers. If a woman is known by the company she keeps, she can do no better than Brenda, DeWayne, Linda, Tim, Derek, Jonathan, Amy, Marc, Mark, Rodney, Cheryl, Jennifer, Mary Lou, Kathy, and Tracy

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADM	Arthur Daniels Midland Corporation
CBOT	Chicago Board of Trade
CNA	Certified Nursing Assistant
CRP	United States Dept. of Agriculture Conservation Reserve Program
FSA	United States Dept. of Agriculture Farm Service Agency
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

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## IF IT DOESN'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE, WHAT IS THE POINT?

**“To believe in this living is just a hard way to go.”<sup>1</sup>**

Rural Iowa has been “hollowing out” for three generations. Graduates leave for more diverse life experiences and job opportunities, some after college and some after military service.<sup>2</sup> As small-town communities gray and die, faith communities may also gray and die. Is this universally true, are all rural Christian churches going to die? Or is new life possible? For those who stay, does the community of faith know the Word of hope in Jesus Christ? If we know that Word, do we, preachers, members, and leaders, demonstrate hope in our worship and in our actions within the community? As pastor of two rural small faith communities, I forcefully realize these are important questions of affect and effect.

Using the Action-Reflection model, I planned six worship services and two congregational events focused on the theme of harvesting hope. For quantitative data, I prepared one survey, two sermon response meetings plus table discussion regarding future hopes for the specific congregation. The survey provided data specific to members of each congregation. This data along with intentional and informal interviews provided rich narratives of embodied faith. Individuals named those who were key participants in their faith development and how they themselves were instruments in the faith of others. Sermons and worship services aimed at asking and considering, how does learned faith

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<sup>1</sup> John Prine, “Angel from Montgomery,” in *Wikipedia* (Memphis, TN: American Recording Studios, 1971), [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Angel\\_from\\_Montgomery&oldid=898057370](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Angel_from_Montgomery&oldid=898057370).

<sup>2</sup> rah L. Courtreau, “Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America. By Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 33, no. No.4 (2009): 24,51,52.

translate into daily recognition of the kingdom of God at hand? What seeds are we planting that our harvest will be a present harvest of hope in Jesus Christ? Does the Word of God affect our response, and are we so transformed by that change, that hope becomes part of our faith DNA?

Eden Presbyterian Church of Rudd, Iowa and First Presbyterian Church of Greene, Iowa, are loosely yoked farm family congregations in rural north central Iowa. Agriculture, grain and animal farming, and ag-related service remains the primary employment of the region and these congregations. Harvest is a season of excitement, hard work, and fear. Will the harvest be plentiful, and will commodity prices remain steady or fall? Trade agreements, climate, weather, all determine the economic health of this region. Grain harvest requires long hours of repetitive work; accidents are common and frequently fatal.<sup>3</sup> These are uncontrollable conditions for most farmers. Yet, one thing farmers can control; if they plant corn, corn grows.<sup>4</sup> It might be slow, late, early, or rotting in the fields, but it will be corn.

### **Harvesting Hope**

If we are to be a hopeful community, we must sow seeds of hope in God alone, pull the weeds, and work the harvest of harvest hope. For some it is difficult to imagine what hope looks like when our eyes are filled with the sights of empty buildings and full

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix G, Interview with Z

<sup>4</sup> There are always exceptions. Every corn field will have random soy plants and soy fields will have corn stalks. This is caused by rotation farm methods and harvest waste. Within this past generation these oddities were cleared by hand as farmers and hired hands walked the fields. This is now somewhat reduced by application of herbicides.

cemeteries. As communities of Christian faith, hope is defined by Paul in Romans 5:1-5.

(New Revised Standard Version)

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup>through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. <sup>3</sup>And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup>and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup>and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

The harvest is often, not what we expected, or has become so much a part of daily life, we no longer recognize God’s participation in our daily living. Using congregational and individual narrative activities collected by the pastor, participants were encouraged to name, and remember their past family farm-based communities of Christian faith. Their own Christian formation and the saints of their lives were shared and described. Worship services named those experiences and related them to harvest and hope. We recalled cultural changes as well as how their ancestors worked through those changes and retained their hope in salvation for the present realm of God. While we spoke of God’s coming kingdom, the intent was to focus more attention to God’s eternal, ongoing, present activity. “...Life in faith is not happenstance or accident. It does not come about automatically. It requires attentiveness.”<sup>5</sup> We also developed a stronger mindfulness for the present ongoing works of the Creator. Especially as we named member’s recalibrated lived experiences, losses and gains. These communities engaged in congregational conversations with scripture, their pasts, their present, and possible future as a community and as individuals of faith. In naming hope in God, a vivid truth was

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Conversations Among Exiles – Religion Online,” July 2, 1997, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/conversations-among-exiles/>.

proclaimed in order to allow a more attentive, honest, deeper, imaginative, and spirit-led hope for the present and future.

The season of Harvesting Hope was concluded on the first Sunday of Advent, the day both congregations entitled “Hope Sunday.” Advent is the Christian Church calendar’s beginning. It is also a time of anticipation of the second coming of Christ. In Advent we proclaim our hope lies in standing with one foot in the now and one in the time to come.<sup>6</sup> Celebrating with song, prayer, and narrative strengthened our experience of embodied faith. Members, leaders, and preacher, were encouraged to identify as fully engaged people, disciples and perhaps prophets of God. This is the harvest Jesus speaks of in John 4.34-38

34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35 Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36 The reaper is already receiving<sup>[f]</sup> wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows, and another reaps.’ 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

Our goal was to faithfully glean from the fruit we, and our communities of faith, planted and cared for, so as to faithfully imagine “In a post-Christian world, how do Christian Communities function?”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 460. Cheryl Bridges Johns, “Holy Spirit and Preaching”

<sup>7</sup> “Ministering to the Grandchildren of the Lost Son: Post-Christian Lessons from Dutch Churches,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 9, 2018, <https://pres-outlook.org/2018/10/ministering-to-the-grandchildren-of-the-lost-son-post-christian-lessons-from-dutch-churches/>.

## Ripe Fields

My primary focus as a pastor is on the churches that serve small rural communities. Some might ask, “Is it important that churches remain in these areas to serve the dwindling population?” The answer of rural church members, leaders and pastors is an unequivocal “Yes.” If there are people, at least one open and functioning church needs to be available. Pastor Daniel Wade of Formoso Community Church, congregation of about thirty, and the only church in town, reminds each of us, “As long as there’s people here, there are things we need to do.”<sup>8</sup>

In this thesis I refer to those who remain, people who are tied to the land as “People of the Land.” For the most part, they are not wealthy, highly educated, and hold no special station in the religious or political government. For the most part, small rural churches, with long lives of persistent faithfulness and social community impact receive no public acknowledgement and no accolades.

Hope is elusive in these small rural congregations. First Presbyterian Church, Greene, in 2018 experienced the death of six members, about 8.5% of the congregation. In 2018, Eden Presbyterian Church lost three members, about 4.29%. Both churches and their communities have experienced this death rate consistently through the past decade. Losses have also occurred as children and grandchildren leave for work in more enticing cities, the so-called, “brain drain” of the Midwest.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Brad Roth, “When Small-Town Pastors Put Down Roots,” *The Christian Century*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/when-small-town-pastors-put-down-roots>.

<sup>9</sup> Jon Marcus, “Degrees of Success: Some Cities Stanch Brain Drain of New College Graduates - The Washington Post,” December 30, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/degrees-of-success-some-cities-stanch-brain-drain-of-new-college-graduates/2018/12/30/e41232ba-0031-11e9-862a-b6a6f3ce8199\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.9e959f02c713](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/degrees-of-success-some-cities-stanch-brain-drain-of-new-college-graduates/2018/12/30/e41232ba-0031-11e9-862a-b6a6f3ce8199_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9e959f02c713).



### **Liminal or Luminous**

Rural Iowa receives little national or international notice or respect until national caucus season. “The broader country viewed states like mine as unimportant, liminal places. They yawned while driving through them, slept as they flew over them.”<sup>10</sup> Too often the media, politicians, professionals of all sorts, including ministers of the Word and Sacrament, treat and speak to these folks as if they were of little worth.<sup>11</sup> A sort of malaise seems to hang over these areas, some stubbornly “holding the line” on new ideas or social changes, others sliding into depression, while others express their confusion about what is wrong with them or the rest of the country. “If you hear over and over again that you’re withering away, well you start to believe it.”<sup>12</sup> Some might say, “If there are no younger people or children to teach the faith, and those who remain do not attend church, then conversations about hope, about the future of the faith community go nowhere. Planning for the future, is a waste of time as there will be no future for this church. Buildings fall into disrepair<sup>13</sup> and worship is poorly attended.”

At one time, Easter and Christmas were the two largest faith celebrations; now funerals see the largest attendance. Decades of traditional ministry have left our pews

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Smarsh, “Country Pride: What I Learned Growing Up in Rural America,” *The Guardian*, September 6, 2018, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/06/country-pride-kansas-rural-america-sarah-smarsh>.

<sup>11</sup> David R. Brooks, “One Nation, Slightly Divisible,” *The Atlantic*, December 2001, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/12/one-nation-slightly-divisible/376441/>. Brooks writes immediately following September 11, 2001 and then reflects a year later on the same regions, what he terms “the meatloaf line.”

<sup>12</sup> Kirk Siegler, “Rural America Faces A Crisis In ‘Adequate Housing,’” NPR.org, August 11, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/11/634640228/rural-america-faces-a-crisis-in-adequate-housing>.

<sup>13</sup> Siegler. In both Rudd and Greene, Iowa, craftsmen are retiring and are not being replaced. Finding good local contractors is quite difficult in most rural areas.

empty and members graying. It is difficult to persist in hope when you see only loss, “for he who invests all of his labor and his dreams loses that labor and that desire and in its place gains only the invoice that goes with such sacrifice – physical and mental weariness, accelerated aging, and eventually loss of health itself.”<sup>14</sup> This loss has been transformed into an eschatology of imbalance. Members and leaders focus on life after life, a time of judgement but ultimate grace. This is most evident in the favorite hymns of personal salvation rather than the community of faith. We remain murky in our understanding of “issues surrounding death and the afterlife, the return of Christ and the nature of the final judgement.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, this has become our focus rather than a balanced approach to the Kingdom of God in this time and the next.

### **Eschatology**

Too often, worship as an ongoing resistance to the empire, the forces of power, is labelled as “political” and eschewed by rural congregations. Indeed, to espouse the one true and everlasting Lordship of God embodied in Jesus Christ and upheld through the Holy Spirit is, by definition, political resistance. Worship that defines itself as a “foretaste of the coming Kingdom” holds an embodied, lived into hope, for the time when heaven and earth are completely united, functioning as one. One Lord, one faith, one baptism firmly places the world’s leaders in a subservient position. Thus, this thesis project strove to hold up the strong words of Cheryl Bridges Johns wrote, “Preaching eschatologically is not only preaching about the future hope of new creation; it means

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<sup>14</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, 456. Cheryl Bridges Johns “Eschatology”

bringing that future hope to bear on the present. ... more than going to heaven when we die.”<sup>16</sup>

As a newcomer to these rural communities, it has been my observation that these rural congregational members, leaders and governing boards, resist future planning. New ideas seem to be too much work for no guaranteed pay off. The congregations sound tired and feel tepid in decisions. Rural churches need an encouraging word, a strong and vital narrative of ministry in which we see ourselves and our context as freed to be participants in God’s new creation.

“Sometimes you have to let go of the picture of what you thought life would be like and learn to find joy in the story you are living.”<sup>17</sup> As a pastor, I am seeking to clearly claim the theologically and scripturally sound belief in the present new creation of Jesus Christ in balance with the life everlasting. “Eschatological hope” and “realized eschatology” are theologically dense. My desire is to cut through the density using narratives of their own life experiences . As I hear their experiences, I lay those alongside scripture’s words of hope. I name and lay before the congregation, these parallel experiences in what Hauerwas calls “truthful remembering”<sup>18</sup> that they may see their lives anew. That they are already made into new creations as part of God’s unfolding Kingdom.

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson, 460. Cheryl Bridges Johns, “Holy Spirit and Preaching”

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Marie Martin, “Sometimes You Have to Let Go of the Picture,” *The Minds Journal* (blog), September 21, 2018, <https://themindsjournal.com/sometimes-you-have-to-let-go-of-the-picture/>.

<sup>18</sup> Erskine Clarke, *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 75.

Eschatology is the “belief that God is at work in the created order restoring all things to their intended splendor.”<sup>19</sup> Through this project, members, leaders, and preacher, were shaped into more mindful disciples, attentive in new ways to the transforming works of the Holy Spirit.

### **Pastor as Observer**

My “preacher’s lens” is shaped by the particularity of rural life, and creation has become my vivid theology. To bear witness to the startling new life that springs forth in days when the snow melts - beckons my (less than) poetic soul to see creation in all of scripture. My hermeneutic has become to name and claim this new life in daily experiences. As an outsider, newly installed as preacher and pastor in this rural setting, I am constantly aware of this staggering cycle of life. Most Sunday worship services begin with my awestruck response to observed regeneration.

In my pastoral role I hear many individual and community narratives focused on planting and harvest. Creation on display and embodied does not strike the people of the land as strongly as it does this outsider. I spend an equal amount of time focused on exegeting the social and geographical context of scripture, how the characters might have experienced God then, as I do the contemporary lived into experiences of God. My hermeneutical tools lie primarily in narrative parallels and intersections. Preachers are in some ways, ethnographers and anthropologists, we are invited inside the homes and public spaces of our congregant members and in small towns citizens at large. At the same time, we are held at a distance. We were not born or raised in that city therefore,

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson, *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, 456. Cheryl Bridges Johns, “Eschatology”

our ways are not their ways. We have received professional training, such that a habit of seeking the Holy Spirit's presence throughout daily lives is a habit. Preachers have biblical knowledge beyond the norm for active members and we see and seek biblical connections unnoticed by members and friends of our congregations. In such comparison preachers offer members an invitation to see how God has been active in their own lives.

As a former Director of Christian Education, I am aware of the many gaps in biblical literacy through focus on worship alone. Neither church, Eden Presbyterian, nor First Presbyterian, has continual Christian Education. Much of my preaching contains strong teaching elements in order to bridge that gap. For much of the year, I employ the Narrative Lectionary alongside our congregation's consistent worship attendance to develop thematic approaches, and build on thick, dense narratives. This is one way in which I strive to engage hearers in "education." As Leonora Tubbs Tisdale reminds and prods Pastors, such lectionaries can be aids or crutches, and we can easily become too dependent.<sup>20</sup> I have come to respect the interests of the congregations and ask their opinions for worship planning.

During the summer and early fall, thematic and Bible book series are popular with both congregations. From 2017 to 2019, the Worship Committee of First Presbyterian Church, Greene has been involved in my choices for worship. This 2019 series, *Harvesting Hope*, follows the 2018 summer series of *Life After Life*. The *Life after Life* series focused on one aspect of eschatology, to investigate the scriptural response to one member's heartfelt question, "How can we be certain we will enter God's promised

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<sup>20</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Minneapolis, MN 55440: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 1676.

kingdom?” The 2018 Life After Life series was well received at both Eden and First Presbyterian congregations.

In my outsider’s view, I frequently point to the polyvalent meanings of biblical situations asking members to imagine the narrative from a different character’s viewpoint. This works especially well for well-known texts. Most of us have given thought of being the Father, the younger son, or even the older brother in Luke 15.11-32, the parable of the prodigal. A sideways or from underneath approach might be, what if you were a pig farmer? As many of these members have in fact tended pigs, this parable takes on new meaning and broadens our vision. In asking for whom, what, when, and where, God is active, the “why” becomes open to a wider lens. Prophetic preaching is a call to become an intentional provocation of the faithful, in order that we might see God’s activity anew.

Loren Mead describes “the plight of the small congregation, laboring under a model of ministry that makes them failures year after year.” Full time pastors with seminary degrees, imposing physical structures, and programs for children, youth, and adults<sup>21</sup> are not long-term good solutions for these areas, nor are they a healthy response to our context. Yet, Prins notes, the church is “alive, until it dies... the broken body of Christ in the world.”<sup>22</sup> Tools for enriched poetic meaning, are needed for those who have no access to such academic resources.

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<sup>21</sup> Nathan Kirkpatrick, “Tangier Island, the Church and Living on the Edge | Faith and Leadership,” June 26, 2018, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/nathan-kirkpatrick-tangier-island-church-and-living-edge>.

<sup>22</sup> “Alban at Duke Divinity School » On Living in a Dying Church,” July 3, 2008, <https://alban.org/archive/on-living-in-a-dying-church/>.

There is no rushing to close the doors and until we do, it is our call as disciples of Jesus Christ to remain faithfully and hopefully engaged in our context. If the future of these churches includes closing, is there a way to embrace a new life and hope, in continuing to share the gospel until then? “Just as when a human parent becomes ill and declines, and the longing of the (adult) child for the safety of a parents’ arms must be resolved in some other way, so when a church is in decline, parishioners must find new routes to living water.”<sup>23</sup> How can we redefine God’s good harvest of hope in rural churches?

In many cases, the ordinary lives of faithful people hold a wealth of good fruit for sermons and worship services of hope. Recognizing God’s daily activity is difficult unless we have developed such a “world lens.” It takes someone else, outside, to ask, “What did you do? How did this happen? Why did you?” In casual conversation, pastors are one of the few people expected and encouraged to ask faith questions. A new preacher is a (very) minor celebrity and for months is welcomed into members’ homes with desserts and coffee. The survey questions opened new opportunities for building a stronger collection of harvested hopes. The survey questions are suitable for any congregation or can be tweaked to suit unique contexts. Such questions help build a habit of pastors and members to speak truth into faith on a regular basis. From there, pastors can easily develop a file cabinet full of faithful daily life experiences to enrich and embody sermons.

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<sup>23</sup> “Alban at Duke Divinity School » On Living in a Dying Church.”

While rural churches are feeling the pain of dwindling numbers more than urban ones, almost all mainline Protestant Christian churches are graying and dying.<sup>24</sup> Small congregations (fewer than one hundred members) make up the majority of mainline Protestant denominations.<sup>25</sup> This project’s design is specific to rural midwestern churches but may have broader implications, as we envision ministry and discipleship in the coming years.

“Perhaps it is not so different for congregations in burgeoning cities and suburbs. If we aren’t anchored in something bigger than our present circumstance- hope, some sense of mission, and ultimately God – then our work becomes just one thing after another, the minor flywheel serving its little mechanical end. We need some sense that our life and labor are ordered toward something greater than ourselves, no matter where we live.”<sup>26</sup>

Followers of God are often hesitant to speak of their faith. As if it were somehow socially unacceptable. By our neglect, many children fail to see the connections between their parents' habits of hospitality, kindness, charitable giving, stewardship, and their parents' understanding of God’s Word made flesh. At funerals, children and grandchildren often tell stories of their parents' lives. In my sermons, I lay the scripture commands or narratives beside those testimonials. Parallel, those scriptures lift those activities to discipleship, suddenly there is enlightenment in their children's eyes. They realize, “My parents lived into their faith. Their faith in God made them the people I love.” Those are moments when the harvest that was left behind has now been gleaned.

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<sup>24</sup> Lisa Foust Prater, “Revitalizing Rural Churches,” *Successful Farming*, November 8, 2016, <https://www.agriculture.com/revitalizing-rural-churches>.

<sup>25</sup> “Fast Facts about American Religion,” accessed February 13, 2019, [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast\\_facts.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html).

<sup>26</sup> Roth, “When Small-Town Pastors Put Down Roots.”



## THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

### **Rural and Agrarian Theology**

In an urban ministry elective course, much time was spent justifying the practice of urban ministry. An argument can be made that Jesus spent little time teaching and preaching in the large city of Jerusalem and much time in the countryside, therefore urban ministry should be considered mission ministry, of a fringe location. Imagine my surprise as pastor to two very rural churches, reading this same description applied to rural ministry. It appears denominational resources and ministry preparation primarily focuses on a mythical suburban paradise where neither urban nor rural issues impinge. Worship and preaching books are usually authored by nationally best-known preachers.<sup>1</sup> Seminaries focus on basic worship liturgies and preaching courses, with books, papers, and articles that seldom focus on rural, small congregations.<sup>2</sup>

What is being published for rural congregations is a mixture of growth templates, such as Rural Matters Institute, which focus on church planting or revitalization. There is value in developing leadership training specific to rural ministry. However, the core mission of Christian churches was and remains Christ centered worship. Contemporary sermon or worship planning materials for these unique faith communities are unattainable. How are we, in rural areas, to open scripture in such a way people's lives will be impacted and they will know God more intimately? Knowledge of biblical

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<sup>1</sup> "These Are the 12 Pastors Who Are 'Most Effective' Preachers," ChristianHeadlines.com, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://www.christianheadlines.com/news/these-are-the-12-pastors-who-are-most-effective-preachers.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), 17.

language allows a preacher to delve deeply into layers of meaning and social contexts. In that same manner, understanding the language specific to this locale facilitates deeper personal and community encounters. People of the land are people for whom farming practices and tools are a first language. Many preachers will find these words and phrases indecipherable. A listing of some such phrases, alongside scripture references can be found in Appendix P.

The research of Woolever and Bruce, notes that strong spiritual growth, personal and in corporate worship, does not impact numerical growth.<sup>3</sup> Being “in Christ,” following Christ as a loyal disciple, does not guarantee numerical growth of congregations, nor is that promised in scripture. Numerical growth is not the best barometer for determining whether a congregation is strong and healthy. The American Christian church is in a time of great change, from a place of power, authority and numerical growth to “the fringe areas of life.” In this time of transition, healthy congregations should be more able to weather the change. If, “our beliefs matter because our behaviors and practices stem from our beliefs,” preachers, leaders, and members need to be empowered to state and evaluate their beliefs in practice and through witness.

We are called to minister to people wherever we are. Location changes the availability of tools, climate, economic issues, population density, heterogeneity and all of that is reflected in the language of the society. Jeff Clark notes that as we are sent “into

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<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19–24. More information found in the Conclusion chapter especially 113-116.

all the world:” Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth,<sup>4</sup> While the Bible does focus on rural life and people, the world then was not as heavily populated as it is now. Perhaps it is worthwhile to consider where, and to whom Jesus would come in this day of megacities.

Clark states unequivocally an important point for preachers in rural ministry, our ministry, is an important mission field. This is a word of faithful service, which those in rural ministry do not hear often or with sincerity. The language and work of rural areas are unique to their location and agricultural production. Malina and Rohrbaugh point to the distinctiveness of agrarian societies. Though they are pointing to the unique language of the New Testament, this remains true and is perhaps even more obvious given the change in culture. Most Americans do not live in rural areas, most live in urban cities or regions focused on megacities. Those native to rural Midwest small towns have a slight “accent”<sup>5</sup> as well as unique word banks at their disposal. As an outsider, I spent much time developing a new vocabulary. Yet my “accent” and choice of words and phrases often confuse or engender laughter among these two ag centered congregations.<sup>6</sup>

Many rural towns and cities have a homogenous population based on immigration patterns of the 1800s. Eden Presbyterian in Rudd was founded by families in German neighboring cities. Those family ties from Germany continue in the United States and

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<sup>4</sup> Jeff Clark, “Rural Theology, Biblical Case for Rural Church Planting & Ministry,” *RURAL MATTERS INSTITUTE* (blog), January 11, 2018, 2, <https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/rural-theology-biblical-case-for-rural-church-planting-ministry/>.

<sup>5</sup> I define “accent” as more than pronunciation, but also grammar syntax and vocabulary.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN 55440: Fortress Press, 1998), 2–3, <https://www.fortresspress.com/product/social-science-commentary-gospel-john>.

have for more than 150 years. Such congregations arose from a need and a desire to remain faithful disciples, no matter their location. In reading articles from other rural church leaders, I am struck by the image of mission focus. The late Senator Paul Simon noted that inner-city churches and rural congregations “experienced some of the same difficult issues: elderly congregations, out-migration of the ethnic base, and aging facilities.”<sup>7</sup> Keeping our doors open is not enough; we must have and focus on our core mission. Our numbers may dwindle but we remain focused on being “in Christ” as a worshipping body, a part of the Church universal.

Pastors in rural areas need to be attentive in focusing on a mission paradigm, not to condescend to the people of the land. Those who have remained are accustomed to being treated without honor or respect, and they do not respond well to this treatment. Those preachers recently graduated from seminaries, filled with Greek, Hebrew, dense theology, and system analysis may be filled with new ideas. However, those new or recycled ideas may not address the needs and situations of the community. For every congregation and community, history and context are crucial for preaching and worship leadership. Just as missionaries are trained to speak the language of wherever they are posted, rural preachers must speak the language and know the context of their people.

Developing an understanding of the complex interpersonal relationships of a small town and family based rural congregations is at first glance daunting. Phrases rather than clear definitions are used to describe casual relationships. “Cousin” may mean second or third or twice removed or just someone known from birth. A pastor who asks

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<sup>7</sup> Ray Branstiter, “Ministry in the Rural Context: More than Just Keeping the Doors Open,” *Word & World*, 2006, 4, [https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/26-3\\_Mission\\_Congregation/26-3\\_Face\\_to\\_Face.pdf](https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/26-3_Mission_Congregation/26-3_Face_to_Face.pdf). 318, 320.

and notices familial and personal connections will be given far more information than can be easily digested. Tracking or noting, on paper may be helpful in such instances. There are also many sources for historical, geographical and economic histories of the locale and region.<sup>8</sup>

Many family-based congregations have a system of responsibility and leadership in place. The pastor who watches the body language of the time of welcome and the passing of the peace will soon discern each person has a “role.” These roles are often undefined yet closely adhered to. “Even though each person has individual strengths and liabilities, those attributes can change in different contexts or relationships.” In a small congregation, these responsibilities are often unchangeable and based on true or false information or secrets shared in the congregation. These take enormous energy and discernment for understanding the congregational system.<sup>9</sup>

In rural communities, congregations are often assumed to have skills in such leadership based on their business or agricultural acuity. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, “business smarts” are seldom what is needed for leading a Christ focused community. Involvement and leadership within the congregation is difficult for lack of resources, not only from “great men” but also because the laity lack time and energy for this work. Jeff Clark notes, “great ideas from great men ...do not translate into action when the... lay leadership team [is] made up of two housewives, two farmers, and a

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<sup>8</sup> Many small towns have historical societies, museums and weekly newspapers.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 24–29.

mechanic.”<sup>10</sup> Small rural communities and congregations depend on all able-bodied adults and teenagers to accomplish daily maintenance and fill leadership positions. Small schools draw from a wide area and encourage students to be heavily involved in multiple extra-curricular activities. As rural economies struggle, most adults work multiple jobs, or are AARP members, and very few pursue theological literacy. They know what is “supposed to occur” in church because they have lived the faith of long time, active, participating members. While this depth of experience keeps the church rolling through leadership changes, long-time members and long serving pastors no longer “see or feel as a new worshiper would.”<sup>11</sup> As members die, move or lose mental acuity, the leadership roles remain unfilled. The congregation’s system will reshuffle to fill the gaps in leadership but there is only so much filling that can occur. A pastor attempting to develop new leaders or reorganize the current leadership model needs to spend time in considering and uncovering the skills and roles assigned by the system. As Richardson notes, “Thinking systemically is very difficult.”<sup>12</sup> It is also time consuming and almost incomprehensible for someone unfamiliar with rural communities. Understanding theologies and systems of rural communities can be helpful.

In research, three distinct definitions for small rural communities and congregations have arisen. Jeff Clark defines “rural communities” as the intertwined connectedness between farm economies and professional and technical economies that support farms. An example of this would be the use of the latest combines and seed air

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, “Rural Theology” 2.

<sup>11</sup> Woolever and Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 27.

carts for partnered family farms of 1000 acres. Wendell Berry speaks of a more specific “agrarian” community or economy listing eleven characterizations of agrarianism. These qualities are intertwined, “in any several of agrarian farmers all of them would be present, recognized and clearly spoken.”<sup>13</sup> The loss of one, disrupts the balance needed for good farming. In these eleven values, can be seen specific members of each congregation. If all eleven members of each church remain in good health and active within the congregation, the church remains healthy. As our membership ages and dies, we lose those essential attributes. Others within the community may, and do, step into those roles, however, the loss leaves a tear in an otherwise whole quilt. The tear weakens the quality and pattern of the distinct pieces. The stress of daily use soon shreds this once whole quilt into irreparable damage.

“Earth community or theology” is the term used by Mary Grey to push us beyond the current paradigm of urban versus rural, or agrarian versus knowledge-intensive economies such as described by Berry. Grey suggests stepping into Brueggemann’s prophetic imagination in linking people with place, “human beings and the creatures of sky, sea and soil who form the bio-region in all its richness and neediness.”<sup>14</sup> Berry, Grey and Maria Harris<sup>15</sup> suggest, people with their feet firmly planted in a specific place display a connectedness to their land but also to their neighbors, as a “theology of hope seeking to celebrate a jubilee must constantly look for healing connections, between spirit

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<sup>13</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Mary C. Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope: Prophetic Dreams for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2000), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*. 42. Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee: A Spirituality for the Twenty-first Century*.” Published in 1996, *Proclaim Jubilee* was forward looking in ways I am only now beginning to appreciate.

and matter, people and earth, and for the deep-seated links between the sufferings caused by” norms and inequalities enforced upon people. These communities follow what Richardson terms an “emotional system.”<sup>16</sup> In harvesting individual and community faith experiences, knowledge of positive and negative labels commonly assigned to specific members or families, can either open or lock down images and relationships. To name those labels without specificity allows the community to grapple with difficult emotional issues and can allow a change in emotional response. Recognition of a family’s reputation and whether that reflects reality or not, allows a pastor to bring new leadership into the community. Thus, a family traditionally called “lazy and dirty” can become newly recognized as “hard workers and leaders.” Returning to the quilt metaphor, these new leaders can change the old patterns to something new and retain faithfulness.

Both Berry and Grey point to diversification of peoples and economies as our best future for the good of the earth and, because we are intertwined, the good of humans. In homogenous communities such as rural Midwest small towns, the diversity is not as obvious as in an urban area. Diversity can embrace more than gender, race, or ethnicity. Diversity might refer to education, health and family health concerns, physical disabilities, gender fluidity, travel experiences, military or volunteer service. Pastors and congregational leaders need a more open mind in defining leadership qualities.<sup>17</sup> Spiritual

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<sup>16</sup> Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*, 24–39. A project for new pastors would be to develop a graphic of the emotional system and the multilayers of leadership and relationships. This coupled with a family tree of the congregation would provide valuable information for leadership development and deep pastoral care. However, it is very dense work and cannot be publicly shared. Such work always reveals secrets.

<sup>17</sup> Richardson, 34–39.



strength and scriptural knowledge are fruits of a different kind of life than business acuity allowing a congregation to seek a different, broader understanding of God's presence.

Grey notes the required imagination is inherent in a faithful reading of the prophets who also imagined a culture counter to empire, "a spirituality of resistance and struggle."<sup>18</sup> Resistance alone is not simply difficult; it is almost impossible.<sup>19</sup>

Brueggemann describes a liturgical ecclesiastical community that eschews the empire and particularly the popular paradigm of "bigger is better" as operating "with a powerful vision, a vision that affirms that the future is not yet finished. God has a powerful intention and resolve to bring us to a wholeness not yet in hand." It is a wholeness of messianic peace and constant renewal. Earth theology then is a "resurrection story of the earth."<sup>20</sup> Earth communities will focus on and state firmly the resurrection of all people, in all times, and all places rather than the American Christian focus on personal salvation. A healthy faith community would seek a balance between understanding the covenant of new creation and the salvation of all through Jesus Christ rather than leaning towards a theology of earned grace.

### **Crisis of Exile**

American Christian theologians and preachers use the metaphor of "exile" to describe the current decentralized location of mainline congregations. "Decentralized" is

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<sup>18</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> American Christians love a story of individual resistance. We focus on and create mythic heroes able to stand alone in their fight for justice and mercy. Bonhoeffer is often quoted for his resistance to Hitler's Third Reich but his cry against being alone in a cell, the lack of anyone to pray with, any community to worship with, is seldom noted.

<sup>20</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 51.

one term used to describe this crisis of shrinking church attendance and loss of societal power and position in the USA. Exile as a metaphor has been examined extensively by Walter Brueggemann, N. T. Wright, Lee Beach, and others. The exilic metaphor, seems appropriate for many American Christian congregations which have “experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world, which gave it meaning and coherence, and ... found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked, trivialized, or dismissed. Exile is not primarily geographical, but it is social, moral and cultural.”<sup>21</sup> Babylon, Rome, American Consumerism, empires are attractive to those who live on the fringes, we tend to look in with envy and desire. “How to sing King Alpha’s song in a strange land” is a very real part of the exile metaphor.

Israel’s experience of and response to, exile is central to the history and theology of Israel. SER (Sin, Exile, Return) the grand metanarrative pattern is found throughout and continues to shape Israel’s geo-political paradigm, such that, exile is not locked into a specific time and place. Exilic imagery is constantly “reused and reinterpreted”<sup>22</sup> as in Daniel 9, “where an understanding of the exilic and post-exilic periods as a unified era which is only to be ended when God comes to the earth to establish the Messianic age.”<sup>23</sup>

This expansive metaphor of exile and post-exile leads to “far more than geographic concern; rather it encompasses all the fortunes of Israel, that which is lost in the exile and still yet to be restored... arguing for the persistence of exile ‘in all sorts of

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<sup>21</sup> Walter. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas G. Piotrowski, “The Concept of Exile in Late Second Temple Judaism: A Review of Recent Scholarship,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 2 (2017): 216–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X15589865>.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas G. Piotrowski, 218.

senses.’” If God’s promises of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Zechariah have not been fulfilled, no new exodus has occurred, and exile is not over, there must be more to come:

“Most Jews of this period (first century CE) it seems, would have answered the question ‘Where are we?’ in language which reduced to its simplest form meant: we are still in exile. They believed that, in all the senses that mattered, Israel’s exile was still in progress. Although she had come back from Babylon, the glorious message of the prophets remained unfulfilled. Israel still remained in thrall to foreigners; worse, Israel’s God had not returned to Zion.”<sup>24</sup>

This theme of a return from exile could have been a theological imperative for first century Jews’ dominant worldview: Zion’s vacancy, the imperfect temple, the dominance of pagans, waiting for a national repentance and the fulfillment of God’s promised forgiveness, together form a paradigm of continuous life in exile “Jews... living within a story in search of a conclusion.”<sup>25</sup> The Herodian family reign with its split allegiance of Rome and Israel would have further indicated a “not yet” return. Such a paradigm would impact early Christian theology of the Kingdom of God.

Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the Exile paradigm typically focus on the priestly and wealthy classes, those who wrote, read and made the official statements. Official statements come from a place of power, “winners” and do not necessarily reflect the paradigm for all Jews especially those left behind during the exile. Certainly, this metaphor does not apply, as Hauerwas notes, to the Canaanites,<sup>26</sup> those who were there

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholas G. Piotrowski, 220.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas G. Piotrowski, 221.

<sup>26</sup> Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 83–90. Barbara Brown Taylor’s choices of “personal terror texts reminds me that many of the members have not heard or read the entire Bible. Personal terror, concern about which side of the door we will land needs to be addressed in every sermon.

before the Jews came or returned, people of the land exterminated to make room for and seemingly excluded from the promises of God.<sup>27</sup>

According to the UNHCR, “We are now witnessing the highest record of displacement on record.”<sup>28</sup> The stigma of refugee status, the inability to control one’s life or the life choices for family members, “discontinuity with their cultural, social, religious and familial life has drastically changed their perception of life and future hope even to the extent of questioning their relationship with their very life and with the life situation in the place of relocation.”<sup>29</sup> Exiles face real physical, spiritual, and social persecution in their homelands from whence they have fled, and in the new lands in which they arrive.

Within some American churches, the exilic theme of perceived persecution American Christians endure is part of the community ethos. The community professes to endure persecution for not agreeing to or following changing social culture. Using the exile metaphor in such a way, obscures an in-depth study of Christian eschatology and denies the current crisis of home loss for millions. Individuals who are looking for or seeking out such experiences often find small moments that can be misconstrued into high drama. We see much of this now in the response to COVID19 and the mask protests.

Calling ourselves exiles, allows preachers, leaders, and members to gloss over our own sins and omissions. Our sins include participation in denying human rights based on set boundaries determined by those with power and authority. In a time of real, global,

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<sup>27</sup> Clarke, 72–73.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Figures at a Glance,” UNHCR, accessed October 25, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Alfred Stephen, “Societas Homiletica » Alfred Stephen – From Dislocation to Relocation,” 2017, 2, <http://www.societas-homiletica.org/author-title-clone/>.

exilic loss, using the term “exile” for the American Christian church, is a form of entitlement and cultural appropriation. The same is true for Willimon’s preferred term, “resident alien.” Such terminology exacerbates the ongoing disconnect between the reality of our social context, and international human realities, and our Christian faith.

The reality is American Christians are not displaced. We have not been forced from our homes and lands for political or punitive reasons. Our Christian faith has no impact on our physical safety or financial status. In the rural Midwest, we are a privileged community. We meet regularly on Saturday evenings, Sunday mornings, midweek, and for special services. Other community groups including the public schools make space and time for our services and needs.<sup>30</sup> Exilic terminology becomes a shield to hide behind, so we needn’t face the reality that we as leaders, preachers, and members of churches have lost our social status and perhaps our prophetic imagination. Our numbers are declining, and this loss is not simplistic and cannot be defined by bumper stickers or a false sense of persecution. Change is difficult and hiding behind a false status does nothing to address this crisis. Church leaders and members often prefer to continue patterns of worship and leadership we know and find comfortable, as has been done by our “forefathers” for decades.

### **Tradition and Traditionalism**

Tradition and traditionalism are a difficult balance for preachers and congregational leaders. Anthony G. Pappas defines tradition as “the foundation upon which we can move faithfully into God’s future.” Traditionalism, holding on tightly to

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<sup>30</sup> John W Doberstein, trans., *Life Together* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1954), 17.

traditions above reason, cultural norms, and reinterpretation of scripture, can block the hope of being part of God's future. In clinching tightly to our "traditions" we may close ourselves to personal and corporate growth, being part of God's new creation. This has been most evident in congregational response to changing Sunday morning worship. Worship, a time of connecting with God and one another has remained largely unchanged despite the evidence this is no longer effective. While some attempts to develop skills for urban church planting and planning have been adapted by most of the mainline Christian denominations<sup>31</sup> these are not useful for rural communities.

Rural communities are declining in population. That is a fact and the narrative most members see. Some pastors describe ministry in these communities and their churches as "hospice care." Pastoral leadership in these communities could be considered a form of chaplaincy, standing at the bedside until death arrives. There are prayers and practical skills for such ministry, learned in seminary and practiced in Clinical Pastoral Education. The term "maintenance ministry" is also used, a kind of treading water image, which denotes that drowning will certainly come and until it does, we gasp and flounder until we are too tired to continue. Such a view limits our response to the members and leaders of congregations. We hear and prepare for the end rather than seeking God in daily life. We forget to practice mindfulness instead of gathering our grave clothes. It is worthwhile to prepare wisely for death, which comes to all individuals and communities. However, our communities and congregations are not dead yet! Like

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<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Carter JR., L. Gregory Jones, and Susan Pendleton Jones, "Disruption and Leadership Development in Mainline Protestantism," March 24, 2014, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/disruption-and-leadership-development-mainline-protestantism>. Four articles from the United Methodist Church leaders regarding disruptive leadership was helpful in pointing out shortfalls.

Miracle Max, we may not want to spend money, time, and resources, on those who are not quite dead or only mostly dead. Rural preachers with such a mindset will find themselves preaching to an ever-declining membership, for we will lose sight of our mission, that we remain and function as part of the body of Christ, whether in decline or ascent.<sup>32</sup> End of season harvest tastes just as good, and feeds everyone as well, as did the early harvest. To discount the lived faith of older members and communities is to lose an important and unique voice of the gathered saints. As small towns disappear as well as the voices of those who have lived such different lives, this county and this body of Christ are deprived of strong, deeply faithful components. We are lesser without them.

Eden Presbyterian Church, Rudd and First Presbyterian Church, Greene, Iowa have more than 300 years of combined ministry. They and their ancestors have survived, declined, adapted, and thrived through floods, epidemics<sup>33</sup>, fire, leadership difficulties, ethnic persecution, the Great Depression, the Great Recession. Yet seldom are these small rural congregations lifted as examples of successful Christian witnessing. The denominations remark on our sadly declining numbers while preachers and leaders find few resources for rural transitional leadership and worship planning. Lack of ability to support the denomination financially or loss of power through membership decline, seems to preclude valuing a congregation.

American rural Christians face a crisis in their economic situation, for they are locked into small dying cities by lack of funds, national status, resources and pedigree.

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<sup>32</sup> “Alban at Duke Divinity School » On Living in a Dying Church.”

<sup>33</sup> Both Eden and First Presbyterian made special accommodations during the 1918 Flue Epidemic and now for COVID19.

They are also locked in by love of their land, memories of previous generations, their community, and their slower paced, less consumer driven, way of life. In this thesis, those who remain on this land, in this place, will be called either, “Stayers” when referring to sociological impact<sup>34</sup> or people of the land, members, or leaders<sup>35</sup> to speak of those who stay in their homeland rather than moving for other opportunities.

Rural congregations have value, for, as Alan Rice asks, “Who knew being in Christ was not enough?”<sup>36</sup> “We would do well to continue to speak kindly and respectfully to and about congregations in decline and to treasure its ministry as long as it lasts.<sup>37</sup> We should remind ourselves and others that it is not numbers that matter. Our faith steels us to join St. Paul and remember that “neither life nor death, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ” (Rom 8.38–39). While small individual congregations may cease to exist, the holy catholic church is alive, and the Word of God is to be sowed with every breath. What word will we bring? Will it be God’s true word of hope, or will it be a slick sales pitch?

Though I choose to not use the term “exile,” the metaphor and theology of being “decentered” or “transitional” is helpful for rural congregational exegesis. Beach makes the argument that “one can experience exile even when one returns to or remains in one’s

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<sup>34</sup> Patrick J. Carr and Maria Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*, Current Affairs / Sociology (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2011), 17.

<sup>35</sup> Small congregations and their communities expect everyone to serve as much or more than they are able. The various levels of skills make these practices somewhat difficult.

<sup>36</sup> R. Alan Rice, “Alban at Duke Divinity School » R. Alan Rice: The Demise of Haystacks and the Future of the Rural Church,” June 22, 2017, <https://alban.org/2017/06/22/r-alan-rice-the-demise-of-haystacks-and-the-future-of-the-rural-church/>.

<sup>37</sup> “Alban at Duke Divinity School » On Living in a Dying Church.”



homeland.”<sup>38</sup> American Protestant mainline Christianity is no longer “the center” of all things religious in our homeland. Brueggemann describes us as the “decentered exilic community”<sup>39</sup> or a “community of the decentered.”<sup>40</sup> Beach uses the phrase “countercultural” and believes this fuels our desire for a homecoming, “Though we currently live away from our ultimate home, there is a hope that one day we will no longer be strangers and aliens in the world, that there will be a homecoming to end our exilic journey and bring us to the place where we were ultimately created to live.”<sup>41</sup> A vision of salvation sustains us, a vision that God is recreating the world and us, that there will be a time when the Harvest is done, and we are called Home.

### **Homecoming**

In both congregations, Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian Church, there is a focus on the biblical theme of “Homecoming” descriptive for entering God’s kingdom after life. First Presbyterian’s worship committee requested a summer worship series in 2018: “Life After Life.” A member suggested, John Piper’s “90 Minutes in Heaven”<sup>42</sup> and I chose Dale Allison’s “Night Comes”<sup>43</sup> as part of worship and sermon preparation. Copies of these books were passed from member to member. The series and books were extremely popular at both churches. As we spent time thinking about the scriptural

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<sup>38</sup> Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope after Christendom* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015), 21.

<sup>39</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Brueggemann, 61.

<sup>41</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 213.

<sup>42</sup> Don Piper and Cecil Murphey, *90 Minutes in Heaven* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Revell, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Dale C. Allison, *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things*, 2016.

promises of “going home” members began to share memories of seasonal harvests . Informal, private, and small group discussion gave sensory rich memories of the harvest season’s long hard days and nights. Harvest has weather limitations, for the grains must be very dry to prevent explosions in the elevators. Rain, wind, or snow can beat the stalks of corn to the ground making it almost impossible to harvest. Communities worked together, neighboring farm families moved from one field to the next, manually harvesting, hauling, plucking, and packing the ripe grains. Working until the sun went down and beginning in the light of dawn accidents were and remain frequent.<sup>44</sup> Women, men, teenagers and older children had a complex system of specific field jobs. Older children and women would stay with the babies and make meals for the laborers. Meals were enormous, carb and sugar heavy, perfect for heavy physical labor. Tildy Schmidt described meals for twenty-five people, with as many as twelve pies per meal.<sup>45</sup> Tables and chairs from other homes were placed outside and all gathered to rest, refuel, and plan for the rest of the day. These memories recall the biblical narrative of God’s table, spread in abundance, a feast much as described in Isaiah 25.6–8 “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” Harvest homecoming is very real to those who experienced such gatherings and common work.

Today, though large tractors have reduced the need for numerous field workers, many farm families continue to arrange special feedings, wives making popcorn and

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<sup>44</sup> Modern tractors use computer mapping and intense lighting allowing farmers to work through the night, however, this has increased accidents and solitude. Solitude is a part of the rise in mental health issues and rising suicide rates of farmers.

<sup>45</sup> Matilda Schmidt, *Rural Roots* (Iowa, 1980).

coffee at 10:00 PM and driving to the fields for conversations with their husbands.<sup>46</sup> In recent informal conversations, older folks of both congregations told me how much they miss harvest. It is not the physical hardship they miss, it is the sense of purpose, the common goal and community working together.

Rural farm families are also typically less sexist than many might suppose. While the most difficult physical work is often done by men, many men share their appreciation for their wives' physical strength and business aptitude. As I make regular home visits, descriptions of their spouses, include such phrases as, "She could lift a hog." "She worked in the field as soon as she finished the household chores." "We were always working together, and we never argued." In many family farms, the books and accounting were kept by the women, and as well as working outside the farm. This allowed for a dependable income stream as well family health insurance. When rural farming communities talk about harvest, it is with great longing and a slightly rose-tinted remembrance of what has been.

Hanson believes that most family farmers see the writing on the wall, a final harvest is coming for all family farms. Those who cling to their farm lives, do so without dreams, and defend their agrarian idea for two remarkably simple, concrete, and to some degree, selfish reasons. First, no one wishes to be the failed link in a great chain of succession. No one wants to "leave now, cash out, and be cast adrift, even when prudence and fairness to those in the present demand precisely that path, ...to admit inferiority... a betrayal of those on the other side." There is also a strong sense of

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<sup>46</sup> "Hot Evening Meals Fuel This North Iowa Farm Family through Fall Harvest," Latham Hi-Tech Seeds, November 17, 2018, <https://www.lathamseeds.com/2018/11/hot-evening-meals-fuel-this-north-iowa-farm-family-through-fall-harvest/>.

“otherness’ for farm communities, of belonging to a long line of unique individuals and families, rather than their children melding or being subsumed by their peers in contemporary America.”<sup>47</sup>

Farm communities are often portrayed in stereotypes. Especially the American prototype of a rugged individual facing uncertainty and beating the odds to win against those who would defeat them. Those who would defeat are often portrayed as liberal academicians, government officials or idealists, none of whom know anything about the real world of farming and none of whom have anything to offer the farmer and farm community. This contrary, solitary image is reinforced in media, music, political messages, and to a great extent by our churches. As rural small Christian congregations focus on personal salvation, the community theology becomes one of personal, earned grace. This reinforces the American mythology of “DIY” and is at least part of the reason for rising suicide in American Farm communities. The CDC terms this ‘farm stress’ and cites causes such as low income levels, high uncertainty of market and climate, lack of mental health resources, availability of guns, and the solitude of farming.<sup>48</sup> A Christian theology that focuses on individual, personal faith is not scriptural. Rather than a rugged individual able to secure self-salvation, the biblical narrative of salvation is most frequently expressing the salvation of a tribe, a nation, all people.

In our 2018 worship series on Life After Life, the focus was on heaven, personal salvation, and answering a member’s doubtfulness, “How can I be certain?” Our focus arose from the many funerals, retirement of farmers, growing disabilities among

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<sup>47</sup> Hanson, *Fields without Dreams*. Xii. Also Interview with D, Appendix K.

<sup>48</sup> George Jared, “CDC ‘Farm Stress’ Suicides a Rising Rural Health Concern,” May 14, 2019.

nonagenarian members. However, it was an unbalanced focus. Experiences of God's ongoing presence were overlooked. We had forgotten the privilege we have in gathering week after week, for worship, leadership decisions, fun, fellowship and special events. We needed to remember the blessings of community enjoyed here and now and focus on "the physical presence of other Christians as a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer"<sup>49</sup> and the health and hope of these congregations. We are called not only to look forward to our eventual homecoming in death or the promise of Christ's return, but to do so while responding to the ongoing inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Those of us who have enjoyed lifelong community inclusion, find it difficult to imagine what a life of isolation looks like, feels like and how quickly it may devolve into a form of hopelessness.<sup>50</sup>

Our response to God focused fellowship is "as usual" yet many live their lives alone. If we are to be a community of hope in God, we cannot allow our fears of change to imprison us, to set boundaries that do not allow others in and keep us focused on our fears and broken dreams. We are called to be God's people, to live into the Kingdom of God here and now rather than "the temptation ... to become self-preoccupied and self-indulgent."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Doberstein, *Life Together*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> May 2020, we are in COVID 19 self-isolation. In person worship is not occurring until we see a decrease in the number of cases and deaths. I am focusing on Bonhoeffer's "life Together" for Wednesday morning Facebook Live.

<sup>51</sup> Brueggemann, "Conversations Among Exiles – Religion Online," 631.

### Realized Eschatology, Ongoing Creation

A healthy church congregation will encourage a balance between personal spiritual growth and a community of faith that is continually strengthened and broadened by members' growth. Fred Craddock describes "realized eschatology"<sup>52</sup> as experiencing the "kingdom of God ...realized here and now."<sup>53</sup> Leaders and members are often confused by this term, as 'realized' is commonly meant as understood or believed rather than made physically material or embodied. It is difficult to find simple yet specific terminology for understanding the not yet and Kingdom at hand of eschatology. Mary Grey uses the phrase "time at the edges" that somehow fills the need for a different word and way of time.<sup>54</sup> A time at the edges captures the tension between the fulfillment of God's kingdom in the life of Jesus Christ and the coming fulfillment of that Kingdom. The tension comes from our real lives which do not seem to reflect this salvation here on earth where war, disease, climate change, and death prevail. The idea of time as a river that flows in one direction is how we experience life. God's time seems to flow differently, more broadly more sweeping, covering all the earth in tides that crisscross and wash continually in a pattern we glimpse but cannot fully perceive.

A healthy balance will encourage an imaginative use of language and images of God being present in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit – then, now and forever.

It is not a Kingdom "postponed... but there is also the unrealized abundance of life now, and even more tragic, no initiatives are taken to alter the condition in which misery and oppression continue. Just as observers can be over invested in the future, they can also be too confined to the present in what some refer to as

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<sup>52</sup> Fred B Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 206.

<sup>53</sup> Craddock, 206.

<sup>54</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 13.

“over realized eschatology. ...either view denies the other breaks apart the kingdom formula: already and not yet, in our midst and still to come, has come and will come. Jesus ‘words to the Pharisees (17 vv.20–21) and his words to his disciples (vv.22–37) join to teach the reader the complete formula.”<sup>55</sup>

We have become more focused on the apocalyptic nature of eschatology, revelation by angels or God’s messengers and the end of the current world and beginning of a new world. This could be considered a dominant empire paradigm designed to keep us from doing the work of God’s justice and judgement. A focus on the sweet by and by is effective in placating a community into placid passiveness. As one elder asked me, “Why stir the pot if the water isn’t boiling over?” A more imaginative hopeful reading of scripture involves stirring the pot wildly, seeing what spins out. Grey strongly suggests prophetic imagination formed by reconnecting with ongoing creation and “earth communities.”<sup>56</sup>

For the Harvesting Hope series, Scripture choices were made with a focus on God’s continuing creative work of creation. As a people steeped in growing, making and harvesting food, creation is a strong theme for their lives. Creation is here and now as well as then and later, a theme from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, the river of the water of life and the tree of life. The images of creation and the lack of control over much of what is crucial for making a living as a farmer, remain powerful reminders of our place in the universe. To name their life experiences as God’s harvest, is to give honor to their participation in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, embodied by Jesus Christ.

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<sup>55</sup> Craddock, *Luke*, 206–7.

<sup>56</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 43–58.

We have mortal bodies, as we age, we should be aware of our physical limits. God's power and plan will not be thwarted by human power seeking, desiring to control everything. Both congregations have a deep immigrant family farm history of work in the fields. Loss of control is physically and painfully obvious as the growing issue of floods and water damage, due to climate change are everyday life concerns. In the city of Greene, two severe floods in four years have driven home the human lack of control. Our language reflects that growing realization as our vocabulary has been transformed, "managing" a flooding river has become "coping with a flooding river." The Army Corp of Engineers is no longer considered the last best word in flood control. Instead a cooperative union of arborists, park and city council members, boy and girl scouts, the high school, and assorted volunteers has begun working together to give the river room for ebb and flow. Many of the rural people, especially farmers and farm families have a very real sense of the presence of the creator involved in their daily lives. The love of and connection to place is intertwined with the presence of God. Farmers share their love of the land, pride in the harvest, growing of crops, the changing seasons, the health and humor of herds and flocks. There is a very physical reality when you live surrounded by corn fields and the ever-present scent of manure.<sup>57</sup>

The theme of God's creation ongoing and never ending is one of the major themes of the Bible. A doctrine of redemption begins with creation, suggesting that "God is very much involved in an ongoing way with the creation, that Spirit that breathed life into the void breathes life into us, and that the incarnate God, Jesus our brother, redeemed us

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<sup>57</sup> AKA 'the smell of money'



through the grace of God.”<sup>58</sup> Understanding our part in creation, moves us from passive spectator to active participant. Passive implies not doing anything, or not responding. Most church members and leaders are doing plenty. We attend meetings, plan Vacation Bible School, try to gather a choir, look for large attendance at Easter and Christmas. Unfortunately, those activities are simply a repeat of what we have done and have proven unhelpful with the crisis of dwindling numbers and membership. We have not yet defined the “crisis”<sup>59</sup> as a community at large, exploring new vocabulary and syntax for what we are seeing and experiencing in this time of transition.

The prophet Jeremiah is a scripturally strong example for making meaning of the disconnect we are experiencing. God’s words to Jeremiah, opened his eyes to see and name the looming conquering of Jerusalem. Jeremiah worked through those visions, and images through some strange yet meaning making activities, especially Jeremiah 32.6–15.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah said, “The word of the LORD came to me ... <sup>9</sup> And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. <sup>10</sup> I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses, and weighed the money on scales. <sup>11</sup> Then I took the sealed deed of purchase, containing the terms and conditions, and the open copy; <sup>12</sup> and I gave the deed of purchase to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah, in the presence of my cousin Hanamel, in the presence of the witnesses who signed the deed of purchase, and in the presence of all the Judeans who were sitting in the court of the guard. <sup>13</sup> In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, <sup>14</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. <sup>15</sup> For thus says

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<sup>58</sup> L Shannon Jung, “A Theological Vision for Ministry in Rural America,” *Word & World* XX Number 2 (Spring 2000): 11. 150.

<sup>59</sup> Wilhelm J. Wessels, *Crisis Leadership Amidst Disruptive Change; The Case of the Prophet Jeremiah*, n.d. 28 – 41. I found this article extremely helpful in naming the crisis for leaders, that we do not yet have a solid name or definition for what we are seeing and experiencing. I was reminded that Jeremiah’s actions seemed a bit crazy and really angered the King. It is only in looking back at the times that we see the value of what Jeremiah was saying and doing.

the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

Spending a large sum of money to purchase land you cannot live on, will not live on, is a strong demonstration of hope. It is a great leap of faith to plant a tree you will never lie under or to plant a field which you will not harvest, or to harvest a field someone else planted. This image strikes the heart of rural communities especially farmers of the US where home and farm ownership are so central to our definition of success. One of the impacts of rising land costs has been a decrease in farmland ownership. Young or new farmers cannot raise millions for a new enterprise especially in a volatile farm economy. Leases have become more common and much more contentious. This further drives the disconnect between older generations who own the land and the younger, who lease.

Jeremiah's is a contrary image, in that the hope lies not in inhabiting the land now or even soon, it is that we all must wait for God's good time. We have no control over the time of completion. The harvest comes in God's time, not ours. In God's good time, the people will return to the promised land and a new harvest will be collected. It is so difficult for people with a strong work ethic to say and believe that we are not in control, only God is. If we put God first and preach Christ first, "We discover that we have needs that we cannot meet. We discover... Only God can meet those needs, only God will control. Salvation only comes together with God, in the presence of others. Only one thing is needful: love God."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jung, "A Theological Vision for Ministry in Rural America," 152.

## Theology of Worship

The Second Helvetic Confession defines preaching as, “The Word of God.”<sup>61</sup> A preacher should be a bit frightened by this belief and practice, with humility and preparation key to keeping a Godly perspective.<sup>62</sup> I am lifted by the commitment I made to be ordained as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament at my home congregation and carry that understanding to every congregation and community in which I live and serve. “The ministry of the church is shared by pastors and people, so that all together may fulfill the mission to which we are called in Jesus Christ. The particular responsibility of the ministry of the Word and sacrament is to build up the Word and serve the people of God, so that the Word may be rightly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly celebrated.”<sup>63</sup> We are asked constitutional questions reflective of four basic theological principles: God is made known as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer; Scripture is the unique and authoritative Word of God; God is specific, in place, time and people; and God calls a people, not merely a collection of individuals. This leads us to contextual preaching, which seeks to bring God’s Word into our daily lives, so that it makes a difference.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ liberates us to live beyond ourselves and our sinful nature. Through participation in the body of Christ, communities of faith encourage one

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<sup>61</sup> “Second Helvetic Confession” 5.004 Book of Confessions: Study Edition, (Office of the General Assembly, PC(USA), Westminster John Knox Press, 2017)

<sup>62</sup> Clayton Schmitt, J. *Is There a Crisis in Preaching?* (Class Notes 2018)

<sup>63</sup> *Book of Occasional Services: A Liturgical Resource Supplementing the Book of Common Worship*, 93–95. (The Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (USA). 1993, Geneva Press, Louisville, KY.)

another to serve as the priesthood of all believers.<sup>64</sup> Moses shared with Jethro (Exodus 18) the wonders of God’s activities on this earth, and Jethro became a follower of Yahweh, “Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh <sup>11</sup> Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them.” Seeking daily “God sightings” from members and friends, strengthens our relationship with God. As I share God’s activities in worship, especially in the sermon, from scripture and current reality, others may become convinced and their eyes opened to a new way of seeing the world. Together, we learn to depend on the Holy Spirit to give “us courage to pray without ceasing to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior”<sup>65</sup>

Faithful serving as Minister of Word and Sacrament, requires persistence and imagination in investigation of the Scriptures. It is a joy to dig deep into scripture, practice Exegesis, use original languages, find the historical context and ascertain the context of the community in which I serve. I strive for clarity, using specific simple phrases understood by a wide range of education and skills.<sup>66</sup> Practical application is key for an effective ministry, a church that does not know what to do with their experiences of God, is effectively useless. Sermons are meant to be daily guides, direct connections between God’s activity and our response in the dailiness of living, “to live holy and

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<sup>64</sup> “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 54 – 64.

<sup>65</sup> “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 66–68.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen W. Ramp, *John Calvin on Preaching by the Law*, 266. Word and World, Vol. XXI, Number 3. (Summer 2001 Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.) In gathering personal narratives, I discovered that many members of the two congregations attended one room rural schools and some did not complete high school due to financial and geographic difficulties.

joyful lives even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth.”<sup>67</sup> While some will say that every sermon must point to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I believe the overarching theme of creation, constantly being renewed and made alive through the power of the Holy Spirit is more inclusive of all scripture.

Denominational and historical connection to the full testimony of the Christian church is a humbling experience. To see so clearly now the sins of our past, push all of us to seek a more clear and Godly understanding of justice and mercy now. The Presbyterian Church is a confessional church. We believe our confessional statements teach us of the faith and our human limits in understanding God’s ways. The older confessional statements are particularly difficult to receive because of their exclusive language and context of war and strife. Between God’s Word and our understanding of that Word, there is a “tension of immanence and transcendence in real presence.”<sup>68</sup> These Confessions statements often demonstrate our failure to listen to God and our desire to shape God’s Word for our own use. Preachers are servants of Word, Sacrament and the real lives of our community and the greater world. We are called to build “Bridges to a better life”<sup>69</sup> but these statements remind us the preacher stands with the rest of humanity on one side of the bridge, merely pointing to God on the other side.

Reconciliation in Jesus Christ requires pastors and people be truthful about who we are and where we come from, so that our public and private lives match. If we say we

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<sup>67</sup> “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 73–75.

<sup>68</sup> Charles L. Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Pub, 1997), 126.

<sup>69</sup> David Maims. *Building Bridges to Action*. ([www.ChristianityToday.com](http://www.ChristianityToday.com). 1986)

believe God calls all people and the Word is for all then we cannot exclude someone. Even if we hate them. During our open “Concerns and Celebrations” worship time, a parishioner asked me about praying for ISIS fighters. I was stopped in my tracks “Yes, J we are supposed to pray for our enemies and that does include those fighters doesn’t it? Even though we hate how they act we are supposed to pray for them. This is very hard isn’t it?” Truth telling in worship leads to truth telling through all our life experiences. As often as I, the worship leader, tell the truth in love with the expectation that all want to be part of God’s family, so too members respond, and we are more honestly engaged. In an age of anonymous media messages, one on one conversation remains our most effective witness. If I speak my deepest held convictions will my actions be judged based on that proclamation? Will I bear up to that kind of scrutiny? As a teacher and preacher, I call other believers to make our experiences of God in the world known and alive. These conversations have yielded an abundant, unique, spiritual and physical harvest of lived out faith stories. When members share their lives, as an outsider, I often see emotional baggage, especially of guilt and remorse. These have often become part of their self-image to their own detriment. One 94-year-old gentleman shared his story of seeking the local doctor during a blizzard for his youngest brother’s difficult birthing. His brother was without oxygen for some time and hypoxia caused developmental issues. To this day, that gentleman holds himself responsible for his brother’s life condition, rather than acknowledging the heroic attempt he made to bring help to his struggling mother and father.

As a pastor, it is my gift to tell the truth in love as clearly as possible, especially in unexpected, difficult conversations. To say to a 94-year-old gentleman, “Oh my gosh you

really struggled to bring help. I hear you saying you kept and helped your brother, financially and emotionally, all his days.” To reframe his sense of guilt and point to God’s grace is a blessing. As I grow older, I find myself less anxious about time and conflict. Conflict is natural and will not destroy us unless we let it fester. Trusting where the Spirit leads, and the truths of Scripture, will bring us through those difficult conversations, allow us to courageously and honestly respond to the needs of those we have excluded, the abused, the broken, the homeless, those we fear and those we reject. The more we trust God, the more we are led to trust one another to hear God’s Words for all and proclaim salvation for their niece, grandson, neighbor, to hear and listen to “...the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.”<sup>70</sup>

Imagination, use of good art, and incorporation of all the senses, leads to a bigger view of the world and God. Good preaching and worship planning should intentionally seek ways to expand our view of God rather than shrink in on ourselves. We place too much emphasis on preaching if we forget it is encompassed with prayers, confessions, music, fellowship and sacraments. They all work together to build a broader more mindful proclamation. Childers reminds us this is a shared participation, a collaborative activity. Lifting up the harvest of daily experiences of hope and grace, allows us to name those small moments of hope and joy so that we do not lose sight of God’s continual creation work. In the short time of preparation and with untrained volunteers, we work to create a “feeling” a multi-sensory experience focused on God’s Word – the central

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<sup>70</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), ed., *Book of Confessions: Study Edition*, Revised [edition] (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 424. “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 65-71.

message of the scripture. As our members are consistent in attendance, we can more effectively build series and thematic experiences. While Arthur Hopkins believes ‘theater is always seeking unanimous reaction,’<sup>71</sup> we all come from a variety of places, contexts and experiences. Often that gap between preacher and member seems too broad to bridge. I passionately believe this occurs as often as it does, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Loving members of the community is often difficult. Again, there is often such a gap between us it seems unbridgeable. To spend time with members in conversation and build upon their faith narratives helps me to let go of my own baggage. In my context, a common year holds four to seven funerals. It is so difficult to say good-bye to the people we know, yet time and again, in our distress and grief, we hold to Jesus Christ. Those services in which we clearly testify to the promise of resurrection while living in a sinful broken world are the most powerful and moving worship services. For our small congregations it is the time we most clearly state who we are to the broader world.<sup>72</sup> We lay the personal life experiences of the departed alongside the biblical narratives of grace and salvation. We proclaim the partnership between faithful disciples and the faithfulness of God, and the world sees and hears that testimony. Our funerals are accompanied by lunch or receptions in which an abundant but simple feast is laid out and generously shared. Friends and families once again share those narratives, the life experiences, unique and yet common.

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<sup>71</sup> Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 124.

<sup>72</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Confessions*, 355. Declaration of Barmen, 8.17



In baptism vows, parents acknowledge they will raise their children to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, “with God’s help.” Eden Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, members, leaders, and pastor, have noticed a strong response at funerals. In the worship service, music, prayers and readings name and witness to the lifelong impact being in Christ made to the deceased. Personal testimony can be transformative and has meaning especially for younger members of the family. It is interesting how faith, so pivotal to older members is seldom spoken of directly to younger members of the family. These younger people are missing out on the connection between faithful living and their ancestor’s life. Perhaps we parents believe our actions speak louder than words. That is true. However, as the Ethiopian asked of Philip, “How can we understand the Word, unless someone explains it to us?”

### **Worship and Preaching in Transition**

In rural congregations, the need for worship planning aids and sermon skills is particularly frustrating for leaders and members as we continue to follow older traditions. Those traditions no longer connect with younger generations, children and grandchildren. Parents who grew up in church and brought their children to church regularly come to leaders asking “Why? Why don’t they attend church?” We remain unclear of how to bridge the gap and connect. One driving question is: “How do we, a biblical reliant people, reach a generation that does not consider the Bible the authoritative Word of God or worse considers it to be a tool of oppression?” Some members expect that the new preacher will bring in visitors and that preaching alone is what keeps visitors coming, and becoming members. However, the entire community’s actions and words, drive the message. From the moment people enter the door, how we greet one another, what

portions of the service most connect with the community, the words and hospitality offered, all serve as a form of preaching. Robert Jensen describes this as an enactment of the “story of creation and redemption by the God of Israel and the father of the Risen Christ.” Many would prefer the authority of preaching reside in a leader and be acknowledged as such, leaving the community’s involvement to actively listen to and be attentive of the Word as it is heard and opened.<sup>73</sup> My experience is both preacher and community, in cooperation and relationship with one another under the authority of God, both together, proclaim the words of creation and redemption. Through a straight-forward approach to the scripture, pointing to God’s activities within the day’s events, truth and our current social situation, the pastor and community build a bond of trust.<sup>74</sup> Repetition of phrases and images can be useful for clarity and memory, not only within a specific sermon but over the course of several weeks of worship. We begin to build a common “accent” that speaks directly of the Holy Spirit’s presence and continuing work within the faith community. This “accent” becomes a unique vocabulary, grammar and syntax for the whole community, binding us together in a shared experience. This “accent” becomes what Malina and Rohrbaugh call “antilanguage.” “Antilanguage” is the language of an “antisociety” a society within another society as a conscious alternative. “It is a mode of resistance, resistance which may take the form either of passive symbiosis or of active hostility and even destruction.”<sup>75</sup> The language of testimony and witness to the present experience of God’s kingdom demonstrates our belief that as

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<sup>73</sup> Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 68.

<sup>74</sup> Clarke, 69–75. Stanley Hauerwas sermon “Embodied Memory”

<sup>75</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 7.

disciples, we are called to a different way of living and seeing. This “antilanguage” or “accent” makes a public statement as well as binding together our faith community.

One issue with a strong “accent” is that others outside the group have difficulty understanding the antilanguage. Churches of long history and a core community are difficult to integrate newcomers. Preacher Andy Stanley<sup>76</sup> suggests shifting the conversation away from our usual language or accent, that points to the authority of scripture and instead point to the authentic “courage and faithfulness of the men and women behind our scriptures.”<sup>77</sup> This becomes a more inclusive language or accent, one that outsiders may more easily enter. Grace is communicated relationally, in contexts that reflect normal human experiences throughout the ages. This becomes a reminder that all people have experienced times of great change personally or as part of a larger community or nation. Rural small communities hold strong “theology of accompaniment. We accompany each other, we accompany the marginal, the about-to-be-foreclosed-upon and the displaced because we are faithful to God and the vision of the kingdom beyond rational calculation.”<sup>78</sup> Expressing this accompaniment alongside the presence of God in such times of hardship, builds a sense of connectedness through all times and places, embracing the other.

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<sup>76</sup> I found this article helpful in imagining how to reach people who do not attend church. This kind of witness occurs in funerals where we choose to lift the deceased person’s Christian gifts as a living testimony to how being in Christ makes a lifelong impact.

<sup>77</sup> Andy Stanley, “Why ‘The Bible Says So’ Is Not Enough Anymore,” *OutreachMagazine.Com* (blog), May 20, 2018, <https://outreachmagazine.com/features/19900-the-bible-says-so.html>. While Stanley is theologically conservative, this article has helpful preaching suggestions.

<sup>78</sup> Jung, “A Theological Vision for Ministry in Rural America,” 151.

An Eden Presbyterian church family had a farm fire in 2017. Insurance for farm buildings is expensive with many loopholes reducing reimbursement. The family lost their piggery, goat shed, farm truck, chicken coop, and all the animals, none were covered by insurance and the family loss was heavy. Eden Presbyterian Church held a fund raiser lunch gathering in several thousand dollars for the family farm restoration. Grace was experienced by this family as the community upheld their commitment to faithful discipleship. That narrative can be laid next to many scriptures that point to the eternal faithfulness of God especially in great loss and sorrows. One example might be rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, through God's appointed leaders, and how unexpected the Emperor's response was. Another such example is Hagar's wandering in the wilderness until she was met and named by God at the spring. Many such contemporary narratives are ongoing in small rural communities. First Presbyterian Church, in Greene for example, has been active in working on the Butler County Emergency Response Team.

Following the 2018 flood, a community board was reformed, and grants applied to cover the cost of equipment for holding flood waters back from Greene's main street. Now, as soon as the flood alarms are given, a rapid deploy flood barrier with sand and sandbags allows the community to curb water before it rises to street levels. Changes in the river front park encourages flood space rather than control. In many instances of personal family emergencies, a similar kind of accompaniment occurs.

A preacher with their ears open to faithful lives can bring these to the Sunday worship leading to a new habit of seeking and harvesting hope in God. Such an approach, personal testimony, is demonstrated in the missionary approach in the Book of Acts.

While Peter uses Jewish scripture within Jewish communities, he does not do that in Gentile communities, such as the household of Cornelius which included soldiers, servants, family and friends. Peter's core message remains the same, salvation in the forgiveness of sins. Each time the Holy Spirit "comes upon all who heard the message" and change, a major change is begun.

I believe the witness of Christians living out their faith, serves such a Spirit filled function. Fred Craddock lays emphasis on human experiences, on stories that give witness to our authentic experiences. "In the process... the very self comes out as the narrator being part of the narration. Emotions are brought out, reality of experience is expressed, and ventilation takes place."<sup>79</sup> In times of transition these stories, the life experiences of faithful people bring God's presence alive and make clear the inbreaking of God in our ordinary lives. "Story then, is not just a frill, an illustration, a diversion, or an entertainment (though it can fulfill those roles as well) ...It is a way by which and through which we come to know and understand ourselves, others, the world around us and even God."<sup>80</sup>

Members, preachers and congregational leaders are engaged with worship, member care, community outreach as well as discerning a vision for the future. Our priorities need a revision, with more focus on "visioning." Assembling facts and accurate data as part of making decisions should not exclude faith. "God calls congregations to ...faith-filled actions. They calculate the risks, gather their [resources] and move ahead in

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<sup>79</sup> Stephen, "Societas Homiletica » Alfred Stephen – From Dislocation to Relocation," 7.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen, "Societas Homiletica » Alfred Stephen – From Dislocation to Relocation." 5. From Kevin M. Brandt S.J., *Story as a Way of Knowing*, Kansas City 1997, viii.

faith. Faith moves mountains, feeds people spiritually, overcomes obstacles, and makes use of available resources.”<sup>81</sup>

### **Hope, Optimism, and Choices**

Hope is not small or insignificant. There is an old saying, “African women wear hope like a skin.”<sup>82</sup> The more desperate the situation, the more urgent the crisis, the stronger the hope. Perhaps, it is that in darkness, a single candle shines so very bright. Hope in the most extreme of crises is so contrary to common sense, it may even seem foolish. If we live in hopelessness, there is no exit, no way out, no way forward, and this leads to death of hope. Humans cannot live without hope for long.<sup>83</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that texts about choices, personal and community, will be judged by our just God who has strong words about law. Terror and fear of judgment must be addressed in sermons and worship along with the reminder that,

Our hope, through all our terrors, is that we are being saved. To hope does not mean we lie down before the terrors, however. For as long as we have strength to fight, it is both our nature and our privilege to do so. ...As preachers and believers, it is our job to struggle with the terrors, refusing to let go of them until they have yielded their blessings.<sup>84</sup>

A common expressed American cultural value is to equate hope with optimism. Optimism is the belief that “Everything will be fine we just have to hold on.” To my shame, I have said such rubbish myself in the pulpit. Optimism has a short shelf life and

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<sup>81</sup> Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why*, 1st ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 78.

<sup>82</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Grey, 6–10.

<sup>84</sup> Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 88.

those whose faith is built upon optimism, the ability of people to solve underlying social problems, we must perform to get things changed; we burn out.

“It is when the revolutions fails, despair set in, and the dreams are shattered... on a personal level when people have to face a future of unemployment, poverty, and isolating caring or severely disabled dependents – that the discovery of a God who suffers with us, who becomes vulnerable with us, is what sustains our hope.”<sup>85</sup>

The difference between hope and optimism is where or with whom, we put our trust. Beach describes hope as “generative” “(hope) sustains faith, inspires new initiatives and allows faith to be expressed in ways that facilitate the ongoing mission of God in the midst of exile.”<sup>86</sup> Apocalyptic hope, Kairos time, means to be watchful, mindful of where, when and how God is inbreaking into history<sup>87</sup> with the Kingdom here and now. In those moments of seeing, heeding God’s activity, we are invited to discern the will of God and make decisions that coincide with that discerned will. We ground our hope in the certainty that this will happen multiple times in our lives, as individuals and communities of faith. Every such experience opens our eyes, ears, and hearts a bit more, making God’s will more easily discovered, put into words, bear witnessed to others. Beach and Brueggemann point to ‘prophetic imagination,’ as a means of speaking the truth of God’s activity now, see God, praise God, proclaim God, while pointing to the future Kingdom of God. Christian leaders are called to speak a generative hope that sustains faith, inspires imagination and new initiatives and “allows faith to be expressed

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<sup>85</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 8.

<sup>86</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 140.

<sup>87</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 16–19.

in ways that facilitate the ongoing mission of God in the midst of exile.”<sup>88</sup> Sharon Welch suggests that God calls us into community with one another, witness to salvation in Jesus Christ and be in Christ within the community.<sup>89</sup> It is that kind of faithful hope that changes the world

Looking at the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah we see some imaginative narratives and actions that indeed stir the senses and provoke response. However, in their time, these were not popular words or actions. Most contemporary congregational preachers depend on a salary provided by the congregation or denomination. Jeremiah’s symbolic loin cloth actions demonstrating Israel’s sin and the necessity of repentance, is not the way to a secure financial living. For a preacher and congregation, to develop a strong vision of an alternative future, needs such dramatic images and narratives. Those “antisociety” experiences and language must be familiar to the preacher, leader, and members that they may speak in the common “accent.” This common accent or antilanguage allows members and leaders to easily step into those images, see their own lives conveyed and imagine a new direction without losing their firm foundations.

To change course implies we are going a certain direction, or that we know what direction we are following. Naming our current situation in an honest and thoughtful manner gives leaders and members a place to begin. Beach compares this to evangelism, “converting people from one way of seeing things to another.”<sup>90</sup> Both congregations have been aware of and named their decline years before my arrival. Session records of both

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<sup>88</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 140. It is noteworthy that both Brueggemann and Beach are pointing to a leadership “audacity” that is no part of seminary curriculum.

<sup>89</sup> Jung, “A Theological Vision for Ministry in Rural America,” 146.

<sup>90</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 143.



churches indicate at least one specific opportunity for a possible choice of new direction. These possibilities reflected the typical denominational response to declining member statistics. One such plan is to yoke parishes such as Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian church. Another is to merge two or more congregations of the same denomination into one rebranded congregation. Another is to design a nondenominational “unity” church with an agreed upon polity. In the history of Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian, many of the earlier suggestions were left without thought or discussion. These three options are typical for the crisis of American Christianity decline. Each option requires a certain adaptability but no new, prophetically liberative changes.

At this moment, Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian, both congregations have the financial freedom to spend time prayerfully discerning the “structural roots of our condition”<sup>91</sup> while prayerfully listening to God’s call, to be in Christ in this place. This place of freedom and choice will not last forever. Members and leaders have begun the naming process and now must begin discernment. What changes are called for and how will we implement those? Each congregation must choose whether to use their freedom to discern a new direction, a next stage in their faith lives or simply “run the clock out.” Our challenge is to discern God’s voice, be in Christ and follow with hope.

“In this sense... freedom is not to be understood in the light of hope, but in the light of despair. It is the condition of being forced that propels us to identify and move towards what is urgent in their existing and continuing situation. The condition of being forced can generate a hope which deprives us of an understanding of the structural roots of our condition and so gives the illusion of freedom from oppressed conditions.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Gerald M Boodoo, “Transgressive Theology or Transgressing Theology?” *VOICES: Theological Journal of EATWOT Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*, Transgressive Theological Voices, XXXVI, no. Number 2013/1 (March 2013): 20.

<sup>92</sup> Boodoo, 19–21. Enlightening article pointing to a privilege we have not named but have assumed.

It is the following with hope that feels most difficult. Naming our situation has felt like a breath of fresh air, breathing life into our conversations and leadership decisions. Discernment without follow through is useless, a waste of valuable time, “Planning doesn’t produce a future unless someone does something.”<sup>93</sup> Woolever and Bruce suggest a simple idea, strategy or plan in order to explain it well, and often, and begin the approach with care. Both congregations have a long tradition of starting something new, a new location, building, even a synod.<sup>94</sup> Each Harvesting Hope Festival initiated a conversation about our identity and our community changes. The tricky part is continuing to present facts and data, while discerning new directions and paths and beginning that transition.

### **Hope Focused Worship and Preaching**

It is my personal belief and experience that as excellent worship and personal spiritual growth strengthen, and remain the focus of leaders’ time, the congregation grows more involved with the community and gains strength as well as hope. The key is “effectiveness.” A pattern of Christian praxis develops as worship and sermons focus not only on inward spiritual growth but on putting that discipleship into practice within the community at large. Social capital and bridges are built as members pray by name and situation for the community at large, naming prayer increases members and leaders’ engagement within the community. The community responds to this naming encouraging

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<sup>93</sup> Woolever and Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary*, 63.

<sup>94</sup> Eden Presbyterian Church was part of creating the Western Synod of the Presbyterian Church, a synod created by Presbyterian churches in which German was the primary language.

further naming and greater private prayer and worship. This praxis of naming and claiming develops congregational language of practical ministry and theology.<sup>95</sup> The testimony of daily lives within the community makes entering worship easier for those outside.

The definition of “meaningful worship” from Bruce and Woolever is only helpful to an extent, as it is based entirely on the measured responses of folks attending church the day of the survey. “Unfortunately, we do not have a parallel Meaningful Worship Index score for people who are not currently attending worship services anywhere.”<sup>96</sup> The index also brings little practical aid to the preacher, other than to emphasize the importance of joy and inspiration. As they note, current worshipers are either experiencing such responses during worship or they are committed to the church for some other reason, such as family connections and traditions.

For preacher and members, accustomed to worship of a certain type or style, the temptation is great to simply boost one portion or another, change the hymnal, use visuals gather a praise band. These are certainly garner attention and short lived excitement. The question remains, how do we live out and speak God’s Word beyond the walls of the building? How do we witness or give testimony in such a way that others feel empowered to make the first step into the church? Personal invitation?

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<sup>95</sup> David Walker, “Personal Prayer, Church Attendance and Social Capital among Rural Churchgoers: Quantitative Empirical Methods as a Tool for Mission and Ministry,” *Rural Theology* 9, no. 1 (July 29, 2011): 39–47, <https://doi.org/10.1558/ruth.v9i1.39>. 45. While there are limitations on how social capital is measured, this is one of the ten qualities listed by Woolverton and Bruce for extraordinary congregations. This also points to a gap between these two congregations which has resulted from geographic location, Eden is rural, a good ten-mile drive from the nearest city, Osage. First Presbyterian Church, Greene, is located within the city of Greene.

<sup>96</sup> Woolever and Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary*, 30.

In harvesting member's narratives, those moments when God was evident to them, the preacher makes a point. This practical lived out faith has great meaning and is worthy of acknowledgement not only privately but publicly, including the worship space. While much of the world does not esteem practical learning or the daily small moments of God sightings, these are precisely the moments we are called to seek out. Jesus Christ was born as flesh and blood to a human woman and man. Jesus did all those daily things that we have done. Jesus learned and taught both practical and intellectual wisdom. Preachers with graduate degrees are often called out as impractical, or too kind and optimistic, by their ruling board. The truth is both academic wisdom and practical wisdom together, bring much to the table. Both kinds of people with both kinds of wisdom, are called to the very same table by the very same Lord whom we all serve and follow.

Jesus talks and learns from poor men and women. He uses parables of sowing and reaping, of shepherds and fishing. Poor people's work is lifted up as, "the Kingdom of God is like a woman who had ten pennies." In Jesus there is no dualism of wisdom. Practical and intellectual, praxis-pedagogy, both point towards the ongoing new creative work of God.<sup>97</sup>

"The educational project of Jesus is ... a public project...[It] is not an academic teaching restricted to the members of a tribal school trained in the Law...nor is it a secret religious teaching given only to a select group of initiates which have been admitted to the covenant of grace."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 90–91.

<sup>98</sup> Grey, 91–92.

In speaking hope, preachers seek to express time and creation in far different ways than the world. As Jesus used daily life experiences, so we use those same experiences to point to a vision of God far deeper than we usually acknowledge. Jesus sings us love songs, of God's desire to be joined with us, an intimacy only hinted at. We fear to imagine we could be so important to the Holy One, fearful of claiming too much.

Perhaps we fear to claim too much, for then we would have to give so much. We so often build walls to prevent anyone, especially the Holy One from being too close, too connected. If we gave ourselves over to the creator so wholly would we remain who we think we are? Or would we be so transformed, so newly created that no one would recognize us? I believe the answer is frequently, yes. We fear being made new, we long to hide into our old selves and cling to our old stubborn, sinful ways. Thus, we need daily confession "forgive us our sins" and a push to remember "as we forgive those who sin against us."

## THERE IS SO MUCH HOW CAN YOU WRITE MORE?

### **Mind the Gap**

The PC(USA) has an intentional “wall” between incoming and outgoing pastors, to prevent the old pastor from “contaminating” the new pastor. A fresh start is needed to prevent some of the old issues and sins from being perpetuated. However, this gap results in little or no congregational context for the incoming pastor. The new pastor starts from ground zero, in a new setting, with no idea of the who, what, when, where, or how of this new congregation. Every community and especially every congregation is unique, filled with a diverse group of members each with a unique faith story and theology. Most congregations have no written history, pictures and records are hidden away in file cabinets and old closets. Thus, pastors new to the community have little guidance for ministry. In addition, while much has been written about the socio-economic realities of rural America, there is little published specific to preaching within rural small churches. This research is my part in bridging that gap, to point out tools and resources for more theologically sound worship services to serve such contexts without waiting for several years of system analysis.

In looking for resources on worship development for the rural areas, I noted that many preaching and worship planning books speak in general terms about discerning the pastor’s congregational and local context. This discerned context is then used to build

worship word banks<sup>1</sup> for connecting listeners to the Word.<sup>2</sup> There is a gap between learning how to preach and design worship and how to discern a preacher's new specific context. Tisdale suggests preachers consider preaching as a form of folk art, arising from the narrative of peoples' daily lives and organically suitable for the context. This invites the preacher into conversations that otherwise would never be held.

While waiting and developing a fully diagrammed emotional system plot or church family tree, the preacher can begin harvesting, gathering these stories immediately. Especially a new preacher as they make the rounds of member homes. Asking faith questions may feel a little awkward for those unaccustomed to such personal witness, the pastor can make this easier by sharing their own "God sighting of the day." Recount a moment of grace, the chipmunk you did not hit with the car, the beauty of the early morning, the yapping dog who greets you at the door, are all easy examples. Once the words of grace or salvation, creation, or hospitality are noted, you can begin to tease out those stories. Members who are asked, will respond, and the preacher who honors those stories, respectfully responding with thanks and prayer will also be respected.<sup>3</sup> This may sound simple, but it sets a tone and pattern for developing a pastoral relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Nieman, *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Patrick Fagan et al., "Outcome-Based Evaluation: Faith-Based Social Service Organizations and Stewardship," The Heritage Foundation, March 29, 2007, /civil-society/report/outcome-based-evaluation-faith-based-social-service-organizationsand; Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art (Fortress Resources for Preaching) - Kindle Edition* (Minneapolis, MN 55440: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997); Sam Chamelin, "Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Churches - Prophetic, Priestly, & Pastoral," Collegeville Institute, July 12, 2018, <https://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings/sustainable-agriculture-rural/>; This list is not exhaustive.

<sup>3</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*. Location 1802

Seeking out the faith stories of members will organically feed into preaching truth and strengthen the relationship between their daily lives and God.

### **Personal and Local Histories**

Home and care facility visits plus harvest tractor “ride along” provide a new pastor with a base of informal insight into the unique families and personalities of rural farm centered small congregations.<sup>4</sup> “Congregations and their day-to-day world can be fertile soil for discovering symbols capable of communicating the gospel in imaginative and transformative ways.”<sup>5</sup>

Putting people’s life experiences into the larger context of the region has been an ongoing process including books and articles about general farming, history and contemporary news, along with more specific history of these two small cities. As pastor, we have access and time to read over congregational records: Session, Deacon, Women’s Guilds, Men’s Studies, Mission Committee and Trustee minutes and rolls. Every small town also has their own records, personal and community memories pointing to socio-economic change over the past 150 years. This combination of congregational and community research is notable not only for what is described, but what is missing.

In reading through one hundred and fifty years of session records I noted a lack of description of natural disasters. Eden Presbyterian Church Session records note the need to change how votes are taken for congregational meetings due to the “flu epidemic.” I discovered this refers to the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, which killed 7500 Iowans and

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<sup>4</sup> Tisdale, 904.

<sup>5</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*. Location 1707.



702 soldiers at Camp Dodge. In a population of 2,358,066, this was not a small event. Floods, blizzards, tornadoes, are all covered in such mundane terms making this reader gasp at the lack of exclamation points. In a similar manner, personal memories of crossing fields during the night in a blizzard to get the doctor, staying multiple days in the gas station because of a blizzard, floods that wiped out houses and businesses, cows freezing in the fields before anyone could get them into the barn, are all described in simple, calm terms. This is their context, emergencies, and disasters happen, face them, make your best choice, and move along.<sup>6</sup>

Clayton F. Thomas describes each person as a “unique library,” bringing their experiences to life where others would have dismissed it.<sup>7</sup> Certainly this is a library worthy of investigation. One unique resource I discovered has been *Rural Roots*,<sup>8</sup> a family diary, a detailed history of the Schmidt family from Otto Schmidt’s arrival in Iowa from Germany in 1867 until just before the author Matilda’s passing in 1980. The Schmidt family is one of several that began Eden Presbyterian Church. The historical society of Rudd,<sup>9</sup> Iowa designed a collection of newspaper articles and personal

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<sup>6</sup> Following the 2016 Greene river flood, FEMA offered several residents of Greene, buy outs of their riverfront properties. Almost no one took the buyout, believing that a “500-year flood” would not recur in their lifetimes. In 2018, the next major flood, FEMA did not make such offers. While I was sad for their loss and struck by their lack of foresight, the response of owners has been calm, “That’s life.”

<sup>7</sup> Clayton F. Thomas, *Glimpses of Greene: Selected Historical Studies* (Tucson, AZ: Alphagraphics, 2018), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Matilda Schmidt, *Rural Roots* (Iowa, 1980). Self-published by Matilda Schmidt, mother of Francis and Bill Schmidt, members and Ruling Elders of Eden Pres. In each generation, Matilda Schmidt notes two or more children from each family left the area and farming to enter a different profession including Engineering, Dentistry and Geology.

<sup>9</sup> Joyce Navratil, *Rudd History: 1869 to 2019* (Audubon, Iowa: Jumbo Jack’s Cookbook, 2019).

remembrances. *A History of the Synod of the West*<sup>10</sup> along with the German Session and Ladies Guild records the central role Eden Presbyterian Church has played in this region. First Presbyterian Church in Greene is not part of the history in *Glimpses of Greene*, but the book does contain histories of families of that congregation. These resources and histories were helpful in following conversations with members of both churches, as their memories of small one room schools and farm practices before tractors can be difficult to understand. It is not that I have never heard of such things, it is the difference in my life experience and theirs. Theirs requires real thought and discernment for me to begin to fully appreciate. As Tisdale notes this harvesting of stories, individual and community, allows us to write a narrative of the congregation. These narratives highlight the work and daily living in faithfulness of ordinary people, to “enflesh large universal issues and themes in local and particular ways.”<sup>11</sup>

In August 2014, I asked members of both Eden Presbyterian (Rudd) and First Presbyterian (Greene) to write and share their hopes for their church. Those anonymous responses were dramatically different from one congregation to the other.<sup>12</sup> Pretty boxes hold these hopes and dreams on their respective pulpits. In preparing for worship and leadership meetings, I reread these “hopes” for people and congregations and prayerfully consider how those impact the days decisions. Beginning in 2014, I surprised farmers by

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<sup>10</sup> H. Gene Straatmeyer, *The Synod of the West: A History of the Presbyterian German Synod of the West and Its Churches* (North America and International: Trafford Publishing, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*. Location 1676

<sup>12</sup> See Table 1

requesting time with them during harvest.<sup>13</sup> I had no knowledge of farming and wanted to learn from them. These became deeply personal times of learning for me. Farmers and I were surprised at the conversations that flowed in a small noisy tractor cab. They recounted family histories, changes in farming and the communities, of how enmeshed the communities are, yet how isolated each community is from the other. Until recently, bad roads and weather and the demands of farm work kept most families and communities within a small geographic location. The results were small self-sustaining towns with most everything available that was needed by local people.

For a broader context specific to agriculture, preachers may turn to the local Public Radio and the County/State Extension Office as well as weekly local newspapers. The county extension offices also offer helpful workshops for locals and the newly local. Talking to local folks about what you heard or read, and special points of interest lead to new vital discoveries that help a new pastor better understand the people and parishes where they preach.<sup>14</sup>

In searching through both congregation's Session records, significant events were uncovered of which current members had no knowledge. These and milestone events were shared with the congregations as part of their Harvesting Hope Festivals.<sup>15</sup> Some

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<sup>13</sup> There are two major events in farming: planting and harvest. Both seasons are very reliant on weather. However, planting requires a lot of attention to the grids and sprayers. Farmers need to be extremely focused at planting. Harvest is much more relaxed in that the grids drive the tractor. Harvest then is a better time to ride with and talk to farmers.

<sup>14</sup> In my area there are numerous unique museums. The Hormel SPAM museum in Austin, MN. John Deere Museum and factory in Waterloo, IA. The Grout Museum in Waterloo. Mason City's McNider Art museum focuses on Iowa artists such as Frank Lloyd Wright, James Cone, Grant Wood, and William Baird. Decorah, Iowa has a Norwegian Museum with original structures imported from the home villages of local immigrants.

<sup>15</sup> Appendix C

events brought laughter. Many events from more than one hundred years ago reminded them of current events. Through naming and holding these events and remembrances up during worship, in part of the time we usually focus on scripture, members are reminded that God has been, is and will be with them.

### **Big Picture Issues of Rural Midwest**

Primary questions for this pastor (and no doubt other pastors in similar situations) serving rural congregations and in small towns are: What difference does it make if these rural small towns disappear from the United States? Why does it matter if the Midwest, the center of the country is “hollowed out?” Why does it matter if educated and talented young people leave the area and the left behind population age and the local small-town economy erode? What does the Christian church say about this?

The socio-economic issues of the Midwest “brain drain” has been extensively studied by sociologists, political analysts and news organizations. NPR alone has more than 190,000 articles, blogs, and shows specific to the Midwest. David Brooks, wrote in December 2001, of the divide in the country between “the coastal Blue areas” and the “Red heartland.”<sup>16</sup> Brooks’ tone is similar to many who view the Midwest as a flyover portion of the country or in his terms, the “meatloaf divide.” Midwest people, the so-called “Red” portions of the country, are for the most part less educated, with lower salaries and lower costs of living. The lower cost of living is most evident in housing costs and property values. The higher cost of food and fuel somewhat offsets that benefit.

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<sup>16</sup> David R. Brooks, “One Nation, Slightly Divisible - The Atlantic,” December 2001, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/12/one-nation-slightly-divisible/376441/>. Blue areas refer to liberal Democratic voting districts found in the large urban areas of west and east coast. Red area refers to the more rural, conservative, Republican voting districts found throughout the country.

People in the red zone do not typically purchase as many of the passing fashions and tech toys as do the “coasties” in the blue zone. Brooks describes the difference as “the People versus the Powerful.” Often those who live in the rural small towns speak in these terms about government employees, university professors, politicians, and sometimes, preachers.

Sociologists Carr and Kefalas, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, wrote “*Hollowing Out the Middle*” which focused on “Transition to Adulthood” based out of Ellis Iowa.<sup>17</sup> Their research provides insight into the social and economic structures of how “brain drain” occurs and it’s damage to rural regions. The drain begins with public school staff and families working together encouraging bright, more adventurous students to leave for better opportunities, usually college or military service.

“Teachers, parents, and neighbors feel obligated to push and prod the talented kids to succeed. Yet, when their best and brightest follow their advice, the investment the community has made in them becomes a boon for someplace else, while the remaining young people are neither afforded the same attention nor groomed for success of any kind.”<sup>18</sup>

This has resulted in a further generational issue as those with less drive or education remain in the area and find fewer job opportunities, beginning or continuing a cycle of rural poverty.

### **Big Insights into Personal**

Connecting these big picture issues with a specific farm family’s personal history is found within Victor Davis Hanson, *Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian*

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<sup>17</sup> Ellis is a pseudonym for a small town not far from both Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian churches. References in the book point to the Mason City, Iowa area.

<sup>18</sup> Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing out the Middle*, 24.

*Idea.*<sup>19</sup> Hanson's family is a raisin farm family in the San Joaquin Valley, California. Hanson presents vivid images from his family's struggle to remain solvent while riding out the 1983 Raisin Farm crisis. In answer to the question, "What does it matter?" Hanson responds, "It is my simple contention, supported solely by instinct and suppositions, that the entire cargo of our current unhappiness – materialism, crime, spiritual emptiness – is an inverse proposition to the number of people who are both rural and agrarian."<sup>20</sup> Power against People as Brooks might say.

In describing how the Hanson family came through the farm crisis of 1983 and continues to hold onto the land, he lays out a very typical situation for farm families. Some of the family hold full time jobs off the farm in order to secure insurance and steady income. The family continues to make decisions trading the stability of the farmland for their own health and financial security. Farmers will "ignore your own family's drinking water supply pooled not far below in a subterranean lake beneath your tractor. Turn a blind eye to your son on the daily spray rig."<sup>21</sup> The use of retirement savings and insurance policies to keep farms afloat is common.

Hanson's descriptions explain much of the Iowa farmers current situation. Butler County (home of First Presbyterian, Greene) was studied by the CDC some years ago<sup>22</sup> seeking the cause of Iowa's high rate of cancer patients. While no single cause was

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<sup>19</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *Fields Without Dreams: Defending the Agrarian Idea* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Hanson, *Fields without Dreams*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Hanson, 70.

<sup>22</sup> DF informal discussion in 2019.

discovered, cancer remains Iowa's second highest cause of death. Since that study, Roundup, a popular industrial and personal use herbicide, has been linked to lymphoma and leukemia. Before Roundup, farmers frequently used a spray form of DDT. Nitrate water pollution has become another such issue caused by field application of manure and water runoff as well as over saturation all leading to contaminated wells.<sup>23</sup> Iowa water continues to be a major political and social issue. City dwellers blame farmers for nitrates and the tiling process which allows water to move quickly out of the fields. Farmers are pushed to plant and harvest without standing water and the increase in rains and warmer temperatures has caused numerous issues for farmers.

Hanson's descriptions lead one to see a common thread in agrarian societies and the crisis of systemic structural change. "Life appears to go on, but wounds of a decade of that magnitude eventually reach the vital organs, fed and nourished by an evil triad of bitterness, frustration and remorse." "The people who fell sick, died, went alcoholic, chose suicide, or simply gave up and moved away." "I see now for the first time, a decade later, that they all had origins of their ruin in that most awful year, 1983."<sup>24</sup> Iowa farm workers suffer from rising suicide rates and opioid addiction. The CDC now notes that stress, the uncertainties of farming along with lack of health resources and isolation all contribute to the rise in opioid addiction among rural communities. The number of noticeably mentally unhealthy folks in this area is frequently distressing for pastors with

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<sup>23</sup> Eden Presbyterian has a well for the church and manse. It is the second well, as the first was found to be non-potable. When the testing was done and a new well needed to be sunk, the congregation was rocked. Many decried the cost and necessity. If the water was good enough for our parents, grandparents, it is good enough for the pastor and family. This pastor drinks bottled water because all the groundwater in this area is nitrate laden.

<sup>24</sup> Hanson, *Fields without Dreams*, 22.

few resources. There are few mental health professionals serving the area. Many of the rural counties are policed by a limited number of county and state services, with little training in mental health issues. Mental health remains a stigma seldom discussed. Many farm households are very isolated, the harsh winters and poor roads increase this isolation.<sup>25</sup>

### **Exile and Stayers**

Seeing the logistics of membership and locale population shifts, we pastors, in rural areas may begin to sense that we are serving an abandoned place and people. Preaching with people on the fringes of American society leads towards the metaphor of the American Christian Church as a community in exile. The essays in *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, opened this metaphor as a prophetic truth warranting further exploration. To live as an “Antisociety” as defined by Halliday,<sup>26</sup> members employ a unique language of proclamation, so unusual in our consumer, individualistic, postmodernity culture, it is “confrontive, so in violation of all that contemporary Americans think they know, that it requires no less than a miracle to be heard.<sup>27</sup> In this sense of displacement and un-centeredness “exiles experienced a loss of the structured, reliable world that gave them meaning and coherence ... in a

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<sup>25</sup> Eden Presbyterian members have been plagued by a local woman who believes an outrageous web of conspiracy of local police, volunteer firefighters, neighboring farmers and the judicial system, caused her husband and son’s deaths. From time to time she uses social media to spread these theories. Many rural areas host several small survivalists and unique

<sup>26</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 6–7.

<sup>27</sup> Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*, 7.



context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked, trivialized, or dismissed. Faithful living is experienced as a social, cultural, moral, exile.<sup>28</sup>

If preachers can mine this metaphor without giving way to the casual defining of American Christianity as persecuted by everything from holiday coffee cups to retail holiday greetings, the exile metaphor can indeed be an excellent resource for discernment. However, the enmeshment of “Americanism” with Christian faith has resulted in diminishing those who truly are exiles, those who reside on the fringes and are truly persecuted. I have chosen to avoid using such language as “exile” or “resident alien” while combing this metaphor for preaching and textual aids.

Among those preaching aids, Brueggemann and Beach suggest community-based pastoral care in which the losses are named, claimed and lamented. As this sense of being forgotten and abandoned by God is felt by shrinking rural communities and congregations, prophetic words and laments as in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and the Psalms, may provide rich images to express sorrow and rage. In working with refugees, and in preaching, exiles need to take with them “old habits, old customs, old memories, old photographs.”<sup>29</sup> This process creates a community narrative and may give voice to traditions no longer followed but still remembered.

This image of the community taking time to name their rage, loss, and lament their sorrow, and name those who have gone before is familiar as pastoral care. Time to name and sit with those emotions allows grieving, communal and personal loss and sorrow, a journey that cannot be rushed. Naming their connections over the generations

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<sup>28</sup> Clarke, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Clarke, 15.

equips a congregation to claim their place, their status as a community that began with a desire to faithfully follow God. Naming their continued desire to remain together and continue the journey of living as disciples of Christ together, allows this small “antisociety” words for claiming the power of the Holy Spirit for the ongoing journey. Grieving is a time of self-exploration, naming feelings and claiming time for the healing process, however, there is a danger a community may become self-absorbed “so preoccupied with self that one cannot ...rethink, reimagine, and redescribe larger reality.”<sup>30</sup>

Homecoming, as God’s promise made to the Israelites that the day would come when they would return home, is a strong theme for rural communities. In more suburban areas, where many American Christians, are not linked to a specific place or community, this has been subsumed into a personalized salvation theology. Personal salvation has come to negate the community focus of scripture and obscures the “kingdom of God” coming near both here and now with the advent of Jesus Christ and in God’s good time to come.

In rural communities, homecoming remains a strong metaphor. As part of ongoing continuing education, a Stephen Ministry meeting suggested the book, *Don’t Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*.<sup>31</sup> The book and class brought forward processes learned from grieving families and my own personal grief. We cannot rush grief for it follows no timeline. Proverbs 25.20 states “Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or

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<sup>30</sup> Clarke, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth C Haugk, *Don’t Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to Those Who Are Suffering* (St. Louis, Mo.: Stephen Ministries, 2004).

like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.” When we don false cheery faces, those who are grieving are then encouraged to do the same. However, to assume an aspect of false joy, rather than express their true sorrow and loss simply intensifies anger and loss. We often do this to avoid heavy, hard conversations, filling the air with platitudes, rather than tears and lament. This causes us to shut our true selves down, cut ourselves in half, and set a boundary on our experience of God’s presence amid grief. Speaking the words of grief and anger, sorrow and loss, allows us to begin a healing journey.

Just as we do this with grieving individuals, pastors and leaders often want to do the same with their congregations: glossing over loss, hiding the truth about transition and change. Haugk notes that this false cheerfulness can “lead suffering Christians into habitual hypocrisy ...they hide their feelings. Feigning cheerfulness saps energy and causes people to miss the chance to experience true joy.”<sup>32</sup> If we never admit we are at the bottom, grieving and sorrowing, and seeking God’s presence in that time, how can we explain our personal and community experiences of woe and sorrow? Even the common theology that this time of sorrow and change is God’s will, is quite unhelpful. Doug Manning writes, “God does not gossip. He does not talk about you to others. No matter how convincing they may sound, they do not know the will of God for you.”<sup>33</sup> This is also true for pastors and leaders of the congregation. We may think we know what God’s plan

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<sup>32</sup> Kenneth C Haugk, *Don’t Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to Those Who Are Suffering* (St. Louis, Mo.: Stephen Ministries, 2004), 116–17.

<sup>33</sup> Haugk. 114

is, but no one does, and it is hubris to pretend otherwise. We gather in community in order to bear one another's burdens, not cover them up with fake platitudes.

### **Imaginative Use of Testimony**

In *Queer Eye*, season 2, episode 1, “God Bless Gay” there is an intertwining of two seemingly disparate communities, the LGBTQIA community represented by the “Fab Five” and the rural African American Christian community of Gay, GA., population 89.<sup>34</sup> One of the Fab Five, Bobby, gives witness to his personal loss of faith and community when he claimed his self-identity as a gay man. Over the course of the episode, we hear his witness to true exile, the struggle for a living, personal security issues, the lack of a real home and family. He is given time and space to express his righteous anger over the injustice the Christian church, through his home congregation, exhibited and continues to exhibit. Later, Miles, who has also experienced such loss from his home church, receives true hospitality from his church home, through the witness of his mother. It is not the authority of scripture that gives Bobby and Miles space to grieve and reclaim the promise of God’s great love, it is the personal witness of Tammye, the testimony of the “Fab Five,” and the congregation’s welcome of Myles’ back into his home church on Homecoming Sunday.<sup>35</sup> This is the “enfleshed” imaginative word we need to preach and live out, perhaps especially in rural congregations.

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<sup>34</sup> “‘Queer Eye’ Recap, Season 2, Episode 1: ‘God Bless Gay,’” accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/queer-eye-recap-season-2-episode-1-premiere.html>. This show is all about shared narratives that result in transformation and healing.

<sup>35</sup> Andy Stanley, “Why ‘The Bible Says So’ Is Not Enough Anymore.”

## Eschatology and Theology

In preparing for a 2018 summer series on “Life After Life,” I read several books of those who have died and then been resuscitated including one authored by Cecil Murphy and Don Piper<sup>36</sup> as well as *Night Comes*.<sup>37</sup> The series focused on God’s Kingdom come, using old familiar hymns and pointing to the unknowable mystery of what comes next. The sermons and our discussions during worship allowed us to focus on trusting God and being in community together to hold each other up in prayer for sorrows and celebrations.

For the 2019 project of Harvesting Hope, to speak hope to loss, I gathered and read four books: *The Church in Exile*,<sup>38</sup> *Cadences of Home*,<sup>39</sup> *Preaching from Memory to Hope*,<sup>40</sup> and *Exilic Preaching*.<sup>41</sup> Each contained theologies and preaching from memory of loss and celebration of embodied hope for congregations in times of dramatic transition from the center of American culture to the fringes; for those from many members to few, and those in congregations transitioning from youthful exuberance to graying and sighing. Beach quotes A. W. Tozer “What we think about God is the most

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<sup>36</sup> Don Piper and Cecil Murphey, *90 Minutes in Heaven* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Revell, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Dale C Allison *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things*, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope after Christendom* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Walter. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles*,

<sup>40</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 1st ed., The Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, 2006 (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Clarke, *Exilic Preaching*.

important thing about us.”<sup>42</sup> How we think about God, guides “how we decide to journey through the reality of the church’s exile these days.... As it was for Israel and the early church... our current circumstances will ...reveal new things about who God is and how He works in this world.” This points us towards the ongoing creation and recreation of the world through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In thinking about eschatology and realized eschatology I turned repeatedly to Fred Craddock’s commentary on Luke.<sup>43</sup> While each gospel has a specific end times lens, the present experience of the Kingdom of God is somewhat more difficult to tease out. Craddock’s book helped in that process.

### **Rural, Land, Creation Theology**

Having preached the Harvesting Hope series, conducted informal group conversations, held specific personal interviews of members from both congregations, read through the survey results, and listened to both congregations speak honestly of their thoughts and concerns for the future, I discovered two authors who are relatively new to me, Mary C. Grey and Wendall Berry. It was the combination of the Holy Spirit, Mary C. Grey’s *Outrageous Hope*<sup>44</sup> together with Berry’s book of essays, *The Art of Loading Brush*,<sup>45</sup> that finally led me to a new direction for preaching with these two congregations I serve. I will be working with a Creation theology lens for the coming months as pastor, leaders, and members, continue to reimagine their lives as faithful disciples in a changing

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<sup>42</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 170.

<sup>43</sup> Craddock, *Luke*.

<sup>44</sup> Mary C. Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope: Prophetic Dreams for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush: New Agrarian Writings* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017).

world. What that might look like, only God knows. I hold to the hope in Christ Jesus that these faithful people will continue as faithful disciples living out their faith in whatever new form their worship community may take.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Due to many circumstances, my husband Rich and I will be moving back to Georgia closer to our children. I pray constantly for these loving faith communities as they begin to consider what the future may hold, and where God is calling them.

## HARVESTING HOPE TEXT CHOICES

### **Process**

The special approach to this thesis is the use of personal narratives. In community worship and fellowship events, members will share their memories of previous saints and ministry, connecting the past and present. Members will be encouraged to claim the hope in Jesus Christ shining from the past into the present and imaginatively engage in a future of hope, rather than focusing on death's heavenly reward. Such a spiritual practice takes time to develop. Tricia Gates Brown describes the purpose of such a habit as, "to facilitate the recognition of who we are in God, to awaken us to what is already there, to recognition and surrender to the attraction of this alluring Love – that we might return to our true selves as a part of it."<sup>1</sup> In this process of naming and claiming, members and leaders will be encouraged and invited into a more imaginative awareness of the hope of Jesus Christ even in a place or time that appears to be without hope.

Language that bridges scripture, theology, and the community context will be a challenge in these locally held theologies. Their Christology is extremely focused on a personal relationship with Jesus and life after life. A coherent narrative of faith development in the community or in their own lives, has never been emphasized. Self-reflection on the socioeconomic situation of their community, possible changing futures are not part of their normal daily functions. Music can provide such reflection, if chosen and used appropriately. In 2018, for the series Life after Life, I requested songs or hymns

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<sup>1</sup> Tricia Gates Brown, "Who We Are in Love," Tricia Gates Brown, February 14, 2019, <https://triciagatesbrown.net/2019/02/14/who-we-are-in-love/>.



from the congregation and on Facebook with a theme of anticipating heaven. Response was very good with more songs than we could sing or use for the series. For this thesis project, I again requested songs, hymns or contemporary (country) songs about seeing God active now. I used these for worship service planning, either as songs or litanies and prayers. The incorporation of their contemporary and traditional songs of faith and hope, harvested from the community<sup>2</sup> as well as the worshiper's own life experiences, gave many a way to share and participate without being as vulnerable as those who shared more personal experiences of God in their daily lives.

Quantitative research was gathered by surveys, previous anonymous information gathering, table discussions and interviews<sup>3</sup>. The anonymous information gathering occurred in 2014, a few weeks into my call to these two congregations. I asked everyone to write on a provided slip of paper, their hopes for their church. I repeated this process in 2019, the comparison was enlightening. Shortly after the Harvesting Hope series began, a letter of general information about the series, an invitation to attend and survey instructions were mailed to all members, affiliates and "friends" of both churches. I also met privately with four members, two from each congregation. I asked them questions about their lives, their faith development and their current experiences of God's active involvement in their lives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Facebook requests for music have proven to be very successful. Members and friends from a distance sent in their favorite harvest songs. Each song was incorporated either through traditional hymns or lyrics used for prayers and litanies within the services.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C

<sup>4</sup> Appendices D, E, F, G

This data was used for evaluation of the activities and sermon series in order to measure progress and improve effectiveness for future worship and congregational events. The data collected will be a topic for discussion with both Sessions and Worship committees for planning purposes in the coming year.<sup>5</sup>

### **Design**

A series of worship services, scripture texts of both Old and New Testaments, related to “harvest” and “the Kingdom of God” was presented. Each congregation was asked to review two sermons and worship services using a customized RPG form.<sup>6</sup> The worship services were based on chosen scriptures and songs suggested by members in an informal Facebook survey on both church pages.<sup>7</sup>

October 20		Luke 7.20 – 37 and Daniel 9
October 27	Eden Presbyterian, Rudd	1 Corinthians 15
	First Presbyterian, Greene	Harvesting Hope Festival <sup>8</sup>
November 3	All Saints Day	Luke 24.13 – 35
November 10	Eden Presbyterian, Rudd	Harvesting Hope Festival <sup>9</sup>
	First Presbyterian, Greene	1 Corinthians 15 Guest Rev Ehlers

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<sup>5</sup> Fagan et al., “Outcome-Based Evaluation,” 1.

<sup>6</sup> Courses in the D. Min. in Biblical Preaching program required a specific RPG form. Members told me they could not understand the questions. I revised the form based on leaders and members comments, see Appendix A

<sup>7</sup> September 8, 2019 Eden Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, Greene and my personal Facebook page.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix C

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix C

November 17	Matthew 6; Luke 10; John 4
November 24 Christ the King	Revelation 1.4b-19; John 18.33-38 <sup>10</sup>
December 1 Advent 1 – Hope	Jeremiah 33.14 – 18

### Special Worship Service

Given the demographics of the two congregations, it came as no surprise to have one funeral during the series. J, a lifelong member of First Presbyterian Church, Greene died October 11, 2019. J's funeral was held at First Presbyterian Church, Greene, October 16, 2019.<sup>11</sup>

We held individual Harvesting Hope Festivals at each church<sup>12</sup>. Using Session records from the past 150+ years I chose specific readings to remind leaders, and members, that these congregations have struggled through change and transitional difficulties before and come through with faithful attentiveness to God. Both congregations have moved from one city to another, built and rebuilt properties. Both communities have seen membership plummet and grow. Pastoral leadership has changed with success and failure, yet God's Word was taught and preached and lived out in daily life. Transition is difficult and can be distressing to members and the community, yet God remains faithful and present. Mission continues to be a primary function of both communities and their service is important to local and national well-being. Following individual readings, a member of the congregation responded with a similar

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<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Explorations: Selected Sermons at the Gayton Kirk* (Henrico, VA: The Gayton Kirk Presbyterian Church, Inc., 2017), 1–4. Professor Weaver's sermon is an excellent example of teaching and preaching on a theologically dense subject such as eschatology.

<sup>11</sup> Appendix B, October 16, 2019, Funeral for J

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix C for these selected readings

contemporary event. To impress upon members and leaders that what we consider massive change is often a repeated portion of our collective and individual histories. We have seen epidemics before, in 1918, and each church worked together through these upheavals. We have done it before, and we will do it now and our children will do it again. If we continue to fasten our gaze upon God's lighted path, we will weather these tumultuous times. Paul reminds us that we are in mortal, changeable bodies,

1 Corinthians 15:51-53: 51 Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

### **Serendipitous**

For Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian churches' Harvesting Hope Festivals, I gathered and displayed all available church records. Leaders and members displayed a real joy in exploring their long fruitful history. Hearing a part of their congregational narrative celebrated as the activity of the Holy Spirit, hearing members testimony of how similar activities continue at this time, raised a new awareness of their ongoing partnership with God. Seeing the records, photos and blueprints laid out, gave them a sense of place and pride that Midwestern folks seldom demonstrate. This was especially apparent at Eden Presbyterian where members decorated the entire church with Harvest themed materials. A professional photographer and member, Kathy Blake, took pictures of everyone participating that morning. Later a photo album was produced by Elder Suzie Brandau and Deacon Linda Brandau with the photographs as part of the historical record of Eden Presbyterian Church.

## ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

### Qualitative Data

Eden Presbyterian Church of Rudd Iowa, and First Presbyterian Church of Greene Iowa, are only twenty-seven miles apart. On the surface, their “small but mighty” identity is similar but observation of the two communities has proven, “Congregations are complex and often contradictory subcultures, not given to facile or hasty labeling.”<sup>1</sup> “Your preaching context does not consist of numbers or categories but actual listeners: the faithful people who hear you, as well as the worlds in which they make sense of what you say and then, maybe, act upon it.”<sup>2</sup> They are small and mighty, faithful people struggling to hold onto their faith in God through their respective faith communities in a time of great and uncontrollable regional, local, and national change.

Historical and demographic materials for both communities are available online and in locally printed resources. The printed resources are unique to each area and present unique histories of beginnings and transitions. I participate in many of the women’s planning meetings and events,<sup>3</sup> and this has allowed for participant observation. These small groups produce events that serve many people, through hard work and thoughtful planning. In these situations, my role is usually to talk to folks, be the Pastor, pray when told, and wash the dishes. By attending faithfully, intentionally, and listening closely, I can participate in kitchen conversations. These informal discussions are

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<sup>1</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, 847.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Nieman, *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>3</sup> There are no annual or seasonal activities planned and led by the men of either church.

particularly important for understanding the power dynamics of the church. "...We want insight into faithful people and what drives or constrains their faithfulness especially the transcendent dimensions of their lives."<sup>4</sup> Kitchen conversations often flow naturally into more than the nuts and bolts of the work, which was mostly hashed out in the planning. Symbols such as kitchen supplies given as memorials, hand embroidered towels, old serving dishes, all encourage the sharing of oral histories. Even the attention given to such spaces as kitchens and bathrooms tell a good observer something about the congregation's self-image and their vision of the future.

As a woman and pastor, I seek out opportunities to connect personally and safely with men of the congregations. I have sought "semi-structured" individual and group interviews especially during harvest. As I requested time on the fields, farmer members have allowed me to ride-alongside in the combine. These "ride alongs" have proven to be excellent opportunities for conversation with men of the churches. It is interesting how long we can ride in silence before they begin to share their personal stories, and theology.<sup>5</sup> The first of such "ride along" interviews allowed me to express my amazement at the complexity of tractors, their computer systems and GPS satellite tracking and the comfort of the enclosed cabs. This encouraged several different farmers to explain the technological innovations and changes they have experienced as farmers. I heard surprising narratives of their first and last tractor purchases, how their fathers farmed and what they see as the coming future of agriculture. Their own identity coupled

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<sup>4</sup> Nieman, *Knowing the Context*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Nieman, 40 - 42. Silence in the combine on ride along is unintentional, but there is nothing as boring as harvest!

with social changes as Tisdale remarks allows us to celebrate and mark these status changes with God centered rituals. Encouraging people to see God's plans and activity within what some might term "ordinary life." Farmers do retire, usually for health reasons, and we celebrate and mourn their changes. We name their times of transition and how God has used their lives, their work and words to make a difference in the world. To feed millions of people is no small thing. We dedicate their lives in retirement to continuing to feed others using different means. This is the preacher's purpose and responsibility, to see "life is virtually endless and constantly in flux"<sup>6</sup> and name these changes as God's ongoing transformative creation.

I hold several formal leadership roles within both communities: VP of the Butler County Disaster Recovery Coalition, active membership in two area ministerial associations, and frequently attend Presbytery pastoral events Within the churches there are monthly Session meetings, annual congregational meetings, quarterly deacon meetings, worship committee meetings, and seasonal meetings of the trustees and cemetery trustees.<sup>7</sup> These leadership roles provide a broader view of county and regional issues such as environmental impact of climate change, what other congregations are doing and noticing, connections to the local schools and to some extent, national events. In so doing, preachers will learn of their members activities beyond their church. Members may choose to not serve church leadership roles because they have community roles that occupy their free time. These roles can then be celebrated within the church as

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<sup>6</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, 870.

<sup>7</sup> For insurance purposes all planting must wait until after Easter Sunday. The 2019 late Easter was stressful but oddly fit the weather patterns as our winter went long. Conversations with farmers and farm families always contain weather discussions.

another sign of discipleship, following God's commands in all their life activities. They also allow members of both congregations to speak of me as a respected member of the community and helps cement my status as an insider. This is often an unspoken desire of the congregation, that their pastor would be known as a good preacher and hold an official status within the community.

Stories and interviews are, as Tisdale notes, rich fields for gleaning their faith journeys as a community of faith.<sup>8</sup> Eden self-identifies as a family unit, with certain members designated as record-keepers, villains, heroes, workers and wounded. A recently deceased matriarch held their memories, able to recall details of events decades in the past and told stories of previous pastors and events. One of Eden's members could function as the new record-keeper, but he is the designated villain.<sup>9</sup> In the telling of his story, his brothers and sisters have also disclosed family secrets such as, of abuse, despair and the isolation of life on a family farm. Is there a good word for this so-called villain? Or does the villain remain the villain forever? Does God speak a word of grace to this family's ongoing struggles? Another family holds tight to a heroic archetype, when a father died young, the oldest son took over the farming, supporting his younger siblings and mother. His archetype of hero prevents him from grieving his loss of a different future. He dreamed of being a pastor, but his life situation prevented that opportunity. He had to forfeit high school<sup>10</sup> and seminary. These are a few archetypes, but all congregations and communities hold such types and stories. As this community is so

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<sup>8</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*.

<sup>9</sup> Tisdale, 894. It would be inappropriate to note why he holds this status.

<sup>10</sup> The county school in his area went to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. High school required boarding or extensive travel and payment for education. There are many such life stories in this region.



enmeshed, others know there are secrets, have heard hints, but do not know the whole story.

Pastors are often allowed or encouraged to share such stories and stereotypes. It is difficult to keep distance from triangulation or enmeshing into the family systems of a small church. However, to be pastor for all members requires a certain distance, professional demeanor and not falling into those archetypes. Thus, a pastor might seek out a congenial relationship with the designated villain. This allows their own self-image, for they surely know how they are perceived by others, to be changed, made bigger and more whole. To see themselves as a child of God, beloved and saved as is everyone. This also allows others to see those negatively typecast as whole people.

At arrival, in 2014, I asked all members to write their hopes/dreams for the congregation on slips of paper.<sup>11</sup> These are kept in wooden boxes on the pulpits and from time to time I reread them to remember what members most hope for their faith community. Both congregations expressed a desire for growth and to continue being active churches for a long time – to keep going. Several members of Greene Presbyterian expressed unique hopes and dreams for the city of Greene. They noted their hopes that the city and the church might prosper and grow, together. I saw and heard little that gave me hope for such an occurrence until recently, when a group of business owners began to gather and plan and ask for input about what residents would like to see. It has been interesting to note that these owners are all women.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Table 1

<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, COVID19 seems to have set back these small independent shopkeepers even further.

Neither church has any difficulty with a woman pastor. As I have heard their stories, especially around funerals, women leaders are common. Several men, especially the older men, have noted how physically strong their wives are or were. One man told me, at some length, how beautiful his wife was and how strong, “She could carry a pig over her shoulder.”<sup>13</sup> Other wives are known to be excellent cooks, bookkeepers, and able to drive the trucks during harvest, all essential skills in farming. Both congregations depend on women for all special events and activities, the men show no issue with taking orders and “doing as told.”

### **Demographics and Geography<sup>14</sup>**

As pastor, my initial work involved getting past the demographics supplied by the denomination. “Spreadsheets are lazy. They don’t tell you about people. They don’t tell you about communities.”<sup>15</sup> Geography is fundamental in agriculture. In these two churches, geography plays an economic and agricultural part in the history of each region. This was made clear after several informal interviews with farmers, from both churches. Much of my information about flood issues have come from informal interviews immediately after the 2016 flood, my position as Vice President of the Butler County Disaster Recovery Coalition, as well as the Greene Recorder newspaper articles.

Greene, IA is a flood plain straddling the Shell Rock River. The river has experienced major flooding in 2008, 2016 and 2018. In 2008 and 2016, the flooding

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<sup>13</sup> J and M , married young, and have been married a long time. His description of his wife’s musculature is fascinating and oddly incorrect.

<sup>14</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, 933.

<sup>15</sup> Hamdi Ulukaya, *The Anti-CEO Playbook*, TED Talks, 2019, [https://www.ted.com/talks/hamdi\\_ulukaya\\_the\\_anti\\_ceo\\_playbook](https://www.ted.com/talks/hamdi_ulukaya_the_anti_ceo_playbook).

resulted in damage to downtown stores, city municipal buildings, and residences. In 2008 FEMA declared the area a major disaster area and offered financial support, building new city facilities at some distance from the river and assisting commercial and residential landowners. Technical and structural support from the Army Corp of Engineers resulted in federal grants to rebuild the city dam. Federal assistance has also increased awareness of possible flood issues through monitoring stations on the Shell Rock and Winnebago Rivers. In 2008, citizens were assured this was a 500-year flood. As a result, many chose to remain in their homes and businesses did not move. FEMA and governmental agencies moved all government offices to higher ground and the new buildings are a source of pride for citizens.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the river continues to flood, as climate change along with the use of field drainage tiling moves more water, faster, into the rivers. The impact of major storms washes out the banks and the floods have continued.

City of Greene area farmers have been hit particularly hard by flooding. In 2018 conversations, several indicated they had lost two plantings in one season with no harvest to offset the cost of seed, fertilizer, and fuel. 2019 held the same results, as farms which have never had flood issues suddenly find themselves islands during the spring rains. “Low farms” have always been risky economic ventures but the possibility of a good harvest has in the past outweighed bad or wet years. At one time, most members of First Presbyterian Church, Greene were farm or farm related households.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Oddly, some citizens of the city of Greene still consider those new buildings a waste of money. This is odd because the old locations have been flooded repeatedly.

<sup>17</sup> Many of First Presbyterian’s farmers are retired or semi-retired. See Appendix D.

Eden Presbyterian Church is still an active farm congregation, as a few members remain active farmers, and many others own farmland and lease. Within ten miles of Eden Presbyterian church, cities of Rudd, Nora Springs, and Osage and most of Mitchell/Floyd Counties are not low-lying areas. However, increased storm activity of the past two years has resulted in flooding from groundwater swelling and crop loss. The price of corn and soybeans has dropped to a low level due to many factors such as, increased international farming, decreased markets through trade agreement disputes, and rising fuel costs.<sup>18</sup> Farmers are constantly weighing their increased costs with low profits. Land leasing rates have increased, and fewer young people are able to make a start as farmers without substantial assistance from their families.

Farming is also physically a high risk profession. Accidents have impacted families in both churches, and early death of the major income producer has resulted in loss of family farms.<sup>19</sup> In several families, teenagers took their father's place as the major support of their families. Both churches share stories of helping another farmer's widow get in the harvest. One member at Greene lost two husbands, her third is struggling with cancer.<sup>20</sup> The CDC (Center for Disease Control) has studied Greene, and much of the region due to the high cancer rates impacting the population. While no primary cause has ever been determined, cancer and diabetes remain major health issues. Farmers at both churches have conductive hearing loss from the mechanical noise associated with open

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<sup>18</sup> The recent drop in fuel costs came too early to benefit most farmers and now prices have risen.

<sup>19</sup> Appendix N, Interview with Z.

<sup>20</sup> He died in 2019 while I was at Luther Seminary for the D. Min. required courses. I grieved with his wife, visiting her over the weekend. This is the first time I am unable to preside over a funeral at First Presbyterian Church, Greene since arriving as their pastor. She said, "I imagine we will get the job done." They do have a way of reminding me I am not indispensable!

tractors along with a startling high incidence of macular degeneration at First Presbyterian Church, Greene. While the region has seen a rise of opioid and alcohol addiction and rising suicide rates, neither church has been directly impacted.

As the median age of members of First Presbyterian Church, Greene has risen, the number of full-time farmers has decreased. Today, most are retired or part-time. The extra stress of groundwater swells and flooding have made the past two harvest seasons tight and frustrating. There is a much higher risk of accidents when working late at night in muddy fields. Eden farmers have almost all “retired;” they stay around to “help” those who are leasing the farmland, but they no longer tend the fields. For the most part, Eden members own their farms outright, without mortgages<sup>21</sup> and they are extremely conservative in purchasing expensive equipment. Each congregation has one farmer in the Iowa DNR (Dept of Natural Resources), REAP (Resource Enhancement and Protection), or CRP<sup>22</sup> (Conservation Reserve Program) programs. Their fields are left unplowed and covered in seed provided by the state to increase natural vegetation and pollinator fields. These two farmers delight in showing me the flowers and discussing how their fields have produced a new kind of harvest.

Scripture texts on harvest, farming, and animal care, abound.<sup>23</sup> The balance between Scripture’s call to care for the earth and farmers’ practices for producing a

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<sup>21</sup> Schmidt, *Rural Roots*. Every farm listed was bought with cash or cash installments. Mortgages were not used or favored. Eden is an immigrant church, with all the men coming from one small German town and all the women from the neighboring German town. WWI German immigrants were not allowed to serve in US military. However, many of the young men from other families did fight and died in the war. Farm families without male heirs were then purchased by German families. This has created a small German area, Brandau’s road and Brandau’s Church, Eden Presbyterian Church.

<sup>22</sup> See Appendix D, CRP

<sup>23</sup> See Word Bank Appendix I

harvest and income, is delicate. A farmer makes many decisions about how to make a living: whether to use all technology available to produce a large harvest, to lease their land to someone else, giving up any control on how the land is used, or to participate in USDA programs that increase land and wildlife health for a steady but low annual rent. These decisions often cause friction between neighboring or partnered farmers. Commercial farming is often blamed for all the environmental ills of the world without much thought or research. My work as pastor is not to judge their choices, but to lift what scripture calls “good stewardship.”

The residents of this region are accustomed to the vagaries of nature. Strong storms, tornadoes, ice, blizzards, floods, nature is uncontrollable, and in the rural Midwest this is often life or death serious. Farmers, or people with farming roots, spend a great deal of time discussing best practices for erosion control, water management, seed quality and the whys of rising fuel costs. Long conversations about no-till farming, cover crops, CRP<sup>24</sup> and REAP<sup>25</sup> are held at planting and harvest season. Recently, before Eden Presbyterian’s Session meeting, Eden’s treasurer spoke again of the hard winds that blow good soil away, unless you use no till, minimum till, or cover crops. A story is shared of him pranking a non-farming visitor, that there is a barge in the Gulf of Mexico dredging up the topsoil that blew from Iowa.<sup>26</sup> Farmers frequently must use insecticides and herbicides on the fields in order to produce a good harvest. As floods and hard winds

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<sup>24</sup> See Appendix D Interview

<sup>25</sup> “Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP),” accessed May 22, 2019, <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Conservation/REAP>.

<sup>26</sup> This is untrue.

have increased, their understanding of climate change has become more certain. The USDA and Extension Offices have spoken about climate change for a decade, and the farming community listens to those reports. Especially telling is the research and development of seed companies such as Pioneer and Syngenta, both of which are working to breed high yield drought resistant major crop seeds.

While for much of America, the economy thrives on “big business” many of these folks focus on smaller, inexpensive, or homemade solutions which are better for the environment. One woman has her husband drive her around looking for “gopher dirt mounds;” she scoops the naturally processed dirt into buckets for her amazing flower garden. Another older couple come through my and neighbors’ yards, expecting gleaned privileges, for our apples, rhubarb, pears, whatever we have growing. The Shell Rock River in Greene floods so often, that there is a system in place for emergency volunteers. Adults, youth including the sports teams, children from Scout packs, all pitch in with sandbags and HESCO barriers.<sup>27</sup> In recent city of Greene planning meetings, a greenway along the river is being embraced and buildings taken down. The greenway includes a park, community garden, and trees, to allow room for the flow and flood of the Shell Rock River. Farmers acknowledge that commercial farming is not “harmony with nature,” nor is it “control over nature,” it is a balance of both formed by long time practices and new technology.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “City of Greene Keeps the Shell Rock River Mostly at Bay After Weekend Rains | Whotv.Com,” accessed May 22, 2019, <https://whotv.com/2018/06/11/greene-iowa-keeps-the-shell-rock-river-mostly-at-bay-after-weekend-rains/>.

<sup>28</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, 1069.

Much of the biblical narrative takes place in rural areas, focused on farm life, raising sheep and goats, pruning the vineyards, planting and harvest. Farm communities now, as then, are dependent on much that cannot be controlled. They exhibit a deep connection and dependency on the God of creation, praying fervently for abundance, generosity and care. Hospitality, a strong biblical theme, is also a strong cultural ethic. This stands in contrast to the myth of independent farmers and ranchers, so often depicted in the media. Farmers and ranchers are much more connected than that “myth” would indicate. Community and the unity of the church are “thick issues.” I am often caught unaware of the intense feeling for their land which shows up in generational familial disputes over their family’s farmland and who gets invited to the farm-land auction and who did not. The local tax assessor is a member at Eden, and he received more than a few fierce comments during the 1980’s farm crisis.<sup>29</sup> For all that I have learned about farming and rural ethos, I am not from this area, this is not my native language and I am frequently unaware of mistakes until someone tells me.<sup>30</sup>

A pastor who listens carefully and treats members with respect will begin to learn these themes and practices. These will become underlying themes in sermons and worship service design.

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<sup>29</sup> I have learned to be specific in talking about tax collectors.

<sup>30</sup> M made a very discreet comment about ‘trash trees’ which made me aware of a major mistake in a recent sermon. Realizing what he meant, I sent him a quick email to thank him for setting me straight. M is often my “farmer in residence.”



### Historical and Archival Materials

Eden<sup>31</sup> Presbyterian Church was founded in 1875 as Rock Creek Mission Station of the Presbyterian Church. The present building was built in 1891<sup>32</sup> with a high checkerboard pattern steeple which fell during a hard storm. That steeple was later replaced with a unique squared off steeple and bell.<sup>33</sup> Eden was part of the German speaking Synod of the West from 1912–1958 and for years services were in German. After WWI this was discontinued. A German language Sunday school class remained until about 1965. Begun by German speaking immigrants, the Lacoste family, Eden Presbyterian Church, remains a family church, locally known as the Brandau church, and almost all members are related to one another by birth or marriage. Eden Presbyterian has many historical documents: Session records, and the Register of Members as required by the denomination are kept in the fire-proof safe. Session records and the Women's Guild records, including all the plans for annual Ice Cream Social, from the first sixty years or so are in German long hand which was later translated into English. Records of Eden's Cemetery are housed with the Cemetery secretary and a separate Board of Trustees manage the cemetery. Eden cemetery land was donated by the Apel family, more than one hundred years ago, and generations later, the Apels remain active members and Deacons. The church building was built by members and has been remodeled twice, a

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<sup>31</sup> H. Gene Straatmeyer, *The Synod of the West: A History of the Presbyterian German Synod of the West and Its Churches* (North America and International: Trafford Publishing, 2016), 232. Eden Presbyterian Church is no longer called, German.

<sup>32</sup> Joyce Navratil, *Rudd History: 1869 to 2019* (Audubon, Iowa: Jumbo Jack's Cookbook, 2019), 82.

<sup>33</sup> The bell remains a structural issue which the Trustees jury-rig every few years.

basement added, and the fellowship area remodeled in 1990. All building work was done by members or was paid for beforehand, ensuring no mortgage.

Eden is at the edge of Rudd, a small town that has decreased tremendously this generation. Rudd celebrated 150 years as a city in July of 2019. No one from the congregation indicated any desire to be involved in that celebration. I found this puzzling, as they all went to school in Rudd and remember when the town was livelier. In conversation, I realize their connections have been broken and they now affiliate with the bigger, thriving cities of Osage, Nora Springs and Mason City.

First Presbyterian Church of Greene is older, founded June 2, 1863 by the Waterloo Presbytery. Their first years were in the Hart School house, south of the city of Greene. In May 1972, they reorganized as First Presbyterian Church of Greene and moved to land about one half mile from its current location. To make space for Greene High school, in spring of 1921, the land was sold, and the church building was moved down the street by a team of horses on rolling timbers. They had built a basement with indoor plumbing and electricity and the old building was placed on top.

First Presbyterian Church, Greene, first session book includes the written version of the founding as gleaned from a History of Butler County and inserted into the first session record book "In accord with desires of the congregation." This insert also includes the story of an early pastor who drowned in the Shell Rock River in 1882. First Presbyterian Church, Greene has celebrated their centennial and their sesquicentennial with large parties, and a "Homecoming" theme, invitations were sent to pastors and members, past and present, and special worship, singing and lunches planned. When the

City of Greene celebrated its centennial, the Church members and Pastor were highly involved.

### **Rituals**

Tisdale is correct when she says, “Rituals provide sources for discovering ... congregational identity ...they also provide opportunities to probe and explore what it is becoming.”<sup>34</sup> Both churches stand at the brink of the grave. It sounds dramatic but we have become so accustomed to funerals, that each has a system that quickly swings into action. In 2018 we lost nine of 66 members from First Presbyterian, Greene and three of 72 members from Eden Presbyterian Church. Without the addition of new members, these losses guarantee we will close our doors in the next decade. These losses have changed the “feel” of each congregation, and the more rapidly they occur, the more change is required. Power and relational systems need time to reconfigure, but there is little time between each death. Eden Presbyterian Church has averaged a baptism every year; however, these are all grandchildren who live some distance away. We are their “home away from home” but few of them regularly attend a local church.

Tisdale reminds us that rituals can express “cherished cultural values” as well as open up new meanings and visions of God’s presence.<sup>35</sup> First Presbyterian Church, Greene, has begun to deliberately celebrate birthdays of older members with coffee, donuts, and cakes. It began with M’s 94<sup>th</sup> birthday. I suggested M’s family join the congregation to celebrate his birthday, rather than wait for the next, and chance his

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<sup>34</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, 963.

<sup>35</sup> Tisdale, 963.

demise. Since then, this has become a rite of both solidarity and passage, popular with our older members. It is my belief we should worship and celebrate until we die.<sup>36</sup> For that reason, First Presbyterian Church, Greene has planned and accomplished a series of small building renovations annually, to bring added beauty and comfort, as well as made the building more handicap accessible. The work has become a point of pride and congregational “buy in” as members donate specifically for these projects.

Eden has an annual Ice Cream Social, a popular community event. Many people from the area look forward to this event and many of the families of members come from their out of state homes to assist and celebrate this ongoing event. A light lunch with pie and ice cream is offered on a specific day, to raise mission funds. Eden’s Presbyterian Women plan and execute the Ice Cream Social, feeding more than 200 people every July. Husbands, adult children, the pastor and her husband pitch in and “do as we are told.” This is a rite of solidarity<sup>37</sup> as Eden’s Social has been an annual occurrence since 1900, excepting the years of World War II rationing. Even when the manse burned down, the Social was held at another local church. Eden’s Ice Cream Social is one of many but is a well-known part of the Rudd-Osage area’s summer activities.

I have encouraged and followed a monthly communion schedule which also includes special feast days. This was more than their earlier practices, and we have switched to communion by intinction. Both congregations have “bought in” and Ruling

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<sup>36</sup> See Appendix B. Preached at both Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian church, Greene on November 24, 2019. During the 8:30 service at Eden Presbyterian, a youth friend of the church came running into the church, to tell us her brother had just been in a terrible car accident. Her brother was injured, the driver, his best friend and an occasional attendee of Eden Presbyterian, killed. After I collected myself, we prayed at length and began a meal rotation for the family.

<sup>37</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, 975.

Elders now stand at the Table alongside the Pastor, leading the congregation in prayer and saying the words of Institution. In recognition of our graying membership, we have changed how we proceed with feast days. All Saints Day has become more participatory, members are encouraged to light candles or write on ribbons to make a temporary banner, for people long gone, not just the past year. Some members have begun to share photographs or mementos of those who have passed. We talk about the members who have gone “home” more openly. This has resulted in the 2018 sermon series, “Life after Life” and has given focus to the Harvesting Hope series as well.<sup>38</sup>

It is my belief that the church should always be a place of truth telling. While many authority figures and information outlets shy from the hard truths of growing old and dying, the church holds to a different standard. Death is not the final event of our lives; we have the promise of life eternal in the kingdom of God. Therefore, we do not grieve as others grieve and we tell the truth as others do not. Everyone must know that they can count on me to tell them the truth. I will be kind and gentle, but I will always tell them the truth as I know it. I demonstrate this several ways, such as naming decreasing membership and financial issues.<sup>39</sup> As Nieman says, “It is still remarkably powerful when a preacher ‘calls the thing what it actually is.’”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Appendix B, Sermon presented at both Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian Churches, November 3, 2019. Scripture Text Luke 24.13–35.

<sup>39</sup> Appendix B, November 3, 2019

<sup>40</sup> Nieman, *Knowing the Context*, 59.

### **Congregational World View and Values**

Despite their different historical beginnings, both Eden Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, demonstrate a romantic/charismatic<sup>41</sup> world view. In worship, we spend time with specific concerns and celebrations. We name everyone who is sick, everyone who has died, every graduation, birthday, and anniversary. No prayer request goes unvoiced. Prayer requests and signs are taken very seriously, and God is expected to be continually active throughout all events and people. No one laughs at the older woman who experiences her dead husband's presence in the house. No one worries about psychotic episodes when another member refused to leave her home for assisted living because "he (her long dead spouse) is here in this house." The Prayers for the People portion of worship begins with a long, specific, voiced, sharing of concerns and celebrations. Testimony of God's response in their daily lives erupts in worship spontaneously especially at First Presbyterian Church, Greene. It is interesting that they seldom attest to the Holy Spirit; it is Jesus who gets the credit though the experience is obviously Spirit driven.

Both churches primarily focus on Christ and atonement theology:<sup>42</sup> Members of First Presbyterian Church, Greene, list as some of their favorite hymns "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "I Come to the Garden Alone." Their emphasis on Christ as personal savior encourages me to focus on the works of the Holy Spirit and the Creator in sermon series as well as in worship pieces. One Elder at Eden told me he did not like how much Old Testament scripture I use in worship pieces such as the call to worship nor

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<sup>41</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition.*, 1113.

<sup>42</sup> Tisdale, 1147.

does he want to hear it for sermons. I had begun a series on Abram, Sarai, Hagar and the children as the fulfillment of God's promises. The Elder believes this came to an end with Jesus and excludes too many people when we should be all about inclusion. Short series on Creation, Old Testament heroes, (male and female) and the Psalms, are mildly interesting, new information for the members. One Sunday I told the story of Jonah, and they had never heard it! This emphasis on Christology works into their view of humanity as children of God, beloved, adopted and saints.

Mission really is driven by location. The small town of Greene has generated five churches that are civic pillars. Members from all five are on the most important town community service organizations, especially the Parish Health Board and related services such as Parish Nurse, food bank, volunteer drivers for doctor appointments, and city-wide service days. Rural Eden's more isolated location resulted in a servant sanctuary model. Eden has four deacons assigned to visit shut-ins each month. I put the Deacon board in place soon after arrival and have had much support and enthusiasm in the ministry. Members often share stories of specific people with needs that we pray for. After a barn and piggery fire, members of Eden Presbyterian led a huge fundraiser for the impacted family. Food drives for the food bank get a good result as well and Eden Presbyterian Church participates in the Shared Table offering a free meal once a month. These giving opportunities are often lifted during worship services, announcing the Offering and the Prayers for the People.

Eden Presbyterian Church, Rudd, and First Presbyterian Church, Greene members are faithful people doing their best to remain faithful and live out their belief in God in a world of rapid change. There are often national events they do not understand; their news

sources are limited and local. They know about local issues and so I learn from them and they learn from me, I try to be very reciprocal in our sharing of knowledge, and they “see the efforts I have taken to know them better, and this in turn affects how they listen.”<sup>43</sup> In worship, we are exploring discipleship, what it means, what it looks like, and what it requires of us.

I have served in several churches in a variety of ministries. In each, it is my desire to build a solid foundation of Biblical understanding, best financial practices and pastoral ministry that invites honest deep conversation. Leaders and members strive to voice witness to a loving God who calls us to walk the way of the Kingdom, model servant leadership, and emulate Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd. Members and leaders of Eden and First Presbyterian Churches and myself have found the narrative lectionary particularly useful in building a foundation of Biblical understanding. The RCL (Revised Common Lectionary) was the norm for decades, leaving many regular church attendees with little understanding of the great scope of the Bible. In interviews, members have attested to their certainty I prepare well for the purpose of building a solid Biblical knowledge and desire to dig deeper into our faith.

### **Parish Response Surveys and Discussion of “Hopes”**

**Description:** I began ministry at Eden Presbyterian, Rudd and First Presbyterian, Greene in August of 2014. I put two different survey questions into the bulletins that fall, one asking for favorite hymns and “Hopes for Greene” or “Hopes for Eden.” Responses from the Hopes query are in boxes at the pulpit of their respective congregation.

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<sup>43</sup> Nieman, *Knowing the Context*, 68.



## **Hopes for First Presbyterian Church, Greene, Iowa, 2014 and 2019**

Anonymous Responses 2014<sup>44</sup>

First Presbyterian Church, Greene, “Hopes” survey revealed twenty-two responses with the following summary:

Eleven express hopes for numerical growth

Four express hope to serve others

Three express hope for different music

Three express hope for money – either to stay on budget or increase

Two express hope for increase in faith

One each express hope for: More outdoor services; Forming a community church of Lutheran, United Methodist, Church of the Brethren and Presbyterian;

Following the path we have started with pastor

This list and results were presented to the Congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Greene at the Harvesting Hope<sup>45</sup> fellowship time. After a potluck lunch, I read these 2014 Hope responses. I used their responses to shape a discussion which was meant to invigorate our imaginations as we consider where First Presbyterian Church members and leaders see its future ministry.

The discussion questions and answers from First Presbyterian Church, Greene:

“What did you notice about our responses?” Their almost unanimous answer was how many were hopes for numerical growth.

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<sup>44</sup> See Appendix H for specific responses

<sup>45</sup> Worship Service at 10:30 followed by Potluck Lunch at 12:15 and table discussion following.

I then suggested we talk about “more people”. “It has been more than five years that you and I have been together, and we do not have more members.” I asked: “What did we do or not do to make numerical growth happen?”

Following a period of silence, I asked “Do we really want new people with children and teenagers, or do we really want people who will give us money?”

Again, I waited and then said “This year we dipped into our financial funds for five thousand dollars and would have had to take more except for the generous gift from the P. estate (eight thousand dollars). What does this mean for the coming year, 2020?”

Again, there were no responses and again I paused. “In reading through your Session records, I see that when Rev. J S gave her notice of intent to resign, the congregation and session stated an intention to prayerfully consider the future ministry of First Presbyterian Church in Greene.<sup>46</sup> We have not done that. Nor has anyone expressed a desire to do that. Five years later, it is time for that conversation.

“What will First Presbyterian Church of Greene look like in the coming decade?”

Table discussion then began. After twenty-five minutes of discussion, I asked each table to share what they were thinking about and discussing. Three of the four table groups suggested ways to increase numerical growth. Those numerical growth suggestions included: new music, outside services, personal door to door invitations. The fourth table brought up the hope for a community church. This precipitated a long conversation about what such a church would look like and where it would be. One concern voiced repeatedly was “What will happen to this building?”

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<sup>46</sup> This stated intention was specific to First Presbyterian Church, Greene. Eden Presbyterian Church made no such statement or decision.

We ended after this conversation with cleaning up and kitchen talk.

Due to completely different circumstances, months later, I have given my resignation and will be leaving at the end of June 2020. Session is now being led in this same conversation with North Central Iowa Presbytery assistance and leadership.

### **Hopes for Eden Presbyterian Church, Rudd, Iowa, 2014 and 2019**

**Description:** I began ministry at Eden Presbyterian, Rudd and First Presbyterian, Greene in August of 2014. I put two different survey questions into the bulletins that fall, one asking for favorite hymns and “Hopes for Greene” or “Hopes for Eden.” Responses from the Hopes for survey were placed in boxes at their respective congregation and remain in those boxes at the pulpit.

#### Anonymous Responses 2014<sup>47</sup>

The results of this survey revealed twenty-two responses with this summary

Eight expressed hope Eden would experience numerical growth

Six expressed hope Eden would grow in serving others

Three expressed hope Eden would grow in faith

Single expressions of hope: Good health of all members; church family continue to be blessed; better music; church united; less judgement; happiness; Pastor not burn out

November 10, 2019, Eden held it’s Harvesting Hope worship service and potluck lunch. Following lunch, we had table discussions. Each table had a portion of the

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<sup>47</sup> See Appendix H for specific responses and wording.

expressed hopes from 2014. Each table was asked to: Read the Hopes out loud. Sit quietly with them for a moment. Think about/discuss and consider how or when you have seen God in the way these hopes describe. Give examples If possible.

Responses from this request were shared:

- It is a desert time.
- Shared Table, CROP Walk, Eden Women Sponsors Camp, Miracle Tree, Boat load of food, supplies, Deacons. One plus of being a small church is that we have more involvement, everyone has to step forward. Ice cream Social. Erin Marth (a member who grew up in this congregation) is a pastor. Our children are active in their own churches. We've become a church of people who travel to our children and grandparents
- Always have Hope
- Talk about the trip out and the trip back to town, finding a way to convince people to do it.
- Kindness to others, Food Bank Support, CROP Walk, helping those in need, Boat load of Food.

After these responses were shared, the group was asked: "What new hopes do you have for Eden? As a group? As individuals?"

Responses:

- We hope for God to be with us and guide us with coping with health issues and changes that are inevitable.
- Our church family will continue to be blessed

- Even though we are small – we must strive to find a purpose to continue to have a purposeful mission.
- Get the bell fixed!
- Our church is a financial giving church
- Surviving
- We are a compassionate, caring family who support each other and our neighbors
- We have to also talk about and look at changes ahead.
- Hope we are flexible and open to big changes in the future.
- As a group – Hoping that we can get younger folks with children to come
- As individuals – We can pray.
- We need to try and find a way to get people to come to our church to experience fellowship and love of fellow man.
- What is Eden going to do if Greene no longer is united with us? Needs to be talked about.

Following this conversation, there was cleaning up and kitchen talk.

**Sermon response on November 3, 2019, All Saints Day.**

Scripture Text Luke 24. 13 – 35<sup>48</sup>

After each service on November 3, 2019, I used the redesigned PRG<sup>49</sup> to survey each congregation's response to this sermon. I particularly wanted responses to this sermon because it is All Saints Day, and the phrase "We had hoped" specifically applies

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<sup>48</sup> See Appendix B for sermon

<sup>49</sup> See Appendix A

to these churches, their hopes for new life in their congregations. The sense of loss and grief that new life is not evident at this time.

**Eden Presbyterian Church, Rudd. (8:30 Service)**

Individuals made notes during and after the service, then discussed their responses in a group. A member took notes and gave them to me later.<sup>50</sup> The results of this form pointed to a successful theme of hope in God. That new creation in God does not look as we expect but is certain.

**First Presbyterian Church, Greene (10:30 Worship)**

These are responses spoken aloud after I read aloud the questions. I did not have the response forms because I had left the forms at the earlier service at Eden Presbyterian Church. Eight members of First Presbyterian, Greene, stayed after the service to respond. Answers were recorded by a member of the group and given to me after the meeting. Summary of results: The theme of Hope was heard and applied to their own life situations. One recent widow expressed hope in hearing that the disciples were sorrowing their loss of purpose. Several of our widows spent a lot of their lives caring for others, especially spouses. Hearing their positive response to the sermon was gratifying. Several indicated they too had a hard time believing what they could not see but could hold onto the promises of God.

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<sup>50</sup> See Table 1

### **Survey One: Christian Life Faith Development**

On October 20, 2019, Survey One was sent to members and “friends” (those who attend but have not formally joined) of both Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian Church of Greene. The same survey was sent to both congregations. Responders were encouraged not to put their names on their responses.

Questions:

- 1 – What does “being a Christian” mean to you?
- 2 - Describe your childhood life in church. What church did you attend? How often? Who took you? What do you remember most about that time?
- 3 - Name one person who was particularly important in your relationship with Jesus Christ? How did they help you know Jesus?
- 4 – Why do you come to church? (circle all that apply)
  - a. Build a relationship with others
  - b. Obtain information / learn something
  - c. Make plans / take action
  - d. Enjoy the music
  - e. Encounter God
  - f. Habit and structure for the day/week/season

Other

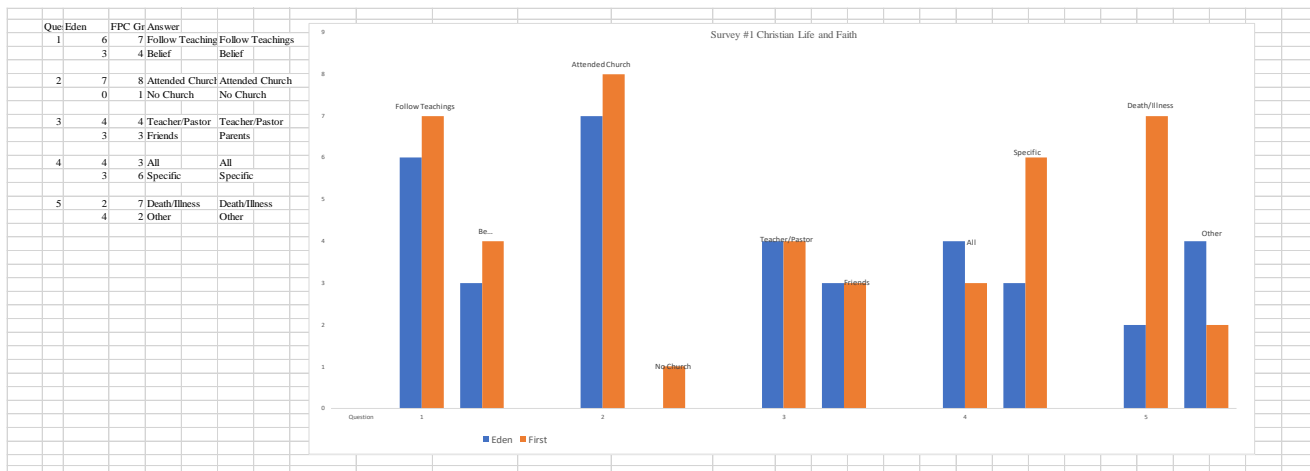
- 5 – Describe an event in your life where you strongly felt the presence of Jesus
- 6 – Think of an image/picture/symbol for the meaning of your Christian faith.<sup>51</sup>
- 7 - Other comments or notes you want to express?

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<sup>51</sup> I plan to incorporate these in coming worship services and sermons.

## Comparison of Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian Church

**Table 1. Survey Results Christian Life Faith Development**



### Summary of Analysis

In reviewing the Christian Life survey #1, Hopes for their church from 2014, and questions about specific sermons, I see honest, personal responses. We have moved beyond the usual ‘Good sermon’ at the door to a deeper response; a response built on respect, honor, time in conversation and intentional listening. Often, they respond to incidental or “throw away” comments from me, those seem to resonate the most often with others personal life experiences. In May 2019, in response to a sermon survey for one of the D. Min. program classes, a member responded: “I get more out of the sermons where you push us to find specific ways to respond to God’s call.” Included with the responses to Survey #1, were unique images of their experience of Christian faith. I will be looking for ways to include these in sermons and worship service designs for the coming months.



I am more than ever convinced that Christians do not want a “watered-down, sweet, how to live as nice people list.” We strongly desire to be held to a higher level of discipleship. When I speak the truth of my shortcomings, such as laughing when someone tells an off-color joke, or not speaking up when someone says something mean spirited or lies. These moments of truth and naming; resonate with all of us, speaker and listener. We want to be truthful in our struggles. We want to know that others feel loss, grieve, become angry and lose hope. I believe that any preacher willing to put time into listening with care, honoring the lives of their congregants, will also find their congregation speaks truth as a matter of course.

## EVALUATION

### Strengths

“Our hope is yet to come. I found out a long time ago that the work I do in this community is not just for the community. I view my work as an offering to God.<sup>1</sup>”

Thomas Long in speaking about narrative preaching says “In a time when Christians are confused about their identity and need crisp clarity and definition, narrative seems to have a dangerous tendency to muddy the waters all the more.”<sup>2</sup> There is an underlying assumption, that Long and others are speaking to. The assumption is that many Christians do not know what it means to be Christian, that they are “confused” about who and whose they are. In the interviews, formal and informal, surveys and prayer discussions, I have seen no evidence of such confusion. The Christian faith of Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian, Greene is evident in community cooperation and conversations.

This is perhaps what Brookes saw when he describes the “meatloaf line.” “Different sorts of institutions dominate life in these two places. In Red America churches are everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> The self is less important, and the community is of greater importance. Brooks is not the only one to make such an observation. Any preacher entering a rural area particularly in the Midwest or Southeast United States will see plenty of churches. Often far more than a small city or town can reasonably support.

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<sup>1</sup> Roth, “When Small-Town Pastors Put Down Roots.” Quoting Rev. Daniel Wade of Formoso Community Church, Kansas. Population 70.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 1st ed., The Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, 2006 (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, “One Nation, Slightly Divisible.”

Community support for churches and places of worship is uplifting for preachers new to the area and suffering from loss of support in previous locations.

A new preacher in a small town is a celebrity of sorts, people are eager to meet you. Those first few months are the perfect time to begin setting up personal meetings and visit local businesses. I have been fortunate to serve in two small areas that have been, oh so kind, to their new preacher. When I make a mistake about local history or business practices, someone will tell me quietly, the correct way things are “always done.” This allows me time to consider whether I want to follow the usual path or go a different way. I have been into the homes and businesses of many of the members of Eden Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church, Greene. I have met families at anniversary celebrations, graduation services and parties, Baccalaureates, weddings and funerals. In all these my focus is on my members lives, where can the Word of God be a support? Where can prayer be a blessing? When am I wanted for the long haul and when am I just to say Hello and leave? Pastoral care and preaching are intertwined.

“The language of preaching is one of the deepest, most constant streams feeding into the pool of the pastoral community. Over time, sermon language slowly, almost imperceptibly, carves out the shape of a people who care. We can ignore the effects if we wish. But like water flowing over rocks, the words of the preacher will alter the substance of the congregation even as the congregation channels the words. As Walter Brueggemann says, “The purpose of the sermon is to provide a world in which the congregation can live.”<sup>4</sup> Through words expressing the Word, pastoral preaching helps provide a world of congregational pastoral care.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Social Nature of the Biblical Text,” in “Preaching as a Social Act” Editor Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 143.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Ramsey, “Preaching to Form A Pastoral Community,” January 1, 2011, <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/188/preaching-to-form-a-pastoral-community>.

A preacher who knows their members will hear a story, a plea, or a lament and bring that to stand alongside scripture to make a bridge of understanding not only for the individual but for the whole community. The theologically astute preacher can then bring more to this pair of connected narratives. A strong theological point can bring depth to these stories, reminding the faithful members of God's overarching plan. To name what we feel, but do not yet fully recognize, gives us a means of hanging onto that deeper meaning. In the funeral sermon for J<sup>6</sup> I began with a verse from Psalm 139, the metaphor of a book of images, perhaps a scrapbook or photo album as many people have in their homes. I then sketched out some of the "photos" of J's life, especially her appreciation for the arts, creating and sharing that with her children and grandchildren. I placed J's single life and the life span of any mortal as small but important to God. I brought the theology of God's omnipotence to this as a reminder that we are each important and fully known by God. Her life story is a witness to her faith, that each (her life and her faith) informs the other. The promise of new life, new creation is described in contrast to the physical, emotional and spiritual impact of dementia, a promise of life and light that never dims. Her daughter, her family, and several members of the congregation told me after the funeral, during the lunch, that the description of God's promised new life for J meant a great deal to them.

To ask participants to give feedback on a funeral sermon seems rude however, I notice the congregation is often energized following a funeral. This is the reverse of what I expected would occur. Funerals are a lot of physical and emotional work for the preacher, church leaders and members. However, my experience is we are more certain

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix B

about our faith and about our life choices after a funeral, after expounding and remembering faithful lives. There is a certainty in the harvested stories of faithful living that can not be denied or dimmed.

In my experience as a preacher, it is the intentional listening that makes such a bridge possible. I believe a real strength of this thesis project comes from sharing the intentional listening I have done through the past years. Members of the congregation and of the community at large will bring their stories to the pastor if there is an emergency. However, a preacher who seeks those stories out, asks and listens with respect, recognizing the honor of such a gift, gathers far more than crisis tales. A professor of Pastoral Care once told her class “You can be a mediocre preacher and your congregation will not mind, if you will listen to their stories and hold them in a respectful fashion.” I would add to this statement, that a pastor will be a better preacher if we listen and respect their stories. Members’ lives, the lives of the community are shared most openly when we treat them as part of God’s abundant creation, signs of new life and transformation that occur every single day. These narratives are great gifts and feed the preacher’s and members’ souls. To lay each beside the scripture and point to the Good News as the bridge between them is to build a bigger world view, a healthier understanding that God is of this world, of all time and of all places. There is no place or community or person too insignificant for the Lord’s presence. God’s presence is constant, ongoing and a great comfort. These gathered stories of hope remind us that we are never alone, God through the power of the Holy Spirit is always with us.

### **Weaknesses**

The evaluation of the sermon series is weak in that a second survey was not sent out. There were no results to compare with the first survey. Members and leaders of Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian Church, Greene made no complaint about not receiving the second survey. However, it is not possible to determine a change for better or worse in how much their hope in God was strengthened by this series.

The anonymous and simple survey early in my called ministry of “What are your hopes for Eden Presbyterian or First Presbyterian Church?” began a conversation which could have been built upon much earlier than the start of this sermon series. Many pastors, I imagine, look back and regret not accomplishing more.

There is a benefit to having the members read questionnaires before worship and then holding discussions after the service. Everyone needs time to think and prepare for those in-depth conversations in order to make more than a surface response. I note too that the more often I asked for such consideration, the more astute responses I received from members. This was notable at the two congregational Harvesting Hope festivals.

First Presbyterian Church, Greene had no time to sit and think about the 2014 responses to “Hopes for Greene” with each other or individually before responding to them. I simply read those “hopes” aloud and waited for responses. At Eden Presbyterian Church, I had their “Hopes for Eden” responses on each table with time for personal and group consideration before asking for their responses. Time to prepare is essential for solid conversation and imaginative responses. Should I do this again, I will use that second process, giving folks time to think and pray and imagine before asking for responses.

In prayerful consideration of the impact of the series, I see my own changes as more important than any change from either congregation. I noticed immediately that members love to share what they like or do not like, felt or did not feel, got or did not get from the sermons. Members who rarely make theological statements were eager to tell me points they gleaned. They shared similar stories of work or loss<sup>7</sup> and gave those to me as precious gifts. Some stories of individuals were included in sermons and some were not. I gave careful consideration of when or how to include a personal story. I asked permission if it were a good story and blurred the specifics and left out names for sad hard or bad narratives. But the possibility was there. In listening and seeking out their stories, I affirmed their story was known and loved by God.

### **Room for Improvement**

My original thesis proposal was the question “What is the good news for ‘stayers’, those who remain behind?” I have come to realize that was an incomplete question. Those who remain behind do so primarily because they do not want to go elsewhere. They love their home, their land, their friends and family. They see in their lives, a more community focused, less consumer driven lifestyle. They are culturally free and proud to be openly patriotic and Christian. While outsiders may see them as simple and foolish to stay in a small town, they see urban life as fraught. Fast paced traffic, large groups of truly diverse strangers is not what they desire. Those who return from travelling south during the winter often moan about how awful the traffic in every large

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix B Sermon October 20, Luke 17. The response of one of Eden Presbyterian Church members to this sermon was to beg me to host a church movie party. Many of the members had never seen Shawshank Redemption and he wanted to share that movie with them. The freedom from fear and the joy of hope are of such importance he longs to share a movie that tells that so well.

city was and how fast the drivers all go. Malls, museums, concerts; most of these folks have no desire to attend or pay for such experiences. Their entertainment lies within or close to home.

These are not people without hope. They are simply different from me in how they express their hopes. I could have changed the question to, “What is the good news for me, a stranger in a strange land?” The answer is that this land is not so strange, it is simply different from my home. The people are not strange, they are unique, and we are blessed as a country to have such groups. Their Christian faith is different in that it is more intuitive and assumed than theologically deep. Research for this thesis and the courses of the DMin. program, pushed me to delve much deeper than I perhaps would have on my own. As I asked for and listened to their stories, more stories were presented, more insight was given. More faith was proclaimed.

As time passed and my reading and classes progressed, the question has changed: “As small-town communities gray and die, faith communities also gray and die. Is this a crisis to be addressed, are all rural Christian churches going to die, or is new life possible? For those who stayed, does the community of faith know the word of hope in Jesus Christ? If we know that word, do we demonstrate hope in our worship and in our actions with the community?” My question is one of effect and affect. Are we allowing God’s Spirit to change us by listening and being open to the Word of God and do those changes make a difference or impact on our communities?

I intuitively knew the members of both congregations lacked deep or broad biblical knowledge. This is especially true for First Presbyterian Church, Green, which has had many short-termed pastors. Eden Presbyterian has received a deeper



understanding of the gospels as presented in the Revised Common Lectionary. However, the Old Testament and many of the letters of the New Testament are virtually unknown at both Eden and First Presbyterian churches. My choice to follow the Narrative Lectionary with summer series based on congregational requests has been successful in beginning to fill the knowledge gaps. In the past four years, I have asked members at large to write down themes, topics, or Bible books they would like to spend time on in worship. The list has included, “Life after Life”; the Lord’s Prayer; Psalms of Lament; Psalms of Creation; Jeremiah 29.11 (which became a series of Jeremiah focused on the “thus says the Lord” sections) Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians. It has also meant I did not do these series: Philemon, nor the Apostles Creed. First Presbyterian church, Greene was most emphatic about not discussing the Apostle’s Creed because the last time they did, several families left the church over “holy catholic church.”

My ability to name the truth in preaching, to name our sins, to name the sense of crisis that we share, has been tested in both congregations.<sup>8</sup> I have grown more confident in naming the sins of racism, sexism, genderism, and I have learned to point to my own issues in that naming. To state that I have trouble seeing people in bigger or different ways, helps others see themselves in my honest self-assessment. While few want to linger on themes of racism, I rewrote the whole worship service and sermon following the shooting at Emanuel AME Church, Charleston in 2015. I spent time explaining the centrality of the church and the growth of the AME denomination, knowledge they had never heard. I did the same thing after the Pulse shooting in 2016, explaining the safe space of a bar because there are so few other places that offer safety to LGBTQi folks.

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix B, Sermons October 13, 2019 and October 20, 2019

After each sermon and discussion, people would tell me they never knew about these things. They seldom think about racism, genderism, or sexuality, for them it is not an issue. Prayer requests during those services were more muted, as we verbally called the names of people killed including the shooters. Many expressed concern that I spent too much time being concerned or preaching about the outside world and not enough on them. However, others whispered as they left, “I have a grandson, a nephew, who is gay or black or whatever.” When domestic abuse was part of the scripture story of Hagar, I called it domestic abuse, two people asked for the domestic abuse information I had on hand.<sup>9</sup> There is no repentance or salvation to be found in hiding our sins. Naming our sins makes confession more potent, pardon more physical, and healing a reality.

In reviewing the survey results, I would have been wise to have evaluated the expressed “Hopes” of 2014 with more vigor. First Presbyterian Church, Greene, desired numerical growth seconded by preserving their character as a community. A more strategic theology of deepened faith would be a good choice for sermon series. In both congregations, Eden and First Presbyterian, I should have been more intentional in gathering members to process a review of the morning’s sermon. In each congregation, I asked whoever attended the service to remain and do a review. I did receive input from a wider range of members than if I had only those who agreed to review sermons for the full four years of the DMin. program. However, the lack of continuity means I do not know if my preaching has improved or changed their thinking in a specific way. Asking for input has also led to more empowered membership. Members at both congregations now request either specific music or sermon themes. More members come to me with

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<sup>9</sup> This sermon was required for the Gender, Race and Power in the Pulpit course in this D. Min. program.

stories they think would make a “good sermon.” Three members of Eden Presbyterian requested specific Christian praise music in video form. This has been an ongoing process for me to learn how to use the technology and to discern new options for the worship at Eden Presbyterian church.

The lack of a follow up survey, due to my husband’s health crisis, leaves this thesis without a base line of response. January 2020, Rich’s heart attack while out of state led to me being out of work for four weeks tending him. The COVID19 quarantine in March 2020 has prevented me from asking people to remember what happened months ago (during the time when I and they were involved in my thesis project).

Despite the lack of follow up, the intentional research of this project has shown that a pastor willing to put in the time and energy to build relationships with members will lead to new insights. Members know when they are heard, and their stories respected. The willing pastor can receive these stories as a gift and an honor, a responsibility and a joy. Laying these harvested fruits alongside the life stories of biblical characters and situations, provides insight unique to their context, seldom heard from national and international super preachers. These unique communities of Rudd and Greene, Iowa have a story to tell. Theirs is a story of faith and truth in a land unlike much of the rest of our country. This is a land that is open and wide, where the sky seems to go forever. This is a land of soil so black it doesn't seem real. It is a land of grey, brown, and beige until suddenly all you can see is chartreuse, neon and screaming green everywhere except in the vivid blue sky. This is a land and people that is fast disappearing due to the onslaught of climate crisis, environmental destruction, and the

exponential growth of agriculture multinational corporations. It would be a sin for these people and their stories to disappear without being heard and shared.

## REFLECTION

### **Value Discerned**

“The church’s unique mission belongs to the transitional period between the beginning of the new creation at the first Easter and its final completion at the end of time.”<sup>1</sup> We sing Alleluia at the edge of the grave. We plant trees whose shade we will not sit under. We plow the fields and scatter good seeds in an amazing soil that God blesses with an abundance that is unmatched. We, Christians hold to an absurd belief that God created a good world filled with many people and longs to be in relationship with each and all of us. In the congregations I serve, I have witnessed the joy and sorrow of living and dying. I have heard the Lord’s name praised in weekly worship, at midweek services and at funerals and congregational meetings, by those who are filled with doubt.<sup>2</sup> These are blessings, too many to count. Any pastor called to serve a rural congregation may also know this blessing.

However, this call did not seem a blessing when I first began in this ministry. Life in rural areas is isolated, dark, quiet, and frankly, smells of manure and skink for much of the year. Yet, I have grown to love the place, the land and the people. In the first few years of the six I have served, I called the Executive Presbyter, every February saying, “I cannot stand it here!” Week after week of cold hard weather left me exhausted. Now I am in the third month of Covid19 isolation and while I am tired, I no longer despise isolation and this place. What has changed that I no longer fret and long for another place with

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<sup>1</sup> Haugk, *Don’t Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix B October 16, 2019 Funeral for J

more people? It has been this project. The harvesting of life stories. Recounting the number of times people have shared how God has impacted their lives. Not stories of burning bushes or great visions. But real ordinary life in which God has been seen. Places and faces filled with the hope in God. In harvesting hope, I have been filled with hope. The feast God provides, feeds me and I shall never go hungry. These stories alongside the scripture keeps me the preacher and members of these congregations “tethered” to the Bible which “teaches us to imagine the God who was and is and shall be.” By seeking out their lived God experiences, I have drawn them into a theological discussion. From those discussions arise sermons and worship services, that speak and sing of hope in God alone and answer some of the congregational questions of how to be faithful in times of turmoil.<sup>3</sup>

The 2019 Harvesting Hope sermon series and the information gathering that went with it, has been a true delight. The four personal interviews I have held were an uplifting experience. Their faith in God shines through some of the darkest worst experiences in their lives. These are not Saints in that they have no miracles associated with them. They are saints, ordinary people living ordinary lives. Their daily choices reflect their faith in God alone. They have seen the Lord active in ordinary times and bear witness to that sight. To live among ordinary saints is to be called to live an ordinary saintly life. The expectation of both churches that I will be a morally upright person, calls me to do my best. These churches plant seeds inside of me, seeds of joy, hope and love. Seeds that bear fruit now and for the rest of my life, wherever I go.

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<sup>3</sup> Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art Kindle Edition*, 1224.

Reading through the historical records and finding themes and surprises to share with each congregation was like a treasure hunt. First Presbyterian Church, Greene, did not know the story of an early pastor's death from drowning. Most did not know that a mother and her son, (members of First Presbyterian) tend that Pastor and two other grave sites to honor the wishes of the Session and a memorial gift they were given more than eighty years ago. There were moments of humor in hearing an 1894 letter from the Pastor and Session telling members to refrain from dancing or playing cards. Two current members then stood and talked about their own lives. One reminded everyone that her parents ran a Dance Hall and she had been paid to dance with the customers. The other lady talked about bridge and how much entertainment and stimulation she got from the game and seeing friends. While many of the names from these records were unrecognized, many came from families still active in First Presbyterian. This was a reminder of the continuity of this church within the community of the city of Greene.

Eden Presbyterian has often surprised me with their lack of historical self-knowledge. Their records are in German longhand for the first eighty years or so, because Eden was a German immigrant church. However, none of the members now speak German. Eden was instrumental in the foundation of the Synod of the West. This short-term Synod has become a template of sorts for the Presbyterian Church (USA) for immigrant populations within the denomination.

During harvest ride alongs, a few Eden Presbyterian members shared immigration stories of the men arriving from Germany settling in and building houses. After they settled in, they wrote to another, close German village, to send women for wives. Matilda Schmidt records a letter from one of the women who came in place of her sister

who had changed her mind about migrating to Iowa. Another member spoke of how the road nearby came to be called “Brandau Road” (not it’s real name) because all the families on the road were part of that family. In WWI German immigrants were not allowed to fight for the US and were treated with great suspicion by neighbors. Many of the local farm families lost sons in the war and chose to sell their farms rather than pass them on. Many of the German families had sons who were eager and able to buy these farms, paying cash or taking small mortgages. I imagine neighbors may have felt some strong resentment towards these German families. In WWII many of the German families’ sons fought and served as translators. These are all part of how this region was settled and became prosperous farmland. Certainly, the fact of a German Presbyterian church in this region of ELCA churches should be worthy of note. Yet, few speak or seem to give much thought to how this happened.

### **Boldly Speaking and Naming**

I have read about and heard prophetic preaching. I associate this style with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Rev. William J. Barber II, and a few others. Usually they are male and often African American. So, it should not be surprising that I never imagined I would engage in such a sermon style. Not me, a good older white southern lady raised to say Yes Ma’am and Yes Sir and never raise my voice. Raised to be polite and never disagree with anyone. Yet naming, speaking the truth and saying out loud what is happening is prophetic. Tisdale describes this as a theology of praxis, that aims to



transform false and oppressive social relationships by naming and critiquing them. The praxis of critical reflection and calls to action are particular to liberation theologies.<sup>4</sup>

Through the training and requirements of courses such as Gender, Power and the Pulpit, and Interpreting and Preaching the Acts, in this DMin. program, I have begun to boldly speak the truth, in a prophetic or praxis, manner. This can be seen in the sermon October 13, 2019 when I clearly state that churches who reject people lose them forever. They almost never come back. I clearly call that rejection, “hatred of those not like us.” In the sermon of J’s funeral, I state that J was “pretty feisty, she had a strong sense of right and wrong and she was not shy about making her opinions known.” I also stated clearly that her dementia drove her to be fearful and so she hid in sleep rather than to sit at the front doorway as she used to, commenting and engaging with the world. I call death harsh and empty. I state that grief is good and right. In another sermon, explain the story of Lot and the two strangers, Genesis chapters 18 – 20. I use the words “gang rape,” as it is spoken of in that biblical narrative. I use words like violent confrontation and brutal sin. I claim the power of grace and proclaim that “yes we live short lives. Yes, this world is so very twisted and wrong – and that is our fault.” To speak truth to lies and justice to injustice, in a variety of ways, broadens our vision of God and who all are God’s people. Interestingly, these are the very sermons that receive the most comment, the deepest thought and consideration of leaders and members.

Because of my reading and the cohort’s preaching examples, I have also begun to use those words, grace and the glimpses of God’s Kingdom now being the foretaste of what is to come. These sermons, where I name and claim are the moments when I am

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<sup>4</sup> Tisdale, 1760.

most prepared, have read deeply the scripture that serves as the basis of the sermon. I have thought and prayed for days of how to bridge the long-ago word to the living word of here and now. I am not always certain the members hear and feel the Holy Spirit, but I certainly do.

I have also become humbler in my preaching. I have heard numerous responses that make it clear, others could and have done as well or better in that pulpit. H telling me she felt sure the church would get her husband C buried without me there. E. telling me that she is almost able to understand what I am talking about now. R. giving me preaching tips. P telling me my habit of putting stuff all over the communion table was not the usual thing for pastors to do. They make me laugh with joy at how free I am to mess up, stutter, stumble, sob, laugh, have a coughing fit, mess with the technological tools, to be human and myself in the pulpit.

This past year, as my home life fell to pieces, I was reassured that God is present. God's presence was declared by the congregational singing and praying and daily asking, "How is Rich? How are you?" My experiences among the members of the congregations I serve, have made me even more aware than before, that we open the Word with hope. Hope that we will be lifted in some way to the heavenly kingdom if only for a moment. That hope then turns to joy in discovering we reside in the heavenly kingdom while we are on earth. Week after week, I struggled to see and speak of how God's time and our time are not the same but are entwined. I prayed and considered deeply how to state with absolute certainty, God's presence is made real now and we are invited to abide with God now. While I struggled to make the Word of God come alive for those who heard

my sermons, those who heard lifted me and mine up in prayer. Through their prayers and voices, these faithful people kept me in the abiding presence of God.

### **Where to Go Next?**

If I were to do a second part to this thesis project, I would look for other preachers to involve in the research. Preaching is hard and we can all use the honest feedback of our congregations. The habit of seeking responses to the sermon and asking for feedback is healthy for the pastor and the congregation. During the DMin. classes I took, we preached to one another weekly sometimes, daily. In that process, we gave one another honest feedback and heard the Word opened by people we respect and work alongside. Involving other preachers in honest feedback, in that same manner, would guide us to a higher standard of preaching. I now realize how much we learn so much from our colleagues by guiding and lifting what we see and hear. Often others see and hear what we did not intend to say. Colleagues would speak truth to me in love and respect for the sake of my growth as a preacher of God's Word.

I would like to preach a second Harvest series focused on faith and a third Harvest series on love (following Paul's trinity of spiritual gifts).

I think time spent reviewing older sermons, written and video, comparing them with more recent work would give feedback as to what scriptures have become overworked or under-represented. What theological themes have been ignored in my sermons? Is the congregation more empowered and involved in worship in recent months or less involved?

We are now three months into COVID19 self-isolation with no in person worship. Facebook Live presentations held twice a week have been our new norm, and the city of

Greene's weekly newspaper includes my Sunday sermons. Several folks, especially from First Presbyterian Church, Greene, have indicated they do not and will not use Facebook or Zoom for these worship experiences. They do not know how to access these and have been fed a weird set of conspiracy falsehoods that frighten them from making such a move. When our Presbytery (regional governing board) offered a grant to help technological experiments, I applied, and we have received a sizable grant. I have invited several local pastors and some Session members to be part of our planning to give coordination and blanket the city. We will begin gathering information and setting up for classes and also teaching anyone in the city how to use these applications. The response to the grant from Session members was unsurprising, "We don't use or have internet service. Nor do some of our members. Why would we do this?" There is a distinct distaste for this technology. I have teased some members and leaders about rural electrification, indoor plumbing and telephone service. We have all lived through massive changes in technology, and dragging our feet only makes the transition more intense and difficult. Being the pastor means leading where some are afraid to follow, telling the truth about what I see the future will look like. It would be irresponsible for me to have the skills and not follow through with such opportunities.

In some small way, I believe that persons who accept the challenge to live among and minister with those who are "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13) will find the reading of the research I've done and presented in this thesis giving them new insights, a true love and perhaps even a vision for the future of the congregations spread across the less populated areas of this country. I humbly offer this work to the glory of God.

“Bring to His sacred altar  
The gifts His goodness gave,  
The golden sheaves of harvest,  
The souls He died to save.  
Your hearts lay down before Him  
When at His feet you fall,  
And with your lives adore Him,  
Who gave His life for all.

*The Worshiping Church: A Hymnal* Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1990),  
Hymn 375.

APPENDIX A: REVISED PRG

Parish Response Group      Date of worship/sermon \_\_\_\_\_

Date survey completed      Where was this survey completed?

The biblical writing/scripture on which this sermon is based is \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear the passage from \_\_\_\_\_ in the sermon?

Please discuss some specific examples, that is, verses, images, language.

Did you hear other passages from \_\_\_\_\_ in the sermon?

When you think about the biblical passage and the sermon, did the general tone and feeling of the text come through in the sermon? How or how not?

How did you experience this passage from \_\_\_\_\_ in the sermon? When you heard the scripture read how did it make you feel?

How did the sermon help you sense what it means to call the Bible, the Word of God?

Did the sermon give you a new or different image for this Bible passage?

Did the Worship Service work with the Bible text and the theme?

What do you remember most about the worship service?

Extra space is provided for other notes or drawings

## APPENDIX B SERMON SERIES

### OCTOBER 13, 2019 SERMON: ACTS 10 PT. 2

<https://www.facebook.com/rich.belles/videos/10158167051755476/>

When Peter goes to the house of Cornelius he is doing so because of the vision, because the Spirit tells him to, but also at the request of men. Two men have come to request Peter come to the home of Cornelius, men of Cornelius' cohort – his unit of 100 soldiers. The men ask Peter to come because “Cornelius is an upright God-fearing man who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, as directed by an angel to send for you to come to his house to hear you speak.”

God-fearing, the whole Jewish nation speaks well of him – hyperbole – exaggeration

But they are making the case for Cornelius – they want Peter to know that this Roman soldier, commander is worthy of his attention.

Why do they have to make such a strong case?

Why do they have to plead for Peter to come? Surely an angel visit is enough to bring Peter – or even more – a Roman citizen of such standing could simply order Peter to come.

So why do they go to such lengths? Why the hard sell?

We find out later – Peter stands just inside the house and begins the conversation and then moves in and says “it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile...” That's not entirely true – it was ok to talk or do business with a Gentile but you could not eat

with a Gentile – you could not know for certain how the food was handled where it came from and so forth..., You just didn't know if it was ritually clean. This meant that Jews and Gentiles had a great barrier separating them. A barrier of the kosher laws – of purity – of separation to ensure the ritual cleanness that all good Jews follow.

That barrier – the attention to purity, exclusion of those considered unclean. This has changed. And it is made evident in the strange vision Peter had of the sheet with all the weird animals, clean and unclean and the voice of the Spirit, What God has made clean you must not call profane/unclean/impure/a dishonor to God.

What breaks that barrier?

“...after the resurrection, after eating with the apostles, the risen Jesus testified, “that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness through his name.”

That sequence, all who repent and seek forgiveness receive it and are made – clean pure kosher there is no barrier.

The gift is there waiting to be accepted. By whoever is willing to accept.

This past Wednesday was Yom Kippur the highest and holiest day for the Jews. A day of fasting, mourning and repenting of sins. It is a day of seeking to be as close to God as possible fully accepted as part of God's family.

This year, as in so many years; It was also a day of death – a gunman in Halle Germany shot at and killed 2 as he tried to enter a synagogue and slaughter the gathered worshippers. Germany alone has seen a rapid increase in such attacks, guns, knives, cemetery desecration racial slurs street attacks vandalism.

Why? Why would someone want to destroy Jews on their holiest of days?



Because the Jews are not the only ones who believe some are in and some are out. Some are included in the family of God and some are not.

A rabbi, a priest and a female Black Presbyterian pastor come to the pearly gates and St Peter with his book open says....

What?           Pause.           What does St Peter say?

That old joke begins with an assumption, many Christians make: Peter is given the keys to the kingdom of God in order to guard the Kingdom

What would Peter be guarding against? Who is Peter guarding against?

More importantly – why does God’s Kingdom need Peter to guard it?

You remember why Peter receives the keys? Because he testifies and proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah (Matthew 16)

“Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock [I] will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The gates are of Hades not of heaven – in Revelation the 12 gates of the New Jerusalem are never shut – they are open all the day and there is no night there. (Rev 21.25) and nothing unclean will enter. God doesn’t need our help to protect God’s Kingdom – that is the very definition of God.

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow, no other font I know – nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Certainly, it is not me or you. That is not in our power. Not now. Not ever.

44 years ago, at the Presbyterian Church General Assembly meeting, Rev. David Sindt stood up on the General Assembly floor and held up a sign that read: “Is anyone else out there gay?” He wrote that sign from a place of abundance, holding the denomination accountable to living into its potential.

Reminding us that there were many gay and lesbian people who would serve and honor God if they were allowed to do so.

Jamie Story in 1977, at our home church congregational meeting, the Reverend spoke at length about what a sin homosexuality is and that no homosexual could enter the Kingdom without renouncing who they were. Jamie – crying “My church does not want me.”

20+ years later I am sitting in the kitchen with yet another crying mother whose pastor has told her that her child, her daughter was going to hell because she was a lesbian. Her pastor told her, God does not love your child and neither do we, your church. Your child cannot come to this church.

How many of those folks left the church.?

It has been my privilege to hear the testimony of many who were told by their churches – we love you and those people, those loved people – they remained. But those whose churches rejected them – heard that as God rejecting them and without exception – they have not returned to church. We drove them away.

So many people for so many reasons have been told – you do not belong to God’s family – Jesus died for us not you. My neighbor’s daughter told us once that my daughter was going to hell because she played with dress up clothes and jewelry. Hairstyles. Length of sleeves. The exact wording of the Lord’s Prayer. Which translation of the Bible

you read. Indigenous people, Black people, women, physically handicapped people, autistic children, people who struggle with mental illness, criminal convictions, or are divorced...

The list is as great as our hatred of those not like us.

I know there are and have been long conversations about why we must exclude this or that group. At the core is usually a belief that these people are worse sinners than others which prevents them from belonging to God's family.

Like Paul I do not believe this. I believe in an omnipotent God able to break all barriers and bring all people from all nations together.

How do we know who is in and who is out?

Jesus said we would be known by our fruits. If we produce righteousness and justice, if we produce love of neighbors as ourselves, if we produce love of God in all our being – we are of God. If we seek God, we will find God.

Who am I to stand in the way of God?

Who am I to block the aisle?

Who am I to prevent anyone from finding God?

### **OCTOBER 20, 2019 SERMON: Luke 17**

<https://www.facebook.com/rich.belles/videos/10158188167745476/>

Today's reading is – different. It is one of the few passages in Luke about the kingdom of God. When will it be made again on earth?

Jesus uses two well-known stories, Noah and Lot.

We all know the story of Noah. But Lot? Ch 18 – 20?

Lot was the nephew of Abraham. They travelled together for quite some time until their herds grew so large, their servants began to fight one another, Lot and Abram decided to separate. Afterwards, Abram delivered Lot from warfare and death. The last time Abraham intervened was when Abram and Sara offered hospitality to three strangers who are later revealed to be God & God's messengers. As the three are about to leave, God tells Abram their intentions for the coming night. They are travelling to Sodom and Gomorrah to destroy, the cities of the plains – for undefined sin.

Abraham bargains with the Lord and 2 messengers. He asks, "If you find fifty righteous within the city will you not forgive the city for the sake of the fifty?" God says -Yes. Suppose 45 are found – for the sake of the five will you not forgive the city? Abraham convinces and schmoozes God until the Lord agrees that for the sake of ten people -ten righteous people, the Lord will forgive the city.

When the two angels arrive at Sodom, they meet Lot who offers them hospitality for the night. They accept. But as night falls **all** the men of the city, to the last man, surround Lot's house and demand the strangers be sent out. This mob of men intend to violently gang rape the two strangers. It is a brutal confrontation. Lot argues and tries to save these two strangers, for he knows this is horrible sin! But the mob will not be appeased. The violence grows, Lot and his household are finally saved by the angels. The men/angels tell Lot – take your family and flee we are about to destroy this place, "for the outcry against its people has become great before the Lord and the Lord has sent us to destroy it." Lot tells his wife, daughters and his sons-in-law, we must leave now. The sons-in-law think he is jesting. But the women follow him. As Lot and the daughters run for their lives, Lot's wife looks back, though she was warned not to, and she is turned

into a pillar of salt. The Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven and overthrew those cities and all the inhabitant of the cities and what grew on the ground.

Nothing is left. Like Noah and the flood of water leaves nothing behind.

Reading Luke 17 selected verses

The Acts of the Holy Spirit, God was God is and God will always be active, on the move within this world.

In the past this was witnessed to through the laws the prophets the history of Israel. Jesus remade that witness, into a new covenant, a recreated promise that the power of God in the Holy Spirit, we would see the world all people as part of God's kingdom. That there is indeed no place without God's presence and activity.

At each step, the Holy Spirit is making all things new – a new creation – a new family of God – bigger, broader more in the image of God.

Perfect?

We are talking about humans. We are free to choose to respond. We catch a glimpse of the Holy Spirit - we see as God sees – beloved and desired for communion – we choose – will we also seek full communion with them, or will we continue to treat them as other?

“So, it was when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham; and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.” (Gen 18 & 19)

Just as the Lord had grown sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, for their ‘wickedness was great in the earth’ So the Lord heard the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah -the cities on the plains.

All are destroyed - except

Noah and his family – Lot and his family

Was Lot righteous? Scripture does not specifically say this, but his actions speak loudly as he places himself between the raging mob and these two strangers. We can argue about all that he says, but we can clearly see he is trying to save these two unknown men. Both these stories were and are traditions that are well known.

We know these as stories of God’s response to great sin – worldwide sin. But we also know that almost no one knows what is coming. Two or three righteous men get notice, but no one else.

God grieves over human wickedness; I would even use the word “hates” wickedness – “that every inclination of their hearts was only evil continually.” This grieves the Lord who made humans as good and in the Creator’s likeness so that the only response God sees to make is to wipe it all out – wipe the plate clean.

Kill them all, salt the ground and move on.

Jesus reminds the disciples, “The days are coming – you will long for the coming of the Son of Man” But like lightning flashing – you cannot catch it -you cannot make it come you cannot set the time.

People will be eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, and building – living their lives and Boom! Flash! Crash! There the Son of Man will be.

Those who try to make life secure – building up big bank accounts and stone houses, they will lose it and those who give their lives for the Lord will keep it.

The Pharisees wondered if the Roman occupation and the growing rebellious actions were signs of the coming of the Messiah – they were perplexed and Jesus was asked “When the Kingdom of God was coming and he answered, “the Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” “For in fact the Kingdom of God is among you.”

Wait... the language here is a bit loosey goosey

It could be among you or it could be within you

And it is definitely not You – singular it is you all – in fact, it’s all y’all

Right here? Maybe he only meant then – while he walked the earth. Right? Surely Jesus didn’t mean now. In this world of chaos and trouble? When it appears that every leader in the world is full of avarice and hatred? When we hear leaders saying the things that fill our news? When we grieve over the death of those we love or our fear over death’s approach.

In the book of Common Worship there is a phrase we say close to the end of every funeral: “You Oh Lord alone are immortal, creator, and maker of all things seen and unseen. We are mortal, formed of the earth and to earth we shall return. This you ordained when you created us saying “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and Cumberland Presbyterian Church, eds., *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993). 925

To me that is the moment. The moment we remember whose we are. The moment we proclaim that yes, we are sin filled. Yes, we live short lives. Yes, this world is so very twisted and wrong – and that it is our fault.

Still. We hold onto our faith.

Still we look for and seek out glimpses, of the good Lord's kingdom.

We anticipate that it will come - it will be.

Rev Tom Long says, "We have been given in Christ a restoration and reconciliation that is already true, already whole, and we are beckoned from God's fullness to live into and toward what has already been given as a gift."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine for a minute that God's Kingdom is a black hole – a well of gravity so dense it cannot be escaped and we, our planet hovers just on the edge of the black hole. We can see it, feel it pulling, but we hold our place just beyond until one day it will grow so strong, we cannot hold back, and we will be pulled inward completely totally and made into a totally new creation.

Shawshank Redemption. An innocent man is imprisoned for the murder of his wife. The prison is awful. Hellish. Made more so by the wicked cheating bully of a warden. The prisoners have no hope. Seldom does anyone receive parole. Once you are in you never leave – until you die. What happens to a man held in such a place?

A man might lose all hope. Perhaps you might cling to the old-time religion of in the sweet by and by – but you never see it – there is never a glimpse. All is without life, without hope, without joy. No bird sings. No human smiles except as they witness or

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 1st ed., The Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, 2006 (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 126.



commit atrocities. NO HOPE. (At Eden I played this clip from YouTube at First Pres Greene, I described it as written here.)

Then one day, a man, a man who knows he is innocent, has an opportunity. And he takes it – he plays a piece of music so clearly feminine and hauntingly beautiful that every man stops. Stands. Listens. For just 8 minutes of the day in an infinite rope of grey days, a moment of light and love and forgiveness is heard. All of them hear it. In the movie the voice of Red says, “I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don’t want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can’t be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you, those voices soared higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free.”<sup>3</sup>

I hear the word free and I have hope – free from sin, free from the fears I carry about death and sickness, poverty and injustice, fears of being less than I should be and more of a jerk than I want to be.

My faith in Christ Jesus casts out fear?

Not alone. Not if mine is the only voice raised. Sometimes we think that we together sing - sing the fear away. Whistle as we pass the cemetery at night

But you and I are not the first ones to sing at the edge of the grave, are we?

NO – the good Lord has sung out of fear and pain and sorrow and abject loneliness while dying and that voice continues to sing - made new through resurrection

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<sup>3</sup> Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*. 122.

made loud through the power of the Holy Spirit. Made into a new creation -bigger and bolder than our individual or national fears.

That one voice of God singing - is enough to make the rocks and stones sing. God's voice sings into the vast grey world we have created, and fear is no more.

We lift our voices following God's call, at the edge of the grave, a hospice bed, the tax office, a court room, battlefield, the solitude of a small apartment, the cardboard box under a bridge – wherever our fear is greatest – when we hear and follow God's voice - Hope grows.

**OCTOBER 27, 2019: 1 Corinthians 15, Eden Presbyterian Church<sup>4</sup>**

We are in a time of harvest – the signs are all around us – massive farm machinery on the roads and fields. Farmers and workers look tired and a little - exultant – a little proud – for the work of sowing seeds is providing fruit – a good harvest is a thing of beauty. We see the signs all around us – fields leveled and a changing skyline as the tall corn is cut. The deer are more active - we see dead deer on the sides of the roads. Signs of harvest abound. I have received massive zucchini, eggplants, tomatoes, peppers all from the abundance of other people gardens. Harvest time is a good time. A time to give thanks and be glad for the abundance of God's good creation. Even on social media sites we see signs of harvest – pictures of garden produce and pumpkin spice coffee jokes abound. Some have begun their annual listing of things for which they are thankful.

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<sup>4</sup> October 27, 2019; I led two completely different services. Eden Presbyterian service at 8:30 AM, 1 Corinthians 15 and the Harvest theme. First Presbyterian Greene, celebrated their Harvest Festival in Appendix C.

As Christians we are aware that the world is always in a time of harvest – God’s great harvest – as the Word has been sown and a new crop tended and raised. It might be that we do not pay as close attention because it is always going on. The landscape is changing, but for many of us – we do not see this as part of God’s plan part of God’s harvest – we fear this is a different kind of crop a crop of weeds planted by an enemy.

God’s good creation is ongoing, from sowing, growing, fertilizing, pulling weeds to harvest all the time. We do not recognize it because – we are that crop. We are that harvest. This community is part of God’s good creation and harvest and since we are the very produce, we have a difficult time seeing it. Just as we have a difficult time discerning a planting pattern from inside the corn field, surrounded by tall stalks, so too we cannot fathom God’s great plan.

This letter, 1 Corinthians, is one of the earliest of Paul’s epistles to a church, dated at about 54 CE - 20 years after the Christ event. It is older than the Gospels, Acts and Revelation. It is a letter specific and general – to the Corinthians and of importance 2000 years later. This chapter 15 is a central chapter not only for funerals – where it is frequently quoted – but even more as a basic statement of our faith – a creed. Some might call it – THE Creed – it is foundational for both the Apostles and Nicene Creed though Paul’s convoluted statements tend to hide the basic statements he makes.

Paul is making a promise - a statement upon which all our faith is built and which he believes with every molecule of his body is true for all time and people.

Remember how Paul was saved from his murderous hatred? How God called him to repent and be saved? How God cast him into blindness and sent a good and faithful witness, Ananias, to lead Paul from killing and imprisoning Christ followers, Paul is

turned completely around and upside down, to being a light of God a leader who would bring many to see God in Jesus Christ? You and I remember. Because we have been told – in the scriptures and in the words of others who have taught us.

Paul goes on to note who he received that witness from - all of them and to remind the Corinthians – that witnesses sowed a seed, built a foundation upon which others build. Paul reminds the Corinthians and us – that we are part of a long line of builders and planters, called to witness called to sow the seeds that will result in a harvest.

Christ has been raised and is the first fruits of those who have died.

I was surprised to discover that some farmers raise nothing but seed plants -they are paid by the seed companies to raise more seeds. In older times, it was traditional for the first of harvest – the best the first fruits to be set aside – to be used for next year's planting – a treasure to insure another yield. The first fruits of Israel's harvest were part of the sacrifice offered to God in thanksgiving for the yield, the great harvest for which the people were grateful.

First fruits – we hear that phrase used for good stewardship of our resources – giving our first fruits to God before anything else. I propose a slightly different view - Jesus Christ is God's first fruits and from his seed – come all of us, all of the saints. for all time. As Jesus Christ is sown – spread broadly across the land, a great harvest of witnesses grows, puts forth and again and again to spread the seeds of Jesus. Unlike a hybrid seed WE are meant to spread - to grow - to flower in abundance. In that way the fields will be full of good fruit, good harvest – with no room for the enemy, a weed that Jesus tramples into dust with his feet - for death is surely our last great enemy. We are

assured in the resurrection of Jesus that God's plan is the end of death and the continuing growth – life and light of Jesus

Paul was many things but perhaps not the greatest farmer ever – he seems to think a seed does not look like the plant it yields – when in fact we see the seeds on the plants long before it is harvest time.

Paul pairs a series of contrasts – of dead and alive

The body is sown in decay dishonor and weakness but is raised in incorporation glory and power – we have the bodies - we are clothed as was Adam – the man but we are made into the image of Christ – Living / LIGHT / LIFE / BREAD. Adam could not inherit the kingdom of God for Adam was body – flesh alone but in the image of Christ, we can and will inherit - made into sons and daughters of God through the life of Christ – we have been recalibrated in a way – made anew – recreated into the image of Christ – God made flesh.

The way Paul describes this transformation this resurrection is similar to the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly – the original image can be seen but it has been transformed into something light, airy, more spiritual. Indeed, we remember that the women at the tomb did not recognize Jesus – until he spoke – so transformed was he – the same experience occurred to disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Until he spoke Jesus was unrecognizable. But – we wonder what does that mean for us? Our imaginations conjure up angels or cherubs ... coal transformed into a diamond, mud becomes light. Mortal flesh is the subject and becomes – more – changed – it continues to exist – transformed. A risen body given life by the Spirit of God.

Paul concludes this important creedal statement with “Listen – heed! I tell you a mystery – a thing we who are flesh will never know – We will not all die but we will all be changed in a moment in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet.

Therefore – my beloved be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor – no matter how small, how local, how hopeless, it appears – In the Lord your labor is not in vain.

This promise Paul makes - is a promise that began not with him. We tend to think the promise of resurrection came with Jesus – I think we conveniently forget other instances where God raises people from the dead – the widow’s son and Elijah; Elisha and the Shunammite’s son, a guy who touched Elisha’s bones – 9 or 10 people were raised – Jesus is the instrument for God’s raising of Lazarus and a little girl. We tend to forget that Jesus did not raise himself - he was raised by God. “was raised on the third day” Jesus is the first fruit of the many who have been and will be raised by God’s action.

This is the promise Paul makes – that God has that power and uses that power to raise all of us, to free us from sin and death to a new creation a new form

This is harvest season, but it is also a season of promises – political promises – educational promises – financial promises. I am sick of people breaking their promises!

Corporations lay off employees promising to help them find new work – the promise ends the moment the door closes – there might be some webinar for resume assistance... maybe...

Corporations that promised pensions have robbed those pensions for high level management bonuses. Public utilities make decisions that break the promise of drinkable

water and no one is held accountable. The list is enormous. Churches too break their promises.

Will you have a completely trouble-free life if you follow these 10 rules? No.

Will your marriage always succeed if you do these 5 things? No.

Will you live forever if you pledge 10% now? No.

Promises are easily made and broken. You and I have been on both sides, making and breaking and being broken. Resurrection is a promise. Foundational. The one promise God has made that completely changes our lives – breaks us free from sin that we might live new lives in Jesus Christ.

This is the one thing you and I can and will and shall count on. How do we know? How did Paul know? Because someone told him. Someone dared to face that murderous raging man and tell him – sin is no longer your master; death no longer has power over you.

You are free because resurrection – God’s new life is real, and you are invited to be part of that new life. You are invited to live into the promise that is truly ours forever – resurrection.

**NOVEMBER 3, 2019 All Saints Day Sermon: Luke 24. 13 - 35<sup>5</sup>**

<https://www.facebook.com/rich.belles/videos/10158229551990476/>

Let’s set the scene – It is the day after sabbath – the disciples have been hiding in a “safe” house – hiding from the higher ups who put Jesus to death. As disciples, students of a condemned teacher – their lives are in danger. The women have been to the tomb

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<sup>5</sup>Craddock, *Luke*, 284–88. I found this commentary helpful in exploring Lukan eschatology.

found the stone rolled away and the tomb - empty. They meet men in “dazzling clothes who tell them “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but he has risen. Remember how he told you? “Then the women remembered – and went back and told these things to the 11 remaining Apostles and “all the rest.” The others gathered together – hiding in fear and sorrow – in the great loss they have all sustained. Peter goes to look and is amazed. But no one else really believes. That same day

Read Luke 24. 13 – 21

We had hoped. Are those the saddest words ever?

Have you had such an experience?

When my mom had her brain tumor surgery and the surgeon came in and said, “We cannot get it all and it will come back.” We had hoped.

As I grew older, about 40, it became evident I was losing my hearing - We had hoped that would pass me by.

As Rich’s diabetes grew more intense, we prayed dialysis would not be necessary – we had hoped his change in diet would be enough.

When I began ministry here, many hoped I would draw new members enough to keep us going as a congregation – financially and spiritually – We had hoped.<sup>6</sup>

Those men and women, children - sick and hurting, poor and wealthy – all hoped Jesus would be the one to “redeem” Israel. The redeemer, as the prophet Isaiah had described – was the one coming who would drive away “those who strive against Israel” Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel who will bring water to the poor and needy

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<sup>6</sup> Naming our pain. Eden Presbyterian and First Presbyterian Greene have been losing members. See further evaluation in chapters 5 and 6



whose tongues are parched with thirst. The one who will open rivers on the places without water, bare plains and heights, fountains in the valleys, everywhere there will be water. The wild lands will hold cypresses, and pines - olive trees and acacia. Trees of life and goodness “so that all may see and know, all may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.”

This is the redemption they hoped for – life for Israel instead of capture and exile from enemies. Water and good fruits - not deserts and thistles.

And their hope is gone – nothing remains except their frustration fear and sorrow.

It is the third day.

Their hope is - gone. Except – the Holy One the Redeemer walks with them beside them and he - kind of laughs at their loss

What? Do not laugh at our sorrow! Don't belittle our crushed hopes! That is not kind! Jesus though he just tells them – “Oh how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”

When they reach the house the two – still have no idea who this is. But they offer him their home, their hospitality, their food. And he accepts – they open the door to him as surely as they opened their hearts on the road.

He stands at the table taking the bread he blesses, breaks it and gives it to them – and their eyes opened - they knew him. Every meal is an opportunity to experience the risen Christ. They recognize! He vanishes!

“Were not our hearts burning while he was talking to us on the road? While he was opening the scriptures to us?”

They have heard Jesus speak and teach before! Long before this journey these two disciples have walked with Jesus. Now they have had a full day of personal tutoring from the risen Christ. The very one they had hoped for.

And his words burned their hearts.

When we look into the scriptures with the Messiah our hearts burn

What will we do with that fire?

Will we allow it to be put out with the ashes of death?

They have been slow of heart in not understanding who Jesus was and his place in the workings of God. Jesus kindles a fire within them, and their hearts burn.

Burning, blazing not smoldering or almost out

No longer slow or small hearts – but bigger / brighter / stronger / more immense hearts. A fire, God’s holy fire - blazes within them. They are on fire for the love of God. For the great plan that has stretched for millennia for the love the intense love that would drive forth such a plan the immeasurable ineffable unimaginable plan of God.

What will they do with these burning hearts? They will offer a place at their table they will offer hospitality they will ask the stranger to come in and they will see and recognize Jesus. Their hearts blaze! Their eyes are opened and Boom!

The Word made flesh walks and talks with those two disciples for 6 and a half miles – on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. A lot of talking. A lot of words. He begins with Moses – so the book of Exodus and all the prophets and interprets all of that to them. It takes the whole trip

A lot of walking with and talking with Jesus.

Weren’t they lucky?

Don't you wish you had such an experience -walking with Jesus most of the day while he explains the whole mystery of his presence, his death his resurrection to you? Don't you want that? Wouldn't it be amazing to have the opportunity to ask all those questions we ponder in the middle of the night?

Today we remember and name many of the people who have made our lives more complete – who have been our loving brothers and sisters in Christ for years, lifetimes

And I wonder do we not recognize the image of Christ within them while we walk and talk with them? Until they are gone and then we think “Oh how our hearts burn not in joy but in sorrow for we missed it.”

Today I suggest you take the time to look into the faces of these gathered brothers and sisters in Christ – see the blazing fire of God within them let your hearts be kindled made into a blazing fire of heat and light for all to see all to witness.

See them - see Christ and let your eyes be opened!

**NOVEMBER 17, 2019 SERMON: Matthew 9.35–38; Luke 10.1–4; John 4.31–38;**

**Mark 4.30–32**

Eschatology – I am positive that you – like me – have been thinking about eschatology all week long. Especially when you see those big green or red farm harvesters and the trucks and the lines at the elevators – the first thing you think is ah! This reminds me of eschatology!<sup>7</sup>

“Definition of eschatology

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<sup>7</sup> “Eschatology | Definition of Eschatology by Merriam-Webster,” accessed February 23, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eschatology>.

1: a branch of theology concerned with the final events in the history of the world or of humankind      2: a belief concerning death, the end of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humankind specifically: any of various Christian doctrines concerning the Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, or the Last Judgment”

NO? Oh my gosh. Well there’s a reason you have not been thinking of that – eschatology is one of those words preachers, theologians and biblical scholars like to use - mostly to show how valuable our seminary training was - but it seldom occurs in a regular conversation.

Even in those moment when it is most appropriate – when we are standing with the gathered family by the bed at hospice watching and waiting for the final moments of someone we love – when we are gathered at the edge of the grave - we do not say

“What is your thinking on eschatology? OR What will the Parousia be like?”

We could because eschatology is about the end times – when Jesus comes again and the Kingdom of God is fulfilled, the earth is made new and all are gathered into the city where the 12 gates are always opened and the lights are always on – Parousia is a Greek word for the second coming.

If we spoke like that using such technical theological jargon, then now would be the perfect time to talk about eschatology – harvest. For Jesus uses the season of Harvest over and again as the image for what KOG will be like - the grains gathered, the chaff burned, the fields prepared – it’s all in there. In fact, harvest is used repeatedly throughout the Bible, old and new covenants to describe when the Lords time is fulfilled.

This past week most of us have been watching, praying for the harvest – that it would be successful, that all would come through it safely, and finished before the next

big snow. That the propane shortage and the wet corn would be resolved in an equitable manner. That more profit and less loss would be the result this year.

Read Matthew 9. 35 – 38 (NRSV)

One of you said last week, “I don’t think we have ever had a year where both the planting and the harvest are hard – where the weather is bad for both. Usually it’s one or the other.” Does that mean you farmers give up?

I know at least one farmer who had to say, he couldn’t plant his fields – he planted, his fields flooded, so he replanted and another flood came – so he wound up with nothing in the fields, no harvest. Yet he is working the harvest – he is and has been working for other farmers helping them bring in the yield. And next spring he will try again. Just because now is not a good year doesn’t mean next year won’t be.

Luke 10.1 -4 (NRSV)

Jesus is sending out the disciples, 70 of them in pairs to go from town to town, place to place, and their job is to tell everyone, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.”

Wednesday, I was at the Coffee shop in Greene – and a young woman, teenager, was at the counter getting a lunch order and pastry to go. She had on jeans, a hoodie, her hair was up, and she had on boots – not cool boots, not pretty boots but wading blech green farm waterproof boots. Her friend came in and said, “Hey I didn’t see you in school today.” The girl with her boots and hair said “Yeah I am in the fields, we have to get the harvest in. When we didn’t finish yesterday, I said, I am not going to school, especially since it’s just a half day – today I am a farmer.” Her friend just nodded – yes you go!

When the Kingdom of God is at hand – when it is harvest time – you don’t wait.  
You go.

John 4.31 – 38

Samaria, Jesus and the disciples are travelling, the disciples leave Jesus at the well while they go look for food, when the disciples return with food, they discover him talking to the woman at the well

Wednesday I was at the coffee bar in Greene – Monica was working, and she looked tired. I asked her how she was, and she told me – about her husband working late into the night. At 10 Tuesday night he texted her asking for dinner and coffee. She took it to him in the field – 30 min drive in the dark. When she got there, she sat with him in the cab and he ate and drank, and they talked. First time they have had to talk in weeks – Monica said 6 weeks has passed without them having time to talk. Three hours they talked and harvested. That is amazing to be able to share the work with your partner. Of course, when she got home her 7-year old was awake waiting and he said, “Mom I threw up on my bed.”

Mark 4. 30 – 33 (NRSV)

Why does God use this image of harvest to explain – eschatology? The fulfillment of the Kingdom of God? God’s Kingdom is an eternity of plenty. More than enough it is an abundance. Overflowing - the word feast and a wedding banquet is used – a time of heaping amounts of food and wine – it is that stream of golden corn flying across the air to fill the trucks – and its more and better than any one thing we could do on our own.

When you hear these parables and images do you also hear who we are in this harvest? We are the workers and we are the grain and we are those who have planted tended and reap. We are all those.

All of us are called to plant and tend and harvest. To follow the seasons God has provided and do the work before us. Some days we look at the fields and they are empty, windswept, broken stalks, flooded, drought stricken. What was planted seems to be gone.

Daniel Troppy<sup>8</sup> lives in Atlanta. He does a different kind of harvest. He drives around the city, a specific route he usually follows. He looks for homeless people, people with signs and carts sleeping on the sidewalks or in the parks and he stops his car and greets them – by name. He knows most. He takes photographs of them if they give permission and he gives them - backpacks full of snacks, toothpaste and brush, handwipes clean t shirts, socks, blankets water bottles. Sometimes dog food.

A giving spirit needs no agenda or schedule. Though most of us need that discipline. This is the photo of a young boy who lives close to Daniel – he was asking Daniel what he does, and Daniel told him about his projects. And then Daniel showed him a sunflower seed. He told the boy plant these seeds and something wonderful will happen. This is that boy with one of the sunflowers he grew.<sup>9</sup>

Daniel does not have the paperwork to be a 501 c3 nonprofit charity<sup>10</sup>. He receives no salary. He has no office space hosts no fund raisers. He just drives around doing this. He posts pictures of the people he meets, naming them and then when he receives money in his PayPal account, he posts the information without the name and

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<sup>8</sup> “Compassion for the Homeless: Photographer Daniel Troppy Uses Social Media to Raise Awareness,” *Atlanta INtown Paper* (blog), January 29, 2020, <https://atlantaintownpaper.com/2020/01/compassion-for-the-homeless-photographer-daniel-troppy-uses-social-media-to-raise-awareness/>.

<sup>9</sup> Used by permission a photo from Daniel Troppy’s Facebook page shown only at Eden Presbyterian Church.

<sup>10</sup> YIMBY Yes, In My Back Yard is the newly organized non-profit begun by Daniel Troppy. At the time of the sermon Daniel had not applied nor indicated he was applying for nonprofit status.

then posts pictures of his Walmart receipts and the stuff all laid out. So, accountability is evident. There is no question Daniel does what he claims. There is no push no letters no requests.

Daniel does not operate like a program. He does not operate like a traditional church. But the work he does is significant. And every day I see the harvest - everywhere – under the bridges, at the interstate on and off ramps, in homeless shelters and tent cities, there are people everywhere – the harvest is there waiting to be seen waiting to be gathered. Waiting for someone to see. And the workers are so very few.

**NOVEMBER 24, 2019<sup>11</sup> SERMON: Revelation 14b-19 & John 18.33-37<sup>12</sup>**

<https://www.facebook.com/rich.belles/videos/10158293716150476/>

Today's readings seem divergent – going in two different directions. 1st is the gospel of John Ch 18 the conversation between Jesus and Pilate as Jesus is being charged with heresy, with speaking and plotting against the Temple authorities and God. Treason against Rome. Pilate must rule on these charges. Pilate and Jesus then have this conversation - King of the Jews.

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<sup>11</sup> During worship at Eden Presbyterian, Rudd, a youth member came into tell me that her brother and best friend had been in a car accident that morning. Her brother was badly hurt, and his best friend killed. I shared this information during the prayers and concerns. The congregation gathered meals for the family for several days.

<sup>12</sup> Along with the worship and sermon, I often include a piece called “Wonderings and Ponderings” I got several responses to this sermon and felt this indicated real interest in truth and the divergence between God's plan and ours.



Divergence - Pilate is talking about King as in earthly political ruler, sovereign – like Caesar or Herod – Ruler/King for their own lifetime or until the next ruler comes along and whacks off their heads. Military power and political power, economic power is what Pilate knows. But is that truth?

Jesus is speaking about ruler in a different manner “You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world. To testify to - give witness to – proclaim the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

“What is truth?” Pilate asks

Pilate never asks, “How do you belong to truth?”

Do we own truth? Most of us believe what we believe is the truth, but it is always only a part of truth. I hear you and I may understand the words you speak. But I may not hear truth because it does not agree with what I believe. We believe our own beliefs more than the truth someone else presents us.

How do we belong to truth? Jesus, says, by listening to his voice, his words. To belong within and listen for the sound of Jesus voice leading us toward Truth

Now consider with me a moment Revelation – a letter written to 7 specific churches in an area we now call Turkey. John’s letter will be read at each of 7 churches publicly and privately. These 7 churches were begun some 40 years earlier by Paul and his cohort. They are located on Roman trade routes and all have had success at some level of surviving as Christ follower communities. This is amazing. For the times are tumultuous – tense, scary, full of change and pressure.

During those 40 years since Paul began to teach and preach, the great rebellion between Jews and Rome had resulted in the destruction of Israel, beginning with the

siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70, including the burning of the Temple and ending in 73 with the destruction of Herodium, Machaerus and Masada. That four-year siege and war left Israel devastated and sent many refugees out to the edges, seeking asylum, new homes with strong Jewish communities that would accept these strangers.

Their fear is that without a temple, without their promised land – Israel will not survive. The holy people of God will be no more.

There is a tension – between very conservative Jews holding onto their faith and faith practices and more diverse groups of these outer edge cities, especially Christ followers. The very idea of believing Jesus, a convicted crucified criminal to be the Messiah, the Promised one was a huge insult. Christ followers were Insulting God and the faith, and the more traditional orthodox Jews were furious. The Messiah would never have allowed Rome to destroy the Temple and the city of Jerusalem – the holy city and people of God? That could not possibly be true. You are not really a Jew – you are a liar, a heretic and the truth is not within you.

Tension grew between locals and newcomers and there came to be a time of local persecution. Those who were outed as Christ followers were arrested, questioned and often, killed for their beliefs.

The prophet John knows there is and will be a time of testing and persecution. Told by “a voice like a trumpet to write, witness and send,” John gives words to the truth he witnesses, the truth in which he belongs.

Being owned by the truth of Jesus will be very difficult life - threatening for themselves - their families and friends. The truth of Jesus Christ, as named by God, set as ruler of all is not comfortable for many, especially rulers on earth, the powers that be.

This letter describing, naming Jesus Christ by God revealed to John is the testimony to these 7 churches, is full of the truth of God in Christ Jesus. Much has been made of the visions, the images John chooses to describe what will happen to Rome and the kingdom of God. Much of it is frightening. War and pestilence and destruction. For these two kingdoms are – divergent – going in two different directions.

The list of names for Jesus – all are part of the truth – YET all together still do not tell us the whole of truth of who Jesus the Christ is, was and will be.

I am the Alpha and the Omega says the Lord God, the one who is and was and is coming the Almighty. God names not only Jesus but God's own self.

For the Truth of God is God is one who names God's self.

I AM is the name God speaks to Moses. Every time we hear "I Am" - we hear an echo of God the proclaimed name of God's self – God is the one who names God. The Alpha the beginning and the end the Omega – the first and last. The one who began all things including time, time we follow and the time we can but vaguely glimpse – the eternal time of God.

We have named this particular Sunday: Christ the King Sunday, it is the end of a cycle of the church calendar, a circle for its eternal quality – it never ends, and it never begins. We mark days upon it to help us connect to Gods ineffable plan, those moments and days when God broke into human history "such that history has erupted and continues to erupt with the glory of God."<sup>13</sup> For God's time is not our time.

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<sup>13</sup> Weaver, *Explorations: Selected Sermons at the Gayton Kirk*. 1-4. Professor Weaver was an extraordinary teacher and preacher at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. These are selected sermons she preached as a member and pulpit supply, published by Gayton Kirk, PCUSA in Henrico County, VA. I will never think of time the same way again.

Our time, our flat calendars, has “lesser events” like National Hot Dog appreciation day. Our flat calendar is handy for lists and appointments, the here and now, but it is not the truth. It is a piece, a tiny piece of the Truth that owns us. That holds us.

Time is a gift from God, if time is a gift, a tool, it should not own us.

This week between Christ the King Sunday and the first Sunday of Advent is a gift we have received from the creator of all things – a reminder, that we are mortal, we sleep and work and eat, in our minds, our time, we have a beginning and an end. Our time, regular time is a gift to remind us that in the time we have, we are called to be owned by God freed from our sins by the blood of Jesus and called to testify to this freedom in every moment we are given.

In God’s time, the beginning, is we do not have a beginning and an end. We were created but God has known us from before we were formed in our mother’s womb. And what was two divergent times are now locked together through the action of God – the Advent of Jesus. The Alpha and Omega. Our beginning and our end. Governed by God’s providential care and plan. Life eternal through Jesus Christ.

You have heard it said, a journey begins with a single step. This day, step into the time and plan of God, experience eternal truth in some way, through this beautiful world and through these beautiful people and all the people we encounter.

What will you do with this gift of time and truth? How will you and I witness to the truth of the Christ? The unique and eternal qualities of the Messiah.

God’s truth and time own us.

We do not own God.

We begin Advent next week, and you and I will call out again and again: “Come Lord Jesus Come soon – Come quickly” Like small children in the back of the car desperate to arrive at Disneyworld rather than enjoy the glorious creation on the road between our beginning and our ending – Are we there yet? Is not the question.

What is the question?

What are we doing with our time? This world needs the witness we provide of the Alpha and the Omega, the Lamb of God, that is a truth everyone needs. Especially ourselves. How will we in the tension of our days and the sleeplessness of our nights remind ourselves we belong to our creator.

Are we planting seeds of faith? Are we tending ourselves like the land and the soil for good growth? What part of God’s great truth will you tend and care for?

### **OCTOBER 16, 2019 FUNERAL FOR J**

It has been said, that “The book of life has many pages and death is not the last.”<sup>14</sup> The Psalmist notes “In your book, [O Lord] were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.” (Psalm 139.16), I

J’s life had many pages, some light and joyful and some dark and full of sorrows. She enjoyed a variety of musical activities including dancing, playing the accordion and singing. Her poetry is known throughout this community and family. Her accordion was as big as she was, but her joy and heart were far bigger than any one instrument. She loved the taste of fresh tomatoes and cucumbers. She played with her children and even

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<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Andreas

more with the grandkids and great grands. Ladybugs were a tiny parcel of beauty. She did an enormous amount of laundry especially diapers in those early years of wringing and line drying. Her sorrows were just as intense, the death of children husband and son -in-law is a long list for anyone's life book.

We could, and many will, spend hours sharing the stories of J's life. Her hard work and discipline, her joy and laughter. And still, we could never know or tell all her life's pages. For we are mortal, and our knowledge is incomplete.

Paul, wrote, "For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2.10) We are known, our book our lives known by God before we were formed. It is a book filled with God's presence, grace of salvation from sin and experiences of the glory that is God's due.

Having her eyes open to that glory, J was a light in the world, a light of joy and delight. A light that was sometimes dimmed by life's hard knocks, twists and turns, and sometimes leaping bright with joy in pleasure and the beauty and deliciousness of God's ever-growing creation.

No human life is perfect but the presence of God in our lives makes an enormous difference. J could be pretty feisty, she had a strong sense of right and wrong and she was not shy about making her opinions known.

Yet her faith in Christ was certain and true. She spread that faith through song and music, poetry and service in the church and community, her music made a difference in the lives of many. Her life and love made light for her family through daily loving acts and discipline.

There is a kind of symmetry in J's gift of music in the Senior Centers and Care facilities. As dementia's grip grew tighter, music was one of her greatest comforts. L and others sang to her and brought her moments of peace and recognition.

Gifts given and received are fundamental to making love real – and it is that reality that makes death, so harsh, so lonely, so empty.

Yes, our hearts are heavy yes, we miss her face and her voice. Missing her is the price we pay for love. The reminder that love is made real and is sweet. Love should be sought and nurtured, for it is fleeting and we cannot be certain we will have another day, another smile, another song.

J is no longer wandering lost and afraid.

God's Love is made real in promises of forever. Grace is the gift we do not earn but receive. Salvation from sin is the price God has paid through Jesus Christ. We are the grateful recipients of the Lord's eternal love. For love is what keeps us in the everlasting embrace of the heavenly family – it is the immense love that helps us as we walk through dark times. It is the loving presence of God that wipes away every tear. (Revelation 21.4) Not that we should not cry but we are comforted. For the light and loving life of Jesus holds Jean, so that at last, she is in peace.

Dementia no longer terrorizes Jean, nor drives her to sleep rather than face the day. Now she is no longer afraid of a face she does not recognize, the words of a voice she does not know – there is no one she cannot name – fear is no more, her body is not cold, her mind is no longer darkened by disease. She can once again delight in all that makes love real – the warmth of her family, the light of God's presence and the beauty of the New Jerusalem. A place full of light and love – where there is no locked gate because

there is no night. A place without hunger or thirst or pain or sorrow. But light music and joy – intense real and everlasting.

You and I, all who have known her, have received a blessing from God – of J, sister, mother, grandmother, cousin, friend, family... made in the image of God to bring the light of love to this world for a time.

Our lives are also gifts for others and our response to J's death might be to feed the light of love within us. To ask God to open us up so that light shines brightly and brings glory not to ourselves but to the everlasting love of God. All times all place all people, shining light and love. In these dark days may you and I shine light. Amen



APPENDIX C

**OCTOBER 27, 2019, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENE, IA  
HARVEST FESTIVAL WORSHIP SERVICE**

**Readings Gleaned from Session Records followed by testimony of current members  
of similar contemporary issues**

**Reading #1 Organization**

June 1 & 2 The Committee of Presbytery went to Coldwater on 1 June 1863 according to appointment. Sermon was preached and another meeting was approved for next morning, June 2, at 9 AM at which time the following persons gave in their names as members of the church:

On Certificate: Solomon Sturtz, Gerry McNabb, John Sturtz, Emmanuel Lydig, Susan Sturtz, Anne McNabb, Rebecca Lydig, Wm Hasebrode and his wife. On examination: Rebecca Sturtz, Sarah Sturtz, and John McNabb

Following this, Session met according to prior notice. Members were received with prayers presented and received into the community.

Taken from history of Butler County and inserted here in accord with the desires of the congregation.

1883 First Presbyterian Church, Greene, IA

To get at the foundation of this society, we must go back in date to June 2, 1863, where the organization was effected (sic) of the Presbyterian Church of Cold Water. This

took place at the Hart school house on section 13, with the Rev Richard Merrill officiating and following charter members: Solomon Sturtz and John Sturtz, Henry McNabb, Rebecca Sturtz, Emmanuel Laydig, Susan Sturtz, Elizabeth Sturtz, Anna McNabb, Sarah Sturtz, and John McNabb.

This organization continued in force until May 19, 1872, where it was reorganized as the First Presbyterian Church of Greene by a committee from Waterloo Presbytery consisting of Rev. Geo Graham and Rev. W. R Smith and ruling elders A.D Barnuer and Simon Armstrong and with the following charter members, Henry McNabb and Solomon Sturtz, Mrs. Rebecca Earnest, Mrs. Sarah C. Heart, Mrs. Ellen Paulsey, Emmanuel Leydig, Mrs. Rebecca Leydig, Mrs. Jenna P. Bentley. The first ruling elder was Henry Mc Nabb. Trustees were Solman Sturtz, A.D. Barrierer, of Greene and Dr. J.F Ely and W.C Rowley of Cedar Rapids: C.H. Bentley secretary.

This organization was perfected at the Moore schoolhouse and commenced its good work with the most favorable outlook for the future.

*Testimony from member*

**Reading # 2 1883**

The first pastor was the Rev. Geo Merrill of Clarksville who preached every alternate Sabbaths for 5 years, He was followed by the Rev. David James, who officiated for one year and in successive course, the Rev Joseph Gaston and E.J. Marshall each about one year. The latter was drowned in the Shell Rock River in August 1882. The Greene Press gave the following account of the sad affair:

“Rev E.J. Marshall drowned in the Shell Rock river while bathing last Friday evening about 8:00. A party of brothers consisting of Rev. E.J. Marshall pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Greene. W.C. Fabrin, E.W. Parus, Will Cheney, and Geo Galis were bathing in the mill pond at the north end of St Thomas & Co.

warehouse and all starting to swim towards the pier of the bridge halfway across the river. Rev Marshall was not able to keep up with the party in the race and fell behind. When about sixty feet from the shore he turned around and began to come back. After swimming a short distance, he disappeared under the water for a moment. He arose to the surface and began swimming. He had not preceded over 10 feet before he disappeared again a second time. No one realized he was drowning. Not coming up again a boat and grappling irons were secured quickly, and the body of the unfortunate man was recovered by Mr. Faling assisted by L Downs. About 15 mins lapsed before he was taken out. Drs. Huckus, Biorey and Johnson were quickly on board and with the assistance of many willing and sympathizing friends, they worked over his body for 2 hours in hope that his life might return but all efforts were fruitless. The young minister of fine education and much promise with not a relative near was a corpse in a strange land.”

The appalling news spread like wildfire over our little town and hundreds of persons collected at the river to get a glimpse of him who for about 5 months had proclaimed to them the immeasurable riches of Christ.

The deceased was sent to the Greene last January by Rev Baird, synodical missionary for the Northwest. He was unmarried, an Englishman by birth, 32 years of age and had been in America about one year. He was a close student, a deep thinker and in theology was well versed. He was a graduate of Manchester and Leeds colleges, England.

*Testimony from P & P M regarding their ongoing upkeep of this pastor's grave site and two others due to memorial bequests*

**Reading # 3 Presbyterian Church Greene, Iowa Dec 19, 1921**

Dear Fellow Member:

For several years, the Presbyterian Church has needed a good basement to furnish additional Sunday School room and a suitable place for social affairs, suppers etc. The many plans to accomplish were only as dreams, for an attempt to excavate under the church at the old location was out of the question on account of the almost solid rock.

Then it became necessary to sell the lots and move the church to make room for the new high school building. The moving was like breaking ties for many of the members who had worshipped and worked there for many years.

The Thomas corner, purchased some time ago, became available at once as a new location. Thanks to those who foresaw the need, and to Mr. & Mrs. Perrin who gave \$1000.00 of the purchase price.

The move has been expensive, and when the work is done, we will owe \$4000.00. As everyone who has built in recent years has experienced, the cost was far in excess of expectations. The painting and grading cannot be done until spring, but the inside work is complete except the floor covering in the audience room.

To those who have not been privileged to see the new basement we can assure them that it is very complete and attractive. Everyone is delighted with it. Already it is apparent that it will be a great help in the future work of the church.

It seems eminently fitting that the church in its new location with additional room and splendid equipment should be rededicated to God and the good of this community. Sunday, Jan 1st- New Year's Day- has been chosen as been chosen as a proper time for the dedication. Former pastors, Rev Fisher and Rev Chase, will assist in the service. It will be a banner day and **have we not a right** to expect that every member, unless prevented, will be there, not only from the standpoint of duty, but of pride and privilege.

Of course, there will be a call for money-or pledges-for who would want to dedicate a church with a dead weight of debt hanging over it, without any provision for

its payment. We know ready money is scarce, so those who cannot pay cash, can meet their pledges in three annual payments.

If any of us should feel that the load is a little heavy, let us remember that is not for ourselves only but our children and perhaps our neighbor's children. Also let us remember the sacrifices of the older members who have handed down to us the main building to us free of debt. Not only have they given us the main building, but their sacrifice and service has made this community a better place in which to live.

The general feeling is the church is that the members should pledge the greater part of the necessary funds. Gifts from non-members will be appreciated and we know of a number who will want to help but we do not think it proper to canvass the business houses and outsiders generally for pledges nor do we think it necessary to resort to this to raise the required amount.

We feel sure you will plan to give this dedication service first place on New Year's Day. Besides your pledge we need the inspiration of "every member present".

Teamwork counts. Our responsibility is personal not general. This is your church-you will not fail it. Presbyterians generally are loyal. If you have been putting your shoulder to the wheel - give it, one more turn. If you have been careless won't you step in line again? This spirit will make it a day of inspiration and real happiness for everyone.

Building statement will be made at dedication.

In His name let it be done.

Sincerely yours,

Board of Trustees

H. B Cheney Chr.

D.H. Ellis Clerk

G.U. Caldwell Pastor

*Testimony of Member T regarding use of this basement and the heated floor and how the church building was moved from the prior location where the middle/high school now exists.*

**Reading #4, Information gathered for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary:**

Financial information on the original building:

Grant of \$600 on the building (from Presbytery)

\$500 given by BCR and NRV

Manse built in 1890, loan of \$450.00

Church rebuilt in 1896, Loan of \$800. New seats installed then.

New windows put in during 11911

Moved to present location and basement built in 1921

Rededicated in Jan 1, 1922

The grant of \$600 made when the first church was built was voluntarily paid off in 1916. As follows: April 12, 1916

Session met at office of Bro. J Kahuda. Members present: John Anderson, J Kahuda, DH Ellis, Rev JW Chase, moderator.

After completing other business, The Clerk of Session was instructed to extend a vote of thanks to the seven young men, members of the church, who on their own responsibility and with their own funds, made an investment which yielded them a profit which according to agreement among themselves is for the benefit of this church, who

from this fund have paid off the loan (grant) of \$600 made to this church by the board of Church Erection when the church building was erected in 1873, and who still have on hand approximately one thousand dollars which is expected will be spent for local improvement. The aforesaid young men are: PH Bestor, CE Cheney, WH Cheney, DH Ellis, RJ Pooley GR Watterson and TG Watterson. Meeting opened and closed with prayer DH Ellis, Clerk

*Testimony of member S regarding the ongoing work of the Mission Fund which designates a portion of annual earnings for mission work*

**Reading #5 Dec 6, 1894**

Session met in Church being called by the Pastor immediately after the usual prayer meeting and was opened with prayer. Present: Rev Smith, moderator, S. Sturtz, OL Crandall, Wm McDonald, Stewart McRoberts and CC Calnuy

The moderator stated the object of the meeting which was to take into consideration a rumor that some of our members had taken part in a public dance at the Opera House. After due deliberation, the following Action was taken:

Whereas the impressions seems (sic) to be current in the congregation that the Presbyterian Church puts no restriction upon dancing card playing etc., on the part of her members. The session take occasion to make known that the above named and all worldly amusements belonging to that class are forbidden both by the fundamental law of the Church and rulings of all our Church Courts. That the indulgence in them is adjudged a violation of covenant vows and also an injury on the cause of religion on the principles laid down by Paul in 1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 8.13 "Wherefore if meat makes my Brother so offend I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."

Therefore, we kindly and affectionately admonish our members to refrain from the worldly amusements referred to, and all such as involve the breaking of covenant vows or violation of Church rules, and that operate as a hinderance to the salvation of others. This we do in all kindness and brotherly love, trusting and having confidence to believe that after having thus been made fully acquainted with the facts of the case, our members will cheerfully acquiesce in and observe the rules of the church in the future. Also, that the pastor be requested to read the above action from the pulpit.

Closed with prayer, O L Crandall Clerk

*Testimony of B and J regarding dancing and playing cards*

**Reading 6    Anniversary and Installation Program**

May 19,1922 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the organization of this Church. This occasion we celebrated in connection with the installation of Rev L.P. Parkeron Thursday, May 11, 1922.

A picnic supper was held in the new basement. Over 150 were served. A history of the Church was read by Elder D.H. Ellis. Some items of interest taken from this report are posted on the following pages as also is the present list of active members.

Several older members gave personal recollections of the early days. Photographs of early pastors and elders were displayed. Also letters and other papers, including mortgages and releases of relating to early building operations etc. Especially fortunate were we to have a picture of Rev Geo Graham the first pastor. Letters were read from former pastors Rev J.W. Chase and Rev Geo W. Caldwell.



A birthday cake with 50 candles was cut by Mrs. Elizabeth Ellis, the oldest member, in point of years of membership. 25 pieces of the cake was reserved for the 25 members who united with the Church over 25 years ago.

Guests on this occasion were former Pastor W.E. Fisher, Rec A.C. Preston of Waterloo, Rev Char Ruth the missionary on furlough for the Philippine Island, Mrs. Fisher and Mrs. Ruth and Mr. & Mrs. Overmeyer and son. Also Mr. & Mrs. Fred Cheney member of this Church recently returned from mission work in Mexico.

Elder R.J. Pooley presided in the installation service with followed. Rev. AC Preston delivered the sermon, Rev W.E. Fisher of Ackley, IA propounded the constitutional questions and gave the charge to the congregation and Rev Chas Ruth brother-in-law of the Pastor L.P. Parker gave the charge to the pastor.

Rev Baker of the Methodist Church gave the benediction at the close of the anniversary service and the installation service was closed by prayer by the newly installed pastor Rev. L.P. Parker

D.H. Ellis Clerk

*Testimony of pastor and member regarding the celebration of all the years of worship at First Presbyterian Church*

## **NOVEMBER 10, 2019, EDEN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH: HARVEST**

### **FESTIVAL WORSHIP SERVICE**

**Session Readings Gleaned for Harvest Festival followed by Testimony of Current**

**Members Regarding Contemporary Events**

<https://www.facebook.com/rich.belles/videos/10158250861990476/>

**Reading 1: Founding of the Synod of the West**

Shortly after being ordained as a Pastor, A Dutch immigrant, Van Vliet noticed the large number of German immigrants crossing the Mississippi River at Dubuque and moving inland to settle what would become Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Minnesota.

They were coming in groups, but without any spiritual leaders. In his conversations with them, he discovered that many of them were originally from East Friesland, and spoke a German dialect closely related to his own native Dutch.

Van Vliet had a strong sense of personal responsibility for the spiritual welfare of all, the image of people who were moving to settle and populate an unknown territory, with no religious leaders, remained with him in prayer and concern. From this arose the conviction that he must do something for their spiritual welfare. The Holy Spirit led him to train young men for the Christian ministry, just as he had been trained by the apprentice method. He also recalled a German immigrant family by the name of Kolb who had two teenage boys Andrew and Jacob, who showed interest in religion and the desire to help people. He invited them to come and live with him, and he would prepare them for the ministry. The two boys responded and came to Dubuque, and he began his instruction in the fall of 1852. Thus, a German school for the ministers was born. – which today is University of Dubuque Seminary.

Time passed, and the need for German Presbyterian ministers diminished with the drop of German immigration and the gradual change of German services to English services. However, for some congregations and pastors and leaders, arose a strong demand for separate presbyteries, because their comprehension of English language was insufficient to follow presbyteries' discussion of important parts of doctrinal and polity matters. They found themselves unable to express themselves sufficiently well in English

to make contributions to the presbyteries' meetings with their thinking. This need drove their leaders to petition the synods in which most German churches were located, by now some had grown to be large in their membership as well as wealth. A separate presbytery in which all the transactions would be in German was needed. Initially, their pleas and petitions were denied for some obvious reasons, one of which was that in a very foreseeable future these German churches would be assimilated, and English would replace the German language. Obvious as this seemed, they persisted in their petitions, the driving forces of which were associated with the college and the seminary at Dubuque. As well as several influential German pastors, members of the Convention of German Presbyters of the West. Through their petitions and persistence, they won the permission to organize three presbyteries: Galena, Waukon and George, from the General Assembly, in 1908: The Presbytery of Galena comprised of German ministers and churches in the Synods of Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Indiana and Ohio.

The Presbytery of Waukon included the German ministers and churches in the Synods of "Iowa, and Minnesota east of the seventeenth meridian from Washington."

The Presbytery of George included the German ministers and churches in the Synods of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado.

During the next three years, the effort to win the approval for a synod (which would be composed with the three presbyteries: Galena, George and Waukon) continued and was achieved at the 124th General Assembly meeting in Louisville, Kentucky in June of 1912.

At this Assembly, the instruction was given "*to meet in the Eden Presbyterian Church, Nora Springs, Iowa on August 14, 1912 at 7:30 P.M.,*" under the moderation of

the Rev. Daniel Grieder. This was carried out according to the General Assembly direction, and the Synod of the West became an ecclesiastical judicatory of the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A.

Having achieved their objective of having their own German synod, the pastors and the people set to work as before with their bee-like activity. They undertook the support of the foreign and domestic mission projects, for which they established an annual Missionfest which became exceedingly popular among the German Presbyterian churches, sometimes lasting several days, with each day hearing several speakers who presented the missionary messages. The collections on Missionfest days usually proved to be quite generous, and often their amounts were published in "Der Presbyterianer." This led to a type of a contest among the churches.

In the course of time, many congregations became affluent and built new churches which revealed not only their financial stability, but also the love for their church which nourished their faith with God's Word. Their Sunday school material and other spiritual literature used in their services continued to be produced by their press which was operated by the Convention (the language was, of course, German).

However, after World War I, the use of the German language in the services began to be changed to English. At first, only in the Sunday evening services, but gradually it was also changed in other church or congregational affairs, especially those in which the young people participated.

In 1922, an English religious periodical, The Presbyterian Messenger, was a harbinger of things to come. More and more congregations began changing from German to English.

In August of 1935, this author, Joseph L. Mihelic, witnessed a historic occasion, without being aware of it at that time. At the George Presbytery meeting, at Zoar Pres. Church, George, Iowa, the opening business affairs of the presbytery were all transacted in German. Then, before the closing motion and prayer, the moderator of the presbytery began to speak in English, saying “This is the last meeting at which German will be used,” and called for the motion to end the meeting and concluding prayer. This was done in German with the benediction.

The Synod of the West continued to function with its various enterprises until 1958, when, with the union of the United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A. in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the synod was dissolved and its congregations incorporated into the then existing English presbyteries and synods.

The passing of the Synod of the West was so peaceful and harmonious that it was soon practically forgotten that such a church synod existed. This showed that, in the wisdom of God, this branch of the Presbyterian Church had fulfilled the function for which it was called forth, and now had been given a larger task in building the Kingdom of God.

*Testimony by member F regarding the translation of records from German to English and Member C regarding the Ice Cream Social*

**Reading# 2: Congregational meeting highlights, 1894 – 1910**

Translated into English by Ed and Hulda Brandau in March 1976

Oct. 31, 1894: The Congregation met at the church, Oct. 31, 1894, according to previous announcement, at 10 o'clock A.M. The meeting was opened with prayer by Rev. C.H. Gravenstein he was then elected moderator for the meeting and C. J. Apel

clerk. Moved and carried that members secure cemetery lots by choice at \$2.00 moved and carried that P. Sohn be treasurer of the cemetery funds.

Jan. 6, 1896: The congregation met at the church at 10 o'clock as per announcement. (This was a meeting to elect officers, Elders, Trustees, Treasurer for the church, SS and Ministers salary, SS Superintendent and vice SS Superintendent and librarian.) Moved and carried to buy 20 large and 10 small Gospel hymn books. Moved and carried that each member be taxed \$1.00 for year to be used for general expenses paid quarterly.

Jan. 6, 1902: As the Trustees had for some time not received the yearly membership tax from 2 members the Pastor and Elder were requested to call on those persons and speak to them concerning their obligations as to the finances of our church.

Jan. 3, 1910: The congregation met at the accustomed place and time. After election of officers and discussion of finances... Moved and carried...to paint church, parsonage and other buildings next spring. Moved and carried that members be granted the privilege to build sheds starting near chicken house eastward and too they must be all alike.

*Testimony from members regarding the need for other outbuildings on the church property for the pastor and family to provide for their own needs*

**Reading #3: Congregational meeting highlights, 1913 - 1929**

Jan. 6, 1913: Moved and carried to instruct trustees to erect another outhouse...

Jan 8, 1917: Moved and carried that trustees constitute committee to investigate about a basement under the church.

April 28, 1918: Special meeting of the congregation met immediately after services opened with prayer by the Pastor Rev. H. Jans and unanimously agreed to have English preaching during the period of this war. Meeting closed with prayer C. G. Apel

May 11, 1914: ...Moved and carried to raise the annual membership tax from one dollar to two dollars per members. Moved and carried to tax each cemetery lot owner one dollar per year.

Jan 8, 1923: Ordinance for parking cars at church. Moved and carried that cars be backed up close to the hitching posts, for by so doing will avoid backing and accidents when leaving. Moved and carries to form two adult Sunday School classes where the lessons shall be taught in the "home" language.

Jan 7, 1924: Missions collections were taken throughout our history and are designated annually, some times to "Native or Indigenous Schools and in 1924 to the Dirk Lay and Christmas Collection for poor suffering children in Germany (1924 was in the midst of Germany's massive economic depression caused by WW 1 and reparations to England, France...)

Moved and carried that we cooperate with the person who offered to put in basement and do our part which consists of Building a new chimney and steeple and helping with the work on the Basement.

Jan 5, 1925: Motion made and carried that we have English services every first and third Sunday of each month for an indefinite time.

Calling of pastors, was done by vote in a congregational meeting.

Here is an example, Nov. 3, 1929, "Informal ballots gave Rev. Schalk 30 votes, Dr. drake 23 votes and Rev Uholen 5, Rev Manus 5, and Rev Fieselmann 2 votes and 9

blanks. Motion made and seconded that we take another informal ballot. Second informal ballot was Dr Drake 55, Rev Schalk 14, and a few scattering votes.

After more moving and seconds were made and withdrawn; Motion made and seconded that we take a formal ballot

Results: Dr Drake 55 votes, Rev Schalk 11 votes and a few scattering votes. As Dr Drake received the majority of votes, he expressed his desire to be given time to consider the call.

However! Dec 22, 1929 Motions made and seconded that we make the salary in the call to Rev. Fieselmann at \$1500.00 and he also to receive all money that is subscribed over that amount. (What happened to Dr Drake?)

*Testimony from members to the change in the structure and the building of the basement and then Fellowship area*

#### **Reading #4 1931 - 1965**

Jan 5, 1931: (Some things never change!) Motion made and carried that Trustees fix bell if possible.

More discussion of using English or German...German services on the first and third Sunday of each month, others English... Leave the question of singing English or German in Sunday School to be decided by the Sunday School at some future date.

#### Session meeting Highlights

Session records are written in English beginning Dec. 4, 1930.

Eden remained in the Wauken Presbytery which was part of the Synod of the West (German Presbyterian) until 1958. In 1958 the United Presbyterian Church and the



Presbyterian Church in the USA joined into one denomination. The Synod of the West was dissolved, and its congregations merged into the English Presbyteries and Synods.

Sept 13, 1962: While the church was without a pastor, Rev Camp having just resigned, Eden Session met at Greene Presbyterian Church under the moderation of Rev Fred Butler (Greene) or Rev. Sinning, retired, or Rev Smidt, who was soon after called as Eden's Pastor, Jan. 1963.

March 4, 1963: "Matter of discussion being where to raise the \$900 needed for a new building at the cemetery. Motion made and passed that one half of the amount be raised through contributions from the congregation and balance to be taken from the trustees' fund.

Dec 2, 1963: Motion passed to hold Service Christmas Day at 10:00 AM.

Dec 29, 1963: Motion made and passed to hold New Years' Service at 10:00 AM

Oct 5, 1964: Motion passed we appoint an Evangelism Committee in our church. Committee appointed was Rev. Smidt, Chairman, Men's chapter: Norval Sinning and Francis Schmidt. UPW: Mrs. Larry Schmidt, UPY: Bill Schmidt, Session members: Dick Kupler, Alvin Bortz. At large from congregation: Mrs. Springer and Marvin Krull

A number of youth raised, confirmed in Eden went on to ministry

Dec 20, 1964: John Smidt was brought to Session "informing them of John's desire to enter the Ministry and he wished to come under the care of Presbytery. After John expressed this desire and told us the reasons for his making this decision, he was questioned by Rev. Smidt and the session members. All being well impressed with Johns remarks the session passed a motion that the Eden Church recommend John Smidt to presbytery as a candidate for the ministry.

*Testimony from Pastor Belles: In searching for Rev John Smidt, I found his cousin Rev. Hensman. John Smidt now retired from the PCUSA and living in Colorado. Unfortunately, Eden's Rev John Smidt has passed away, but his cousin shared that Rev John Smidt served in the military and several Presbyterian churches.*

April 6, 1965 Session meeting held for the purpose of examining the members of Confirmation class wishing to join the church and also others desiring to join the church.

Confirmation class: William Brandau, Max Brandau, Peter Apel, Mavis Gratias, Craig Brandau, Russell Brandau and Carolyn Brandau. Also Mrs. Lulu B. Brown was received for membership.

Nov 1, 1965: Christmas eve service and Christmas Service on Sunday Dec. 26  
New Year Service to be held Sunday, Jan. 2, 1966

Dec 9, 1965: Elder Dick Kupker had been unable to attend Session meetings due to illness for the past 6 months. In a discussion regarding the upcoming annual meeting, Session decided to take an absentee ballot to Elder Kupker and to "anyone else requesting such a ballot due to illness."

### **Reading #5 1966 - 1975**

From Session records

March 25, 1966

Because of the snowstorm the special congregational meeting (March 23<sup>rd</sup>) was postponed. Session decided to hold this meeting Thursday Evening, March 31<sup>st</sup> after the church service to consider repairs to the floor in the sanctuary and the making of new cupboards.

April 1, 1966: Confirmation class: “The 4 young people, Christy Peters, Bradley Toppin, Kenneth Brandau and Delmar Reisman met with the session and were examined stating their wish to join the church.” “The Session voted to receive the ... 4 named young people into the church upon answering the questions April 3.”

Nov. 7, 1966: Interim Moderator, Rev Kalveswaki reported on a communication from Rev. Langenberg about the possibility of a merger between Eden and the Church of Christ, Colwell and Orchard. No action taken.”

Sept 1, 1974: The Memorial Fund Committee reported and a motion for them to purchase a display cabinet, metal letters for the outside bulletin board and a new communion plate carried, with the money to be taken from the Memorial Fund.”

October 24, 1974: Session records begin to be typed.

January 13, 1975: The annual congregational meeting was held on Monday Jan. 13, 1975 at 7:30 PM. “A motion carried to authorize the trustees to investigate and repair, if necessary, the structure holding the bell.”

“Art Gratiias gave a report on the possibility of purchasing 19 new pews or refinishing the present pews. A motion was made and seconded and carried to have the session appoint a committee to look into this a little further.”

January 19, 1975: A motion was made, seconded, and carried that the session support and encourage members of the congregation to sign a petition of concern for kinds of programs and movies shown on television. A notice will be put in the bulletin.”

April 20, 1975 Special Congregational Meeting: “After a report by Art Gratiias, and much discussion a ballot vote was taken with the results as follows: 50 in favor of

refinishing the present pews, 20 in favor of purchasing new pews and one wanted to wait until we have a minister.”

Sunday, June 15, 1975 : Session meeting at 8:30 before worship. “Mary Schlobohm, chairman of the pulpit committee, presented the name of John N. Bates, Davenport, as a candidate for pastor of the Eden Presbyterian Church and had a written report with terms for the call. A motion was made, seconded, and carried to accept this report and to recommend the terms of call to the congregation.”

Special Congregational Meeting held after worship

Mary Schlobohm, chairman of the pulpit committee presented the name of John N. Bates, as candidate for pastor of the Eden Presbyterian church and read the terms of call as recommended by the pulpit committee and session.... A ballot vote was taken ... 80 “yes” and 1 “no” vote. A motion was made, seconded and carried to make the ballot unanimous. “ Installation was held Sunday, Aug 10, at 4:00

Feb 7, 2017: Discussion was held about the Eggena family fire loss. Motion by Ken second by Nina to authorize a Sunday Dinner for members and guests. A free will offering will be taken.

April 4, 2017: The Eggena benefit was successful: Clearing up after, Linda Brandau sent a thankyou note to every contributor. Checks have been given to the Eggena family totaling more than \$4000. Good publicity before and on the day of the event led to good results especially financially but also in community recognition. Linda Brandau did an outstanding job.

*Testimony from member L regarding this benefit and how well received it was*

August 2017, Pentecost offering totaled \$727 with \$290.80 to be used locally.

Motion by Ken second by Francis to give to Bridges Mentoring

May 17, 2018: Review of events Tuesday, May 1 at the manse. A man came by looking for cash and entered the manse area without permission. The Trustees, Elders and Sheriff's Dept took this intrusion seriously and began a series of security improvements. More outside lights, motion activated, and several discussions with the Sheriff. A final request that they tell the intruder to leave the area has had great results.

## APPENDIX D

### CRP: INTERVIEW WITH D

**Initial Interview, March 4, 2020 11:00 AM First Presbyterian Church, Greene,  
Meeting Room. Reviewed and Revised March 9, 2020 at D's home**

D is a longtime member of First Presbyterian Church, Greene. He and his wife S play significant roles within the church leadership and the community.

How long did you farm?

1978 I rented the farm from Dad. Dad went to help his brother for a year or so and then he took the farm back for two years. Dad broke his hip in the winter and had hip surgery. Because of the hip surgery he had a lot of pain. In 1980 or 81 Dad came to me and asked, "Do you want to rent the farm?" and so I did and later bought the farm.

D worked fulltime at White Farm Equipment<sup>1</sup> in Charles City. "I was about 45 years old and renting Dad's farm when I offered to buy it. I bought it and they financed the purchase with a standard interest rate. I then sold the acreage and house which helped with paying part of the loan."

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<sup>1</sup> White Farm Equipment was bought, sold, split off, reunited, and now exists as a line brand name of the AGCO Allis-Gleaner Corporation. Wikipedia.

What is acreage?<sup>2</sup> “Acreage is property close to the house and outbuildings, a farmstead usually less than ten acres. The house and acreage I sold included the house, outbuildings and a couple of acres on the river side.”

CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) is a USDA (United States Dept. of Agriculture) program putting environmentally sensitive land to rest for a specific time, allowing for land renewal. D began putting fields into CRP some thirty plus years ago.

How did you begin?

“I rented 100 acres of land to the CRP, on a ten-year contract. That rental income assured enough secure income to help cover the farm payments to my parents.” He was determined that payments to his parents would be a primary responsibility.

“The soil on the family farm is sandy, not heavy, and is susceptible to wind and rain erosion, also drought susceptible and doesn’t hold nutrients well. The soil needs extra nutrients to grow a good crop. So, the CRP wild grass planting would do the soil and wildlife good and assure income.”

After the CRP ten-year contract, D had to farm for one year that one hundred acres to be able to again bid. More people want to participate in the program than the USDA has land to put into fallow. In order to farm those acres, D had to kill the wild grasses and used an herbicide in the fall and a disk harrow two or three times to cut through the grass roots.

D’s father expressed interest when D started no till or minimum till farming for that land. D used a Chisel plow for minimum tilling. His father saw D’s hard work and said he was glad it wasn’t him having to make all these adjustments. In order to conserve

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<sup>2</sup> All definitions are also found in the Word Bank, Appendix I

the soil and prevent erosion, D used a chisel plow and minimum till farming for soybeans that year. D believes that despite the extra work and the unevenness of the fields, it was a better crop than ever before. Soybeans worked better because soybean seed roots easily and quickly. Corn needs a more even seedbed.

What is a seedbed? “It is the land you prepare for planting.”

After a year of farming, D was able to rebid that one hundred acres back into the CRP. When that ten-year lease was up, the USDA offered a ten-year extension at a higher rent. So that land has been twenty years without farming and provides an assured income to the family. Income stability is very difficult for farmers to arrange and the uncertainties of farm income can become a major factor in family farms. D has been diligent in setting up assured income for some fields.

D now has a complex network of contracts with the USDA and neighboring farms leasing fields. At one point, D raised pigs for the local elevator owner. These “feeder pigs” were another stable income producer for the family.

From time to time, D has wondered what his father would think of the CRP field rent and use. Would he think it a good decision to let the soil rest or would he be less pleased at the lack of a harvest produced on his farm?

D believes this has been a good financial decision, not only for the good it has done the soil and wildlife, as well as assured income, but grain has been over produced recently, driving the price down. Not producing grain helps D’s neighbors.

Just as D wonders what his dad would think, he wonders about the inheritance he leaves for his children. D has talked to his son about the land. “Are you sure you want the land? And not the money for the land?” His son assures him he wants the land itself.



Several of his son's friends from high school remain in Greene and have farms. D also believes his son will find help from the FSA (USDA Farm Service Agency).

Now the CRP has a pollinator focus of flowers and grasses that attract bees, moths, ants and butterflies. D loves the fall looking out at the changing grasses and flowers in their coloring. In spring, D burns the fields as directed by the USDA to reduce invasive weeds such as wild parsnip. These acres come near to tree lines and wooded acres. Greene volunteer fire department assists in this spring burn so that nothing gets out of control.

Several farmers wives/partners work in the fields or do the paperwork including taxes, so I asked D about his wife's (S) involvement with the farm: "S did not help with the farm, she was willing and probably able." But D delights in doing it himself. Harvest is a special time to see what has been produced from the spring work of planting. As he has grown older, the work is more difficult but as long as he is physically and mentally able, he hopes to continue farming.

## APPENDIX E

### **INDEPENDENT: INTERVIEW WITH M AT HER HOME, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2020 12:05 PM**

M is a long-time member of First Presbyterian Church, Greene. She lives just a few blocks from the church.

“I was born in Greene, Iowa and then later my Dad got a new job and we moved to Mason City. We lived on an acreage and my first school is outside of Greene. It is no longer a school building. One of Dad’s first jobs in Mason City was as a city employee and then later he worked for then Interstate Power (now Black Hills Energy).” He was a pipe fitter and perhaps belonged to the Union.

I learned to do things myself. Dad did most everything himself. I watched him do the projects like build the garage, put on a roof. I did regular chores like tend the summer garden, tidy up our room, sort the laundry, and wash windows. It was me and my brother. Mother was very picky about how things should be done. I was not taught how to cook. I was only allowed to make popcorn and fudge. I took Home Economics in school for cooking but only learned gourmet cooking, not the regular cooking for home. I was married the first time at 16, I turned 17 the next month. My parents like my first husband, he was a worker, and they gave me permission to get married. I got pregnant immediately. But it was a tubal (ectopic) pregnancy and I had to leave school to recover

from complications of the surgery. I went back to high school later and graduated from Mason City High School.<sup>1</sup>

“I took sewing in school beginning in the seventh grade. And I was good at it. Mom finally let me use her sewing machine to make my own clothes including my Jr Prom dress which the dry cleaners ruined. My mom was different. She and I never got along. Even when I took care of her later. I was always stubborn and learned not to take nothing from nobody. Me and my Dad were good buddies, we spent a lot of time together.”

I got divorced in 1968, husband was a drinker and had a second “family”. I had two kids and we moved back to Greene where my parents had retired and lived. My parents had some land and a fifth wheel (recreational vehicle that is towed by a truck.) Divorce was unusual in 1968 and Marge had to learn to push and speak forthrightly because “men think women are stupid. I have always learned easy and took those tests in school and always came out “mechanic.” I’ve never been afraid of machines. I learned to sew, work in a plastics factory, book makers, and Jell-O production.”

My parents traveled a lot in that fifth wheel and while they were in Texas, Daddy started feeling poorly. They drove and visited my brother and when they got to Greene, he called me to take him to the Dr. Daddy had throat cancer and surgery.

In April 1970, I met V he was a friend of a neighbor woman. We married in October of 1970. V had six children. V had a lot of health issues and between those and the children he was living on welfare.

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<sup>1</sup> Mascon City High School was originally where a now abandoned Shopko is, off the main thoroughfare of Mason City.

I met E in the plastics factory where I worked. That factory is now closed, B's brother owned it. I've known B since I was fourteen.<sup>2</sup>

V was the opposite of my first husband. V was a romantic and a poet. He wrote poems all the time. I made a book of his poems for the kids when he died. We had ten and a half years of marriage and lived in Greene with all eight kids. V had to work to keep the kids, so he went to college and later ran a lathe in Waverly. When that plant closed a new plant in Hampton opened and he worked there. M stayed at home for a few years with the kids. Later she got a part time job waitressing at the Riverview Café on the Shell Rock River in Greene. Then she became full time short order cook.

V was working odd jobs on a local farm, moving pigs, hard physical work. He got to aching and went to the chiropractor. T, the chiropractor<sup>3</sup>, realized V was having a heart attack and called the ambulance. T called me and I got in the car and drove to Mason Mercy hospital as fast as I could. While I drove, I talked to the Lord about V. "It's God's call but if V couldn't get back to really living then just take him." Marge didn't want him to have more physical health issues. Part of his health problems included borderline epilepsy which went undiagnosed and untreated for most of his life. This is part of why V could not hold a job for very long. V died on April 17. The family dog waited at the door for V for three days. Then stopped. C our grandchild used to hit the top of the fan and V his granddaddy would come into the room and thump the top of the box fan and they

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<sup>2</sup> B and E are also members of First Presbyterian Church, Greene. They do a lot of helping for M especially her macular degeneration eye shots.

<sup>3</sup> Chiropractors are held in high regard in rural Iowa. Many people go to see them regularly for muscle and bone pain. Anecdotal experiences indicate they are held in higher regard than General Practitioners.

would laugh. C did it once, and V never came in. C never did that again. If V did not respond immediately, he never would. Those are good memories but sad too.

At forty, M was a widow. That was too young for most state financial aid, but she got a lot of financial help from the community. She worked at the café. On May 2, V's birthday, M cleared out all his stuff, gave it to his children or sold it. "Started to put life together for myself cause I knew I would have to make my own way." M got the job at the plastics shop. Then the shop closed.

Faith has always been important for M. "I believe what the Bible says, and I take him at His word. I have been close to death a couple of times and I could feel God's presence." During her tubal pregnancy and almost wipe out on black ice, M was certain God was with her. "God kept me going." The same is true for financial difficulties. "God always makes sure I got enough money to cover. Always made certain needs are met. Not extra, not wants. But needs are always met. 'Ask and you shall receive.' Not frivolous things." I am a strong believer in prayer. I don't just say I'll pray on that. I really pray and believe God acts and later I will find out what changed.

After the plastic shop closed, M had to go to Des Moines to apply for SSI (Social Security Insurance) and get testing done. There she met a lady, a midget, they got to talking and afterwards kept in touch and wrote each other. That lady's aunt knew a man, H, who was in a Florida prison for murder. Her Aunt wrote to H regularly and encouraged M to write him also. M started writing in 1990. H was sentenced for robbing a liquor store and shooting the clerk. He had blacked out from drinking so was uncertain if he did the crime, but felt it was probably true. While in prison, H began to attend AA meetings and read the Bible. H worked with leather in prison and made a Bible cover and

a cover for his AA book. H sent those books to M before he died of throat cancer in 1997.<sup>4</sup> H would take no money for other items he made M such as moccasins and so she put money into a bank account for him in Greene. He also sent money to M and she deposited it into the savings account. H was released to a guard's care after being diagnosed with throat cancer. M sent him all the money so he would have it for whatever he needed.

H asked M to write another younger man, B, who was in prison for attempted murder. B told M he was gay and got into a bar fight. B bit the other guy and so was sentenced for attempted murder. But that was only what B said, "No way to know the truth." B's sister sent M \$280 of an estate B received. A gift from B for M to use. M used most of it for very expensive prescription ear drops and a housecoat. Her needs were supplied. B died from cancer while still in prison.

M's Daddy died and in 1986 M's mother remarried. That allowed M to move into their trailer. The trailer, and the land it is on, are paid for. The trailer was manufactured in 1971, had two owners before her parents bought it and placed it on its current location in 1977. For thirty-three years M has lived in this trailer. She has replaced the roof, furnace, much of the floor, and windows. Her trailer is not in great shape, but it has lasted long past its expected life span. The walls, floor, and roof are poorly insulated, with frost on the inside walls during the coldest days and nights. The floor is just plywood covered with carpet.

Much of the work M does herself. When she wanted to repair the living room floor, she measured and got wood cut at Greene lumber yard, one piece at a time. The

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<sup>4</sup> M has these beautifully covered books at her front entry, you cannot miss them.

guys at the lumber yard would load the wood in her car trunk, and she drove it up the hill to her house. She moved the furniture herself, from one side to the other, putting new plywood on top of the old floor. First Presbyterian Church, Greene, her home church, had left over large pieces of carpet. We gave her most of that and she has covered the floor. It looks much better and feels solid. This summer she hopes to do the same thing with her bedroom. All attempts to volunteer folks to haul and move stuff have been rebuffed. Marge believes she can do it herself.

At this interview, M indicated for the first time that she might be ready to move into apartments in Greene. There are assisted living apartments connected to Greene's Nursing Home which also have underground parking. There are also subsidized apartments with one and two bedrooms. Both places are well maintained, with several resident friends of M..

## APPENDIX F

### **FAITHFUL DOUBTING: INTERVIEW WITH S MARCH 18, 2020 2:30 pm, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENE, IA**

S has lived most of his life in the Greene, IA area. Born in Emmetsburg, IA his family moved to Greene when S was in second grade. S graduated from University of Northern Iowa in 1979, with a degree in Business Management and an Economics minor. He then started working at John Deere . His pay was excellent, but the corporation politics were difficult for S. All John Deere employees were required to participate in the annual United Way Drive. Employees were told by their managers how much, what percentage of their salary would be designated for United Way. S saw many of the requirements of the corporation, such as the Union requiring employees be kept on payroll no matter their performance level.

S's father was the manager of a local grain elevator owned by two sisters. The sisters were content for S's father to run the elevator as he saw fit. After a short time at John Deere, S began working with his Dad at the elevator.

The main business of the elevator was purchasing, storing, and selling grain. Farmers want a low cost to grow a high yield and sell at a high price. Farmers send their grain to elevators for storage, the grain must be kept dry and cool. Elevators buy and sell the grain to processing companies, such as ADM (Arthur Daniels Midland). The difference between what the elevator pays and what ADM pays is profit but not pure profit, there are many costs associated with transportation and storage. Elevators set



futures for their grain on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) trying to balance their Basis for wide when grain is purchased and narrow when grain is sold.

Along with grain, their elevator sold feed and seed and hogs for Rath Packing Company in Waterloo. After Rath went out of business, they bought hogs for Hormel in Austin, MN. Hogs are not easy to raise in outside facilities, and they are susceptible to many diseases. Confinement reduces the uncertainty of weather but requires fully feeding hogs and maintaining clean facilities and water. Even with a good manager, raising several thousand hogs is difficult. Given the volatility of hog prices, they do not always provide a solid profit margin. At some point the S family decided to buy ‘feeder pigs’ and had farmers raise them, a couple of hundred at a time. Gradually farmers were less and less willing to take on the work as building facilities for full confinement was very expensive. As DF indicated in his interview, feeder pigs guarantee a set payment each year which is helpful for farmers. However, in conversation with other farmers, they indicated one terrible winter and low meat prices pushed many to stop raising any stock animals. Now it is integrated packers who primarily own and manage confinement facilities.

When S’s dad retired, Steve became the manager and was really on his own. S added the sales and repair of truck and tractor tires to the offerings of the elevator. This reduced the amount of time a farmer needs to spend waiting for new tires, especially in the busy seasons. The tire business was steady and helped fill in the slow times when grain sales and production were low. S worked at the elevator for fifteen years, managed it for eleven and owned 50% share with his brother D for twelve years. D was

uninterested in running the elevator but was able to purchase 50% share with S from their Dad's partner.

S learned a lot about grain sales and running the brokering side by experience, his dad, and building upon his college education of business, accounting and economics. He took short courses from Iowa Grain and Feed Association and the Iowa State Extension Program. These programs have been cut back steadily over the past two decades. Now most elevators are owned and operated by large cooperatives.

S and D co-owned the elevator for several years with their dad. In 2007, neither set of children were interested in managing and owning the elevator. In 2007 the family sold their elevator to Innovative Ag Services, a smaller cooperative group of elevators. They got a reasonable price. Ethanol corporations have grown into large corporations, and no longer need grain elevators. Energy corporations such as Hawkeye have merged into larger corporations and now many are owned by Oil companies such as Flint Hill Resources which is a division of the Koch Brothers Energy Corporation.

After Innovative Ag's contract to procure corn for the ethanol plant was not renewed due to merging with an oil company Flint Hills Resources, S went back to Packard for a short term as a manager. He enjoyed working for the small business, however it was quickly growing into a large corporation and S was disenchanted with the management decisions. In March 2015, S became an independent broker. He assists farmers in getting the best possible prices for their produce and knowing the right time to buy and sell. This work is done primarily from home over the phone and is usually completed by about 2:30 PM. As an elevator manager, S was accustomed to working

fifty-five hours per week in the slow winter season and somewhere around one hundred hours a week in the spring and fall months.

In 2013, S's father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His father chose not to do the treatment cycle, did better than expected and lived fourteen months. S's mother had already been diagnosed with dementia and deteriorated while S's father was dealing with cancer. In 2010, A's mother had a seizure, was diagnosed with brain cancer and died in 2015. In 2014, within three weeks of one another, both of S's parents died. In February 2016, A, S's wife was diagnosed with Brain Cancer, **GlioSarcoma multiforme**. Surgery was performed in early March and A returned home to rest and start treatment. S's new job allowed him the time and energy to stay home and care for A.

On the day A died, S had a new customer meeting at 5:00. Hospice was a presence in the house for the last week. S met with the new customer and returned to find A slipping away. Her skin became mottled, she stopped responding and her breathing was shallow. He hurried to contact his daughters M and E, and A's father. She died moments after her sister, and father arrived from Ames, IA.

The timing of A's illness is a particularly painful point. S was working fewer hours and they were beginning to imagine what retirement would look like. They visited wineries and cozy places all over Iowa. They had many plans and ideas, and both were conscientious about their health. The only good part of the timing is that S was able to stay with her and see to her care while working.

As the years go on, S has struggled with his faith in a loving God, for he cannot see how loving goes with this horrible cancer. A's mother died of brain cancer, though a different type and A was very distressed that this was happening to her. S is very aware

that he needs a partner, that he is not equipped and does not desire to be alone for the many decades of life he probably has. Greene is a particularly difficult place for S to find someone to date, small towns know everyone's business. The winter and weekends have been particularly difficult. S has few close friends with whom he can share his faith issues. His work is successful but there is a stagnant season when nothing is happening and there is little work to be done. S has served as an EMT in Greene for many years. He has also taken other part time work such as bartending at the Greene Country Club and recently as an EMT in Waverly. These jobs get him out of the house and out of his head. S was very fortunate to sell the large historic home he and A owned. He has purchased a small house on the Shell Rock River closer to the center of Greene. This house needs a lot of work and he hopes it will be the house by the river for the grandchildren to enjoy in summers to come. He has been looking for acreage closer to his daughters but has yet to find the right place. Recently S began dating a widow from a nearby city. They share much in common and S is finding this new relationship lightens his heart and eases his loneliness.

“I am better with someone else. My self-confidence is better when I have someone else in my life. My hope is improving because friends helped me find someone to spend time together.” S is still irritated that for years S was putting himself last and lost so much. Why so much loss when he has given not only his time and energy but his money in donations? He has lived a good life and tried to do the right things and he is so frustrated with why God took so much from him in such a very short time. As time has passed, he continues to read and think. As we meet, I am struck by how his questions are more and more foundational. The problem of evil, the meaning of life and the goodness

of God, these are the deepest faith questions which have been pondered through the ages. While S has no good answers, he continues to ponder. I pray he will receive answers and they will give him some peace of spirit. In the meantime, his faithful doubting is a wonder to behold.

## APPENDIX G

### **THE TREE OF LIFE HAS A TRUNK OF FAITH: INTERVIEW WITH Z, MARCH 20, 2020, 10 AM AT Z'S HOME**

Z grew up in the Nora Springs, Iowa area, she had one sister and four brothers. Z was the fourth child. Their life was not easy, Dad was an alcoholic who worked at grain elevators in the area. They rented small houses until Z's maternal grandmother died. The grandmother left her house to Z's mother along with 160 acres of farmland. Z's mother and family worked together to raise most of what they needed. Hogs were raised and butchered and canned. Vegetables were raised and canned or frozen also. For vacations, the family went camping to several national parks including Glacier, Yellowstone and Montana. Z remembers driving to Duluth to get the cousins and all of them travelling together. Those were good memories.

There were many sad and hard memories. Z's youngest brother (ST) died in a car accident at eighteen years of age. ST was a high school senior and the other driver died, and ST's girlfriend was injured. Z's father "drank away" the 160 acres of farmland. Z's father was an alcoholic and sexually abused his daughters. First the oldest girl and then Z. When the two sisters began to have menses, he stopped and turned to beating his wife. The oldest son called the Sheriff to report his father was beating his mother. After twenty-five years of marriage, Z's mother divorced Z's father. Eventually Z's father wound up in Montana, just outside of MacDonald pass, in low income housing, alone and

untended. After his death in winter of 1992, all the living children visited his final home and had the memorial service.

Z's mother remained in her parent's house and eventually as the children grew and moved out, Z's divorced sister moved back in as well. After a while, Z's mother went back to the local community college for her CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant).

Z's aunt and uncle bought the rest of the farm. Z's mother "E" moved to Mason City, retired and died on August 13, 1998 at sixty-four due to cancer. She was diagnosed in July and had little time to prepare and her family was devastated.

That same year, Z's husband B died in October working on the harvest. B's brother was working with B on emptying corn bins. It had begun to rain, and they were trying to finish the corn before it got too wet. B slipped in the mud and the semi driver backed up over him, unable to see B. An ambulance was called for the damage was very bad. B was driven to the hospital in Mason City and then life flight to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. Z was at work when she got the call. She gathered B's best friend, the pastor of Eden Presbyterian Church, and got the boys in the car for the drive. Z remembers it was raining hard, really pouring.<sup>1</sup> As Z and B's best friend, their pastor drove, Z was praying and thinking frantically, "God I am not sure I can deal with half a man. Not financially or emotionally." The Dr had told Z over the phone there was little hope. As they drove the pastor JB said "Z, they mean they are just waiting for us to get there and say good-bye." Pastor JB helped Z to hear the truth. She felt intense guilt, but she was very frightened as well. Z and B had three sons, one with profound hearing loss

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<sup>1</sup> The road from Osage Iowa to Rochester MN is not terrible, it is paved. However, there are very few streetlights and several unexpected curves. This must have been a terrible drive.

and they had recently paid for his uninsured experimental cochlear implant surgery<sup>2</sup>. Money is always tight for young farm families and theirs was no different.

By the time Z, the boys and the pastor arrived in Rochester, B was being kept alive so they could say farewell. Z signed all the forms for organ donation, and B was declared dead. Several of B's siblings and Z's family were gathered along with the three boys, Z and their pastor JB. This was a Thursday evening, on Sunday Z was in church, Eden Presbyterian and JB, their pastor and her husband's friend, preached on loss. The boys were there, and they all grieved, named their loss and sorrow. As one Sunday school teacher said, when Z feared she had lost her faith, "You don't question faith if you don't have faith."

Favorite memories of B:

Z and B met at a party. Z had been drinking a bit too much and she didn't remember B's name. Z graduated high school in 1979 and started a course at Hamilton Business School in Mason City, studying bookkeeping. Z and B started dating in November of 1978 and married in December 1979. They were married at Eden Presbyterian Church and the pastor JB and his wife, became very good friends with them. At the wedding, Z was crying a bit and JB gave her his handkerchief.

Z and B were not wealthy, but B's older brother and wife handed down furniture and things for them.

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<sup>2</sup> This child remains a textbook case of cochlear implant surgery for young children. His face as a child is on the University of Iowa Children's Hospital mural. University of Iowa has one of the leading cochlear implants surgical, support, and research units in this country. I was fortunate to be able to have mine installed here.



Z broke the hydraulics of a tractor and her brother-in-law yelled at her. B however, just said, "Let's take it to the shop." B was quiet and steady unless he got mad and then he got really mad. Their three boys were born in 1981, 1983 and 1990. The second child was born profoundly deaf. Z and B noticed quickly that he was not babbling as did other children. They took him to Iowa City first for hearing aids and then for Bone Conduction Hearing Aids. Neither was a good solution.

By the time, this boy was three, he was in a special class for hearing impaired children. The boy learned to sign, the parents and the church community learned to sign. All wanted to communicate with him. B had some initial issues with his son's deafness and sometimes hesitated to pick him up. There was a week-long camp for parents and children in which the parents had time to talk together, to think about their children's needs and loss of dreams and hopes for their children. B was uplifted in this camp and realized all that he could do to help his son. B then shaved his mustache so his son could more clearly read his lips. The boy fell and split his forehead, his father B, got woozy at the sight of blood but they took the boy to the hospital.

They were accepted into an experimental program for children born deaf. Unfortunately, their insurance would not cover the experimental treatment. Still they were united in their determination to do whatever was necessary or even might be helpful for their child.

Z remembers that B had never been outside of Iowa, his family was also poor. And Z planned camping trips as she had done. When they went to the badlands, B was as excited, or more than the boys, awestruck at the beauty and difference from Iowa. Z and

B camped with the pastor JB's family in Colorado and again B was thrilled with the beauty of this new place, even though he had trouble with altitude sickness.

B was a devoted son, having daily visits with his mother and father, coffee and chat until his death. His father died in 1993 and eventually his mother moved to a town house. Then Z and B and their sons moved into the family house and farm. Z kept the farm after B died, but could not keep up the work, eventually she sold the farm. This infuriated B's family, but it was simply something she could no longer manage.

In August of 1999, Z ruptured a disc in her spine and had surgery. Her in laws took the two younger boys from the scene of the accident to stay at their place while she was in the hospital. One year after Z lost her husband, Z suffered an emotional breakdown and received treatment in Mason City Hospital.<sup>3</sup> Her counselor told her that all that loss in such a short time caused her old sorrows and pains "to explode out." For Z, B had been her lifeline, the one on whom she could depend. He had "rescued her from her dysfunctional family." Now he was gone, and Z needed a new lifeline. The church community became Z's lifeline.

Z explains that life is like an oak tree, with a strong trunk. Storms, hurricanes, displace you or knock you completely down. Small storms such as health issues may make you bend. Z's strong trunk has become God and family. They are always there when needed. Her three sons spend a great deal of time and energy with their mother.

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<sup>3</sup> The hospital wing for mental illness is 5 East, saying someone is in 5E is a shorthand for mental problems in this area.

When asked how she is now, Z replies, “I’m okay with life. My prayer life should be better. I am not good about setting a specific time and place and way to pray. But I pray for people and situations a lot.”

I asked: What things build up your faith? Z’s answers: Go to and participate in church. Go to and participate in Fellowship. The Women’s book study. As we talked about that group, she realized we had not met for a very long time and she thought we could meet via zoom and even hold our meetings with Zoom. She keeps up with her friends and family through Facebook and prays for others. Z loves music and has a lovely voice. For years she was in the church choir. But her voice is changing so she doesn’t sing as well.

I hope people can see by my actions who I am and that my faith stands out. Kids are attracted to me. I have a lot of talents. I am hoping and wishing for retirement.” Z is waiting for elective surgery for fusing together more of her spine discs. She is in pain from fibromyalgia and arthritis, especially in her feet. Despite all these physical ailments Z is one of a kind. Her laugh and cheering are well known at the Middle and High school where she works. She has been super sportsman of the year and is often one of the teachers prominent in the end of year video.

APPENDIX H

**NOVEMBER 2014 SURVEY ANONYMOUS ANSWERS:**

**“HOPES FOR FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENE”**

- I. Bring more people to the congregation
- II. Have a polka service try and get more members or all ones to come to church
- III. FPC can continue to grow and work together and doing our part Help others
- IV. To continue on the path, we have started with Kathy
- V. That it (the church) keeps growing and the congregation stays as warm and welcoming
- VI. We “enlarge” our congregation and keep on budget
- VII. Volunteer program to visit our shut ins
- VIII. More families at church (children)
- IX. Better music
- X. More outdoor services
- XI. Deacons so that all members receive care and communion -constant
- XII. More people
- XIII. Hope to follow Jesus
- XIV. Exchange music in different forms to promote working together with other churches
- XV. More people in attendance
- XVI. We will grow in our faith
- XVII. For new members – need younger to be able to thrive financially

XVIII. More come to church

XIX. New members

XX. Lotto winner

XXI. Bring more people to the congregation

XXII. This probably more than 1 year to develop but I hope for Pres/ Luther /Meth /Brethren to join/form community church to enlarge talent base and save each financially by going to one facility and down to one – maybe two pastors!

### **“HOPES FOR EDEN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH”**

- I. Come up with a new direction to serve, something the entire church can get behind.
- II. Showing faith in all aspects of life To continue kindness, support and inspiration to others
- III. Encourage others to seek out new members for our country church.
- IV. Continue to serve God through studying the Word and by acts of kindness – serve the needs of the community not only our church, but the world.
- V. Happiness
- VI. The church can be united
- VII. Less judgement teach us how
- VIII. To be “small but mighty” known through our community for “the good” we are doing, to be active not just a “Sunday morning” church
- IX. Do more service projects and Be one
- X. Continued discipleship for all members Missional direction that the congregation can get excited about and be transformed by
- XI. Hope that Eden can be a light to the surrounding communities and people throughout the world

- XII.Young Family Growth
- XIII.More people on Sunday
- XIV.More people in community service
- XV.Better music
- XVI.Deacons – Everyone getting care and communion with regularity
- XVII.That more members will come back to church to worship with us
- XVIII.Hope the church can continue to grow and bless all who can come
- XIX.I hope and pray that we can all come together to work together and grow. Praise to God!
- XX.Good Health for all church members. Pray for them
- XXI.That our church family will continue to be blessed
- XXII.To grow in more attending each Sunday and particularly to have over 60 people wanting to be here each Sunday

APPENDIX I

**WORD BANK SPECIFIC TO MIDWEST RURAL COMMUNITIES**

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Acreage	D <sup>1</sup>	Property close to the house and outbuildings, a farmstead usually less than ten acres.	
Agrarianism	Berry <sup>2</sup>	“...a feeling – an instinct, an excitement, a passion, a tenderness -for the living earth and its creatures.”	Old and New Testaments are filled with agrarian images: the sower and harvest parables, shepherd metaphors and narratives. God calling creation Good in Genesis 1 are but a few
Amish communities	Berry 84-86, 181	“The Amish have made themselves different from the rest of us by their obedience to the Gospel’s imperative to love their neighbors as themselves... they do not compete with their neighbors but instead depend upon them for help.”	Old and New Testament references to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Amish farming practices are of good stewardship and long-term health rather than short term high yield harvests, see Job 12; Genesis 1; Lev. 25; Jer. 32.

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix D Interview with D

<sup>2</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 7–12.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Balanced local economies/ Provision/ Stewardship	Berry, 33-35	“...within given limits would be diverse, coherent and lasting... there should be a parity of necessary occupations.” Provision is an older economy, with attention to our need for food, shelter clothing, and that those need to be easily accessible to all people.	Fair treatment of employees/slaves is found in both Old and New Testaments, Deut. & Lev. Contain specific rules of fair value for work and purchase price; Jubilee instructions for everyone and everything to rest. James 5 the good use of wealth to benefit all.
Bars		A desert treat, with cookie or pie or shortbread crust, a sweet filling such as pie fruit, chocolate or marshmallow, and a topping. Baked on a long flat pan and cut into squares or rectangles. Easy to transport these are popular at all gatherings. Ex: Brownies, Rice Krispy treats, Scotcheroos, Cherry bake, lemon bars	Proverbs 16.24; Psalm 107.9
Bread	Grey <sup>3</sup>	Bread is making a connection between life and care. Sustenance is what rural farm communities are all about, it is their reason for existing. Bread is far more than a loaf it is life and meant for all. <sup>4</sup>	Bread is referenced more than 300 times Isaiah 55; John 6.35; Genesis 21.14
Chisel Plow	D	A basic, economic plow often used in fields with excessive residue, rocks, stones, and thick roots.	Micah 4.3
Coffee		People in rural small towns are careful with their money. They always have coffee brewing or warming. It is always weak and often, if the “barista” is older, it is decaf. and they do not warn you. Drink at your own risk.	Apparently, coffee is nowhere to be found in the Bible. This is so sad. Isaiah 51 & 52 exalt the reader to “Awake! Awake!” and “put on strength!” Matt 13.35; Luke 21. 34–36; Eph. 5.14

<sup>3</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Grey, 22–34.



Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Co-Op/ Cooperatives	Berry <sup>5</sup>	A marketing co-operative will be found in most rural agricultural lands. These usually have a long history of sustaining small farmers by controlling surplus production and “assuring an equitable return to producers.”	Cooperation is used with some frequency Ecc. 4; Acts 4; 1 Cor 3.6; Rom 1.1 and Jesus sending out the disciples in pairs are all strong examples.
Cowboy clothing, boots and hats		Clothing for church, dancing and parties.	Daniel 5.7; Luke 16.6; Ezekiel 6. 10–13; Luke 15.22
CRP (Conservation Reserve Program)	Appendix D	USDA program putting environmentally sensitive land to rest for a specific time, allowing for land renewal	Jubilee: Leviticus 25.8-55 Sabbath: Deuteronomy 5.14; Exodus 20; Genesis 2.2; Leviticus 23.3
Determinism/ Free Market Economy/ Industrial Agriculture	Berry <sup>6</sup>	Granting limitless “permission and scope” to the free market will push out “inefficient farmers” and benefit those who are most efficient. Quantity over quality.	Hard work should be rewarded. Prov. 27; 2 Tim. 2.
Dinner		A fancy meal served at a specific midafternoon time set by the family, on special days and holidays. Church dress. Ex.: Thanksgiving Dinner	Feeding the 5000 changes lunch into dinner. Transformation of simple and basic to a feast John 2. 1–12 the wedding feast in Cana

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<sup>5</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 41–56.

<sup>6</sup> Berry, 41–56.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Extravagant Waste	Berry <sup>7</sup>	“Nature’s Law of Frugality” or “The law of return” Needless expense, extravagance in any form, poor judgement in making purchases, unnecessary debt – these cultural choices are eschewed in self-contained economic communities. Production is based not on the desire for highest, but the most sustainable yield. “Farming should fit the land.” Farming includes, animal, grain, vegetables, trees, anything that depends on the land for growth.	See stewardship and care of land.
Garden		What you grow for yourself, family and friends. This is not the same as farming.	Gen. 1.11–12; Gen. 2.8–16 Specific to Garden of Eden. There are 77 verses including garden
Hot dish		Casserole served at potlucks, family gatherings, funeral lunches	Nehemiah 8.10; Proverbs 11.25; Matthew 6.25
Inevitability/ Technological Progress	Berry <sup>8</sup>	Economic and technological determinism. Those who are displaced by changing economies will inevitably find their livelihoods replaced by industry or unemployment.	Work as a curse is seen in Gen. 3. Working hard equals prosperity: 1 Sam. 16; Col. 3; 1 Tim. 3. Scripture does not use “unemployed” but rather those who will not work, 2 Thess. 3. Narratives about those who could not find work, sought it and found it from the hands of the righteous, especially the book of Ruth.

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<sup>7</sup> Berry, 52–56.

<sup>8</sup> Berry, 50–53.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Knowledge-Intensive Economies	Berry <sup>9</sup>	“...the abilities to exploit, trade, add value to, and market the cheaply produced commodities.... with a disregard of local and personal” and a disconnect from the land and people of the land.	God is the creator (Genesis 1) and owner of all lands, Ps. 24; 1Cor.10. We are stewards of that land, Jer. 32. These are but a few of many such scriptures.
Landfill	FS <sup>10</sup>	Landfill means more than a dumpsite for garbage. Most counties have recycling centers incorporated into the dump in order to pay for the land and maintenance. Costs are minimal because you haul it in already sorted. Each landfill has a set of instructions for sorting and days hours of accepting trash.	Trash nor garbage occur in the NRSV Bible. Ash heap is used in 1 Sam. 2. 8; Ps. 113.7; Lam. 4.5. Golgotha, a hill of execution or a cliff with two holes that make a skull like appearance are noted as the place of Jesus’ crucifixion in the gospels.
Lunch		A quick, cold, simple meal served at noon. Everyone comes in to eat and return to work quickly.	John 6.1-14 The little boy’s meal of fish and bread shared out to feed 5000 Matthew 14. 13-21
Meat Locker		A butcher shop of identified locally raised meats. Each meat locker has a signature sausage recipe, and jerkies of all sorts depending on local wildlife and hunting seasons. Meat lockers often sell locally produced beer, wine and cheeses.	Gen.18.7; Gen. 43.16; 1 Sam. 13.34; 1 Cor. 10.5; Luke 15. 11-32

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<sup>9</sup> Berry, 29.

<sup>10</sup> FS a member of Eden Presbyterian Church. When I moved into Eden’s parsonage, FS welcomed me to the house with directions to the landfill. I did not understand why he was telling me this until he explained there is no trash collection from the house or church. I was flabbergasted and FS thought my shock was hilarious.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Mennonite		A protestant denomination arising from the Anabaptists. Anabaptists, Mennonites and Amish are all part of this same movement and share many, but not all, qualities. Most Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches are part of the Mennonite World Conference, which meets regularly for discussions and worship but is not hierarchical.	Servant leadership is stressed and in scripture this is a strong theme of the gospel of Mark.
Moldboard Plow	Appendix D	A plow with one or two heavy blades to move dirt to either side of a central furrow. .	Micah 4.3
Parity/ Sustained economy	Berry <sup>11</sup>	Defined by the Agriculture Adjustment Act of 1933, as “that gross income from agriculture which will provide the farm operator and his family with a standard of living equivalent to those afforded persons dependent upon other gainful occupation.” Using parity cuts out the word socialism which has become such a bugaboo in this decade. This act is the underlying support for small farms and sustainable rural economy designed in a time of drought, food scarcity and depression economy.	See Balanced local economies
Pollinator	Appendix D	Flowers, trees and grasses that attract and support the life of bees, moths, ants and butterflies	Song of Solomon 2, 4, 6; 1 Peter 1.23–24; Matthew 6. 28-30

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<sup>11</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 37–43.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Popcorn Supper Grazing		The evening meal is exchanged for an easy to prepare snack such as fruit, cheese or popcorn. Usually following a large dinner. “Thanksgiving evening, we had popcorn and apples. Ma was exhausted.” Gathering leftovers for a “snack” whenever you get hungry. In north central Iowa, beer is necessary for good “grazing”	Daniel 1.8-15; 10.3; 1Timothy 6.7-8
Practical Knowledge/ Wisdom	Grey <sup>12</sup>	Many people who live good productive lives in rural farm communities do not believe their wisdom counts for much in institutions of higher learning. They also believe the reverse is true. Being able to make do with little from the outside reinforces the sense of isolation and a cycle of underappreciating those with different wisdom and experiences.	Isaiah 55.11, 65.1; Luke 24.32. The books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes along with many of the prophets.

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<sup>12</sup> Grey, *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope*, 88–92.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Projection/ prediction	Berry <sup>13</sup>	Applying a short-term growth or loss rate over an extended period. An assumption that the future will be continuous without change. “Projection moves toward certainty or “truth” by counting repetitions and by further processes of reasoning. ... our every effort to predict will finally meet either unforeseen circumstantial limits or simply the limits of our knowledge and intelligence.” Berry points to the danger of projection/prediction, because “its power to bring on first fear and then a movement that can be popularized into a fad. ...no one does good work because of fear.”	Two vastly different paths Knowing the future. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes have several verses about wisdom and the advantages for humans to seek wisdom, implying this is possible without the help of God. The major theme of scripture is God alone knows the future. Our task is to patiently believe that future is for good and not bad, Jeremiah 29.11.
Rural America	Berry <sup>14</sup>	To some extent any rural area can be known, thought about and sympathized with. But not all rural areas and people residing within are the same and fit a certain type. Just as urban dwellers share some characteristics, so too rural folks.	Human diversity in several, disparate traditions. The Old Testament has narratives of conquering and destroying those who are not the people of Israel. There are also commandments to welcome the sojourner. Paul writes of all being one in the body of Jesus Christ with Christ the head of all. Acts moves from a small inner circle to a people from many places and social stations through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>13</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 59–61.

<sup>14</sup> Berry, 72–84.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Scientific Industrial Agriculture	Berry <sup>15</sup> and local knowledge	Following World War 2 a growing reliance on industrial automated practices and cheap petroleum fertilizer. Iowa is proud to be a leader in agricultural technologies. The John Deere Waterloo Boy tractor is one of several tractors designed in Iowa. John Deere tractors are evident in the fields with their bright green and yellow colors. Norman Ernest Borlaug from Cresco, IA developed the industrial agriculture practices known as the “Green Revolution <sup>16</sup> .” The “Green Revolution” is about producing as much as possible as cheaply as possible to feed as many as possible and does not refer to conservation or climate change.	Two opposing images of “abundance” good for all people and amassed for only one person’s benefit. Examples of beneficial abundance can be found in the Joseph narrative, Genesis 41.49 and Gospel narrative of the widow who gives her last penny. Jesus’ parable of the rich fool of Luke 12 is a good example of misuse of abundance, greed.
Seedbed	Appendix D	The land you prepare for planting	Proverbs 28.19; Genesis 3. 17 – 19; Luke 8;

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<sup>15</sup> Berry, 7–12.

<sup>16</sup> C.S. Prakash, “The Green Revolution & Dr Norman Borlaug: Towards the ‘Evergreen Revolution,’” [www.agbioworld.org](http://www.agbioworld.org), 2011, <http://www.agbioworld.org/biotech-info/topics/borlaug/green-revolution.html>.

Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Spirit	Heyward <sup>17</sup>	Passion and deep feeling not often expressed in real terms. Cautious language perhaps to assure understanding and avoid miscommunication is the norm. However, to never express anger is accompanied by loss of joyousness. Carter Heyward: “What we are in the church must be about... is a return to religion of passion – a way of being in which anything less than spilling over with the Spirit of God is not enough; spilling over with desire to know and do the will of God in our daily work and play.” (Heyward, “Passion,” from <i>Our Passion for Justice</i> (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984) 21.	Revelation 3.14–21
STEM	Berry <sup>18</sup>	“Scientific, Technological, Engineered and Mathematized” For some people this refers to a tight focus on science and technology as the salvation of all economic woes. However, it can be a broader teaching paradigm to develop long term excellence in land use and husbandry and sustainable food production. Many public schools offer STEM linked agrarian education, often hands-on, in their curriculum.	See Agrarianism
Supper		An evening cold or light meal served after 5:00 PM.	Matthew 26 – the last Supper, Passover meal, Exodus 12

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<sup>17</sup> Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 21.

<sup>18</sup> Berry, *The Art of Loading Brush*, 32–36.



Word/Phrase	Reference	Definition	Scripture Reference
Sweet corn		Manna. The harvest season is short and intense. Truckloads of corn will be strategically placed throughout the community manned by bored teenagers with full sized brown paper bags. The youth will not make change and seldom count the ears they just throw a ton of corn in the bag and charge you \$5, cash only. Each truck will have signage indicating which farm produced the corn. .	Corn is not native to the Middle East; it is not in the Bible. Manna the food that “falls from heaven” Exodus 16.31; Numbers 11.7; Deuteronomy 8.3–16; John 6.31 & 49
The Synod of the West	Straatmeyer <sup>19</sup>	A temporary synod (1912–1958) covering much of the Midwest, bound by the common use of German for worship, teaching, publications, records and doctrinal and polity discussions. This Synod grew out of what is now University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. “...their comprehension of the English was insufficient to follow presbyteries’ discussions of important parts of doctrinal and polity matters.” German being their primary language, they could not express themselves sufficiently in English to contribute to these discussions and decisions.	Acts 17.22–34: Paul uses the philosophy of Athens to begin a deep discussion of God and Jesus Christ. Acts 2: The Holy Spirit gives the gift of tongues to the gathered disciples to spread the Word to many of different nationalities.
Wine		Beware. “Locally produced wines” are made either from imported grapes and blended or involve no grapes but some other fruit such as gooseberries. The substance produced bears little resemblance to wine. Drink at your own risk.	281 references are made to wine and wine production in the Bible

<sup>19</sup> Straatmeyer, *The Synod of the West: A History of the Presbyterian German Synod of the West and Its Churches*, 10–12. Eden Presbyterian Church served as the first meeting place for this Synod, August 14, 1912 at 7:30 PM and was part of the Presbytery of Waukon. A fascinating study of German immigration patterns in the Midwest USA and the spread of reformed Christianity which remains as the PC (USA) and Reformed (RCA) Churches. There are also references to the anti-German sentiment in much evidence throughout this time.

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