

Theology Matters

What Have We Learned During the COVID Crisis? Ten Presbyterian Ministers Respond

Nothing has so disrupted the communal life of Christians in the West in the last one hundred years than the COVID pandemic (I specify “in the West” because Christians in the East have suffered far more devastating disruption of their communal and individual lives for a much longer period under Communism). Opinions vary as to the long-term consequences of this disruption. Some suggest it has sown the seeds for the church’s revival. Others fear it has sown the seeds of its destruction. The jury is still out.

Pastors have struggled to meet many new challenges and opportunities. Many have learned how to apply technology to solve problems. Others have learned the limits of technology. Some say, “We’ve been able to reach more people.” Others say, “It’s been like flying blind.” Many congregations have come out of this crisis surprisingly well, financially. Others have not. Yet as much as many have missed in-person fellowship, the big question that looms for most pastors is: “Will the people come back?”

Sunny extroverts are often oblivious to the attraction, but being a cyber or TV Christian has many advantages. It is so much easier than living the Christian life concretely in community. “Online worship is a safer, more convenient, and efficient use of my time. I can work, exercise, go to the game or go fishing, and still participate in worship, plus I can mute what I don’t like.” Let’s not kid ourselves: Getting such folk back to church is not going to be easy.

New patterns of life have developed in this past year for many families, couples, and individuals. More relaxing and entertaining routines have been established, replacing the hard-won habit in many homes of getting up and going to church. Maintaining the priority of corporate worship

and a commitment to Christian education, of course, isn’t a new problem. It’s one of our deepest *systemic* problems, and not so easily solvable. If Johnny or Susie is not put to bed or woken up on time, fed, dressed, and brought to church, the best facilities or programs we offer won’t help.

Yet perhaps herein lies our opportunity. Many during this crisis have amused themselves to death. Many know as never before that money or technology cannot solve their deepest problems or feed their deepest hunger. Many want more than Zoom meetings. What an opportunity for us to re-discover and be the church, the body of Christ, to look each other in the eye, to listen and speak to each other, and to invite others to participate in this rich, deep, real, albeit flawed, fellowship led by our Incarnate Lord.

Pastors face many challenges today. One of the great privileges I have as editor of this journal is talking with pastors from across this country. I must say I have never known a time when more pastors were more exhausted than in this past year. Many challenges and the inability to meet them have taken their toll, as the following pages show. But amid these challenges, Jesus Christ has been much at work, burning away “the wood, hay, and straw,” teaching us what the “gold, silver, and precious stones” of his church are, and showing us afresh that he alone is the church’s one true and firm foundation (I Cor. 3:11ff).

Richard Burnett, Managing Editor

Table of Contents

What Have We Learned During the COVID Crisis?...	p. 2
Theological Mystery of Words.....	p. 11

Time For Meditation and Contemplative Prayer

by Susan L. DeHoff

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? By far, the greatest challenge has been providing pastoral care. On March 16, 2020, I became the pastor of a congregation of shut-ins. In addition to elderly shut-ins who were accustomed to that way of life, congregants who were “hale and hardy” were shut in. The uncertainties of the pandemic’s duration along with the fears associated with the virus itself sharply increased the need for pastoral care among this population, while at the same time making it impossible to be physically present with them. As both pastor and pastoral psychotherapist, I have been keenly aware of the increase in anxiety among congregants, in some cases reaching a clinical level, which made providing pastoral care even more critical.

There was also the challenge of how to care for the hospitalized when no visits were allowed. Some were hospitalized for surgical procedure. One person experienced complications that kept him hospitalized for a month. Talking on the phone was difficult for him. By far, the worst moment was praying over the phone with a beloved elderly member dying from COVID. We were both isolated from each other in that walk through the shadow of death.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? Many members learned the importance of focusing on what we *can* do rather than on what we *cannot* do. March 16, 2020 was also the night of the monthly Session meeting. I invited a member who is a Commander in the U. S. Health Service to give us *facts* about the virus and how we could avoid contracting it while continuing the church’s missions to the poor and our ministry more generally. I also invited a member who is a professional educator in audio-visual technology, to give us facts about how we could begin live streaming Sunday morning worship services. We began live streaming the following Sunday, adhering to government safety regulations to protect the production crew. We’ve learned to value the importance of each other’s gifts, especially those very gifts different from those customarily applauded.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? The greatest future challenge is the same as that of the last two or three decades. A few powerful members have dominated the other members, making it difficult for other people to have a voice and a role. While there is now a new set of

needs, especially discerning how media and technology can and should be used in ministry and mission, the greatest challenge remains helping all members find their voice, opportunities to raise it, and empowerment to use it to share the wisdom, insight, and gifts God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—gives them.

Because we re-opened as soon as allowed, we have not suffered nearly the financial loss or membership apathy that some other churches have experienced. There has been a feeling that life for our church was only slightly disrupted, that for the most part things went on as usual. So, many members see life going on post-pandemic as it had been pre-pandemic. Getting this very conservative church to put our church in the context of a changed world is not going to be easy.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? Live streaming has extended the reach of our worship services to include other sections of the country and nations around the world. The increased use of technology has also given significant roles to members who previously did not participate in the church’s ministry. As a result of our May 2020 reopening, people seeking a place to worship in person attended our services, bringing in new members with gifts and talents for service. Interestingly, the dominating group has not been part of the live stream production crew and in person worship, both of which are credited with keeping the church together. This is giving opportunity for those responsible for the live streaming to find support among each other and to strengthen their voice and role in the church.

5. What have been the best sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? There is an ecumenical clergy group in the small town where the church is located. We met on Zoom once a month and when it was safe, we met in person for brown bag lunches. We also planned some ecumenical in-person services for special moments, such as the week after George Floyd was killed. We shared the challenges of ministry during this time and found understanding among colleagues for those challenges.

Encouragement also came from the live stream production crew, who remain dedicated to providing opportunity for virtual worship, in spite of a small group of nay-sayers. The most important encouragement is seeing that God is blessing our efforts.

For me, personally, there had to be more time for meditation and contemplative prayer. There had to be time when the prayer list was set aside, and I simply said, “Now I am the one in need of prayer.”

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Being Transformed By the Living Word

by Annie Duncan

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? I’m a bit embarrassed to say that our greatest challenge was actually with us pre-pandemic. Our greatest challenge was how to get people to go deeper and grow in their faith (discipleship). Figuring out discipleship for the over-scheduled has been something we couldn’t figure out. Until COVID. Early on in the pandemic, we saw so many people turning to our online services. People were engaged in worship. But our leadership knew that while the “gather” (whether online or in-person) is an important part of our faith journey, it does not end there. We gather to be sent. So, one of the silver linings that COVID has been is that we have been forced to “go” and be in our homes and in our communities.

The challenge that this gave us was to provide for people spaces to grow in their faith, outside of a Sunday worship service. BelPres, pre-pandemic, had not figured out how to best do this. We didn’t have a clear “next step” for people. But during COVID, we started “All In” Zoom Groups. The groups meet online and dig deeper into a passage of scripture together by going over three questions: 1) What does this teach me about God?; 2) What does it teach me about people?; and 3) How do I live differently because of it?

Our congregation has a lot of computer programmers and engineers, e.g., from Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing, etc. So, gathering more information is a comfortable zone for many of our members (e.g., What is the Greek root of this word in the Book of John?). The growing edge for us has been relational—getting to know God and each other in a more vulnerable way. Our challenge remains being *transformed* by the living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? The biggest thing we have learned is that the church is not a building, but a people. I know we knew that before, but it has become crystal clear the longer we are in this pandemic. Pre-pandemic, there was a toxic belief that ministry only counted if it was “onsite” at the church building. But

COVID has forced all the ministry and discipleship that we are doing out and outside of the church building—into homes, into coffee shops, into parks, etc. I don’t see us changing this model post-pandemic. Our people being out in the community—where there are opportunities to evangelize—seems more in line with the Gospel than our people fighting over room reservations in the church.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? One thing leadership has been pressing into lately is that God is making us one. For a long time, we have been a church that has had multiple Sunday worship services—and done them with excellence: a Sanctuary service (traditional worship), a Modern service (contemporary worship) and an African service. “All of us, together” is a phrase we keep hearing from the Holy Spirit. COVID has brought all of us together. And as we begin to regather and reopen, do we stay in our separate lanes of worship? Or is God doing something new? Is he bringing his people together? That is going to be hard, for a 65-year-old church with some major preset traditions. But there is something beautiful about being together. Setting preferences aside and being together for the sake of the prayer that Jesus prayed so many years ago (John 17). And in a time when our nation is politically divided more than ever (and that extends to our church as well!), maybe being together is exactly what God wants to get done with his people and church.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? We are busy and maxed out. Early on, when COVID cancelled what seemed like everything, it has given us a chance to truly assess what we add back in—what we add back into what we offer at church, but also what we add back into our schedules. The silver lining is that it gives us a blank slate—and one should never waste a blank slate moment.

5. What have been the best sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? The biggest encouragement has been that our people are continually engaged. Through worship services to serving our community to

raising over \$1.5M for COVID relief in our community, we are seeing the best of our people right now. There have been fewer and fewer “angry emails” about things that don’t really matter (e.g. the coffee wasn’t hot enough, my announcement was not in the bulletin, etc.), and more engagement surrounding things that do matter (e.g. asking to understand more about God’s heart for

justice and racial reconciliation and what our church can do, responding to the ways COVID has impacted our community, etc.).

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Learning Patience, Digging Deeper, Finding Gems

by Gary Cecil

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? For over thirty-six years I have understood ministry as a Presbyterian pastor to be primarily that of preaching the gospel, teaching the faith, and exercising pastoral care in the light of the faith, as John Leith described it. Of this ministry triumvirate, pastoral care has suffered the most. As a pastor, I believe it is important to visit the sick in their home or hospital, to lay a hand upon someone in prayer or to offer a blessing, to engage in pastoral conversations that depend as much upon seeing the other person as hearing a voice over a phone. COVID has left many in isolation and loneliness. A phone call is better than no phone call, but it is no substitute for in-person contact. In a time of unusual crisis when pastoral visitation would be most beneficial, the pastor and officers have been sidelined. This extends to the pastoral care of worship and preaching. Too many are afraid to attend worship due to health concerns and/or restrictions. The same is true for the pastoral care of fellowship.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? A predictable answer to what we have learned through this would be: *patience*, in the sense of patient endurance, patient in affliction (e.g., Hebrews 10:36ff.; James 5:10-11; Rev. 13:10). But through this came an increased appreciation for *spiritual discipline* with renewed determination. We made a commitment even before COVID to undertake a serious study of Discipleship as part of a Vital Congregations initiative. Then when the crisis came, we stepped up efforts to get out pastoral letters and spiritual lessons to the congregation, and we continued to read, study and pray at home. We did not go virtual, but I received positive feedback regarding the printed sermons sent every week that encouraged members to contemplate and study the scripture and message. At the same time, Discipleship participants continued at home with their workbook, *Discipleship Essentials*, by Greg Ogden. These things created opportunities for dialogue and deeper theological discussions via phone calls and

members dropping by the office—maintaining safety protocols, of course. Fortunately, we have been able to resume in-person study and worship, thanks be to God! I am reminded of something Yogi Berra said: We have deep depth! I would say that our spiritual depth is becoming deeper through all this.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? Turning to Yogi again regarding future challenges: *The future ain't what it used to be!* I think we understand that churches like ours cannot re-create “the good ol’ days”—and I’m not hearing that so much as a real concern for the church maintaining integrity within our cultural climate. My wife and other members have pointed this out in terms of the Church as the Body of Christ: We lose integrity when worship becomes a spectator event from home with no real interaction as one body, one fellowship in the Spirit. As one said, we have become “Just an arm,” not Christ’s Body. It’s like a zombie’s disembodied limb, moving about but with no real life.

My theology professor, John Leith, discussed this same problem in his book, *From Generation to Generation* (Westminster/John Knox, 1990). During this “Covidity” crisis, I have found myself drawn to this book where Leith described the integrity problem in terms of pluralism, inclusivism, the elevation of change over tradition—and overall, a theological crisis, a crisis of faith in the church. What my members have been expressing is a sense that the church has been sidelined. It is not so much that we are competing with a dominant cultural pluralism as Leith saw it, where there are “many Words to become flesh,” but that there is no longer even a dialogue possible about the one Word we profess. This is even taking place within the church herself, where voices for political and social change use the church for their own ideology or cause. As Leith put it, “A Christian may move constructively from faith to political and social activity, but few, if any ever move from political activity to faith” (50). So ...

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? What good might come of this? This strange time in our history and church life has opened eyes to the need to maintain integrity, to stand firmly on the church's foundation of Bible study, worship, learning the theology of the church, and preserving the truth about Jesus Christ. As a Presbyterian congregation, we are re-examining the foundational principles of the church's mission as One, Holy, Universal, and Apostolic Church, the Body of Christ, and Christ's faithful evangelist. Traditional, yet open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not conformed to this world, but transformed (Rom. 12.2).

5. What have been the greatest sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? The most encouraging thing throughout the crisis has been continuity in the Word. We have dug down deeper into Scripture and have discovered wonderful gems of encouragement in hard times.

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Rediscovering the Main Thing

by Edwin Hurley

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? Separation from our congregation has been my greatest challenge. I am a people-person, and not being able to be with people of the congregation has been hard. While we have made regular efforts to reach out via phone to all members, there are many we are missing, or have only passing contact with. When we do make contact, however, there is always great appreciation felt. That separation is most keenly felt in absence of in-person worship, as we have mostly offered worship only through live distant broadcast. Funerals have been so different, either nothing being done near time of death or very small graveside services.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? We have learned of the resiliency of the church. Jesus nailed it when he told Peter, "The gates hell shall not prevail against it." We have adapted in creative ways with small groups and other classes being offered on Zoom and worship services through live broadcasts on Sunday morning.

Providentially and independently of COVID, the very week we had to close the church last March new cameras and equipment were being installed through the generous gift of a member and former TV executive, so we were able to offer our first on-line service that very Sunday and have done so ever since. To paraphrase Martin Luther's famous one-liner, "While I drink my little glass of Wittenberg beer, the gospel runs its course." In other words, "While the Pandemic grips the world the gospel runs its course." We have experienced just how durable the gospel and the church are.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? People have grown accustomed to staying at home, worshiping in their PJ's. We wonder how many will remain in this pattern? What will our re-opening look like? How will our future programing change? One fear that certainly did not materialize: We worried whether people would still give. But giving has remained steady and even increased, both in our regular budget and an emergency capital funds drive that was actually over-subscribed.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? Our people have rediscovered the main thing. The purpose for which we exist is to worship the Living God and make and grow disciples of Jesus Christ. Peripheral programing has gone away. Much of our community outreach, such as AA, Sunday Club for the mentally challenged, etc., sadly, have had to be curtailed. Yet we have continued to worship and grow and learn new ways to reach out to our neighbors, such as our every Wednesday "Feed My Sheep" food ministry to the neighborhood. It is clear that people have a greater appreciation for their church through these hardships and recognize the difference this church is making in their lives and in the lives of our community and world.

5. What have been the greatest sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? A few members have regularly called just to check on my wife Gayle and me, to see how we are doing. Sadly, I have buried two of the most regular callers. Being on the receiving end of congregational compassion and care has been uplifting. People have consistently stepped forward giving their time, talents, and treasure to a

greater degree than before. On Easter Sunday I named some of our home-grown saints who have entered the life eternal recently. The connection of saints on earth and saints in heaven has been vivid for us.

I am inspired by the following lines by Dietrich Bonhoeffer written from prison to his infant nephew, Dietrich Bethge, upon his baptism:

Are we moving towards an age of colossal organizations and collective institutions, or will the desire of innumerable people for small, manageable, personal relationships be satisfied? Must they be

mutually exclusive? ... We may have to face events and changes that take no account of our wishes and our rights. But if so, we shall not give way to embittered and barren pride, but consciously submit to divine judgment, and so prove ourselves worthy to survive by identifying ourselves generously and unselfishly with the life of the community, and the suffering of our fellow-men” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (p.299)

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It Is His Church, Not Ours, and He is Faithful

by Laurie Johnston

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? One pillar of our church was diminishing physically. She and her husband needed assistance. At Christmas she was still leading church dinners as she had for over thirty years. But now she needed our help, and we were struggling to be there. They were farmers living on land passed down from generations. Their children tried to help but lived away. This couple needed *our* church. We tried to help, but their rural setting complicated this. They wanted to stay in their home. But their children worried, understandably, and found it easier to put them in an assisted living facility closer to their daughter. They were devastated. Seeing them leave their home was difficult. I never saw this tough farmer’s wife cry, but that day tears were rolling down her cheeks.

For the next months, I talked with her in the assisted living facility. She was unable to see anyone. She missed her friends. She contracted COVID. She lasted a week. No one could see her, no goodbyes, just gone. I know this dear woman is in heaven with her heavenly Father. She had a strong faith and giving spirit. She was simply aging and sick. We would have been with her to the end, but COVID prevented it.

We had a twenty-six-year-old paramedic who was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer. He had moved to another town. Before being diagnosed, he got engaged. The wedding was set for March 27th. But the church where he attended canceled the service due to COVID. He was devastated. This couple wanted desperately to marry before he was too sick. He called around. No one was available. Finally, his mom called me. I agreed to do it. I called the sheriff. He said, “Do it.” So, we live-

streamed it and when the couple walked out of the church, we all—congregation, EMTs in firetrucks, and all—cheered and honked horns in the parking lot. He was so happy! Cole enjoyed life with his bride until December 2nd when the Lord took him home.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? We’ve learned that fear can be the refiner’s fire. Fear can expose the depth of our faith and faith reveals itself in our actions. From the beginning, our session provided suggestions for safety. We highly recommended masks, distancing, and hand-sanitizing. We live streamed our services for two months. However, as we re-opened we could tell some weren’t coming back, no matter how safe we made it. Therefore, we learned patience, understanding, and not to be judgmental. We realized, again, that we don’t control this world, but our Creator God controls all things. We learned it is His church, not ours, and He is faithful.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? Yes, the temptation of half of our congregation is to never come back. Some have perhaps grown comfortable with staying home in their pajamas and watching church. Others have found something else to do during that time. Interestingly, it is not those most at risk for COVID that stay home (like our elderly or immune suppressed) but young people and young families. I pray they see that gathering with the community of believers is of utmost priority.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? This pandemic has done a lot of damage, especially the way it has been manipulated politically.

However, the silver lining is that it could be the best reassessment for the church. Why do we do certain events? Should some traditions die? Should new ones come to life? I have seen that those who really make an effort to be at church, really want to be here! It has caused congregants to reflect on what they really believe. Some have fallen away. Others have shown up.

5. What have been the best sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? It's been a lonely time, especially as a solo pastor. It's difficult to know if you are making right decisions for the congregation. However, God does provide faithful saints. Throughout the shutdown, our praise team, video and audio guys, administrative assistant, and a few regular congregants, would show up and help, setting up chairs, sanitizing bathrooms, and were consistently ready to worship the Lord in an empty sanctuary. God bless those believers who never give up and never falter.

This crisis has been very difficult. But we kept worshiping, reading our Bibles, meeting our financial needs, and maintaining a mid-week program for children. We were blessed to have adults to step up, wear masks, and run the program. More than fifty kids showed up every Wednesday and no one contracted COVID from this program. But loneliness and disruption took the biggest toll. At times, I felt like I was fighting on my own. I had a few meltdowns and wondered how we would ever recover. I can't say we're roaring back, but slowly we will, I pray, get back. The biggest hardship is ministering to people in crisis during this time. Life and death continue. It's been especially hard to be there for others. I've learned how important prayer is, and that the communion of saints transcends our physical presence.

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Considering Christ's Incarnation Anew

by Jake McCall

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? So much of pastoral ministry involves being physically present with your people. Whether it's visiting with them in their homes, having fellowship meals with them, or holding their hand beside their hospital bed during times of difficulty or pain, these important moments have been missing or diminished. As much as we have tried to bridge these gaps with phone calls and Zoom meetings, we have not found adequate replacements. This has made discipleship more challenging and outreach to our community more challenging.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? I believe we are still learning, but it is my prayer that we are learning the irreplaceable importance of togetherness and connectivity. Most of us value and uphold the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ, but it may be important to consider it anew. Our Lord found it necessary to dwell among us—to live with, work with, eat with, and minister with the people that God gave to him. The apostles followed this example as they continued incarnational types of ministry as they began establishing Christ's Church in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. As we continue the ministry of Christ today through His Church, I believe much of our calling revolves around deeply knowing the flock that we minister to from within.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? Out of necessity we have developed paths of connectivity that have allowed us to remain physically separated from one another. I have noticed that many have celebrated online attendance and equate watching a video sermon with the communion of the saints. While I believe it was an important step to think outside the box over this last year, I believe we have to recognize that isolated ministry efforts are not a long-term solution. The next few months will be an important time to emphasize that these efforts were not a replacement for the physical gathering of the church but simply a bridge to get us beyond the devastation of COVID. It is clear that a lack of church fellowship and community has caused spiritual, mental, and emotional challenges. These are things that I have noticed in others and experienced myself. I have also seen how re-entry into Christian fellowship has been a source of renewal for struggling people. I am convinced that welcoming and encouraging people back into the life and presence of the Church will need to be a top priority, rather than continued emphases on technological alternatives.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? This has been a sad and difficult year for many people. In the midst of the sadness of COVID, our country has grown in its division and worship of politics.

My prayer is that the true Church will understand its true calling to extend the benefits of Christ to the people and places that God has given to us. And in so doing, I pray many that were once far-off will be brought near and will find refuge and hope as they meet Jesus and his grace in and through the local church.

5. What have been the best sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? My best sources of encouragement have been times of prayer with my family, a few friends, and Session. I have also recognized that God has proven that He will continue to use the ministry of the Word and Sacrament to equip and build up the saints. We have had to adjust and at times pray through new ways to administer these means of grace,

but God has continued to faithfully use them for our church. When you go through a unique season of uncertainty like this one, it is difficult to know how to move forward and discern God's direction. Therefore, I have been greatly encouraged to read about some of the experiences and perspectives of those that have gone before us, especially those who have lived and ministered in the name of Jesus Christ during unprecedented times of difficulty and suffering.

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A Moment of Revealing

by Joseph Sherrard

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? We have lost so many important spaces of congregational life and pastoral care, some of which we continue to do without. Caring for the flock while being unable to visit saints who are in the hospital, unable to share a meal together, and unable to enjoy those unplanned moments of ministry that take place spontaneously when the Body gathered without restriction has felt like ministering with one hand tied behind my back (and sometimes two). Underneath all of this is the loss of physical touch: hands held at hospital bedsides and embraces after funerals. I have grieved the loss of personal pastoral care, and it is a challenge that we continue to navigate as many in our congregation continue to struggle and suffer.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? When we made the decision to cease in-person gatherings on March 14th, our congregation entered lockdown equipped in all of the explicit and implicit ways we have formed them as disciples of Jesus. The result was a surprise stress test on the fruit of our ministry, and ever since I've been pondering what was revealed. I've been forced to ask how much of our work was focused on getting people to "come and take" from our various church activities (i.e., consumption) versus equipping men and women to meet Jesus in Word and prayer, to love and lead their families and friends as followers of Jesus, and to respond to suffering with perseverance. As a result, we've redefined the core virtues and competencies for what it means to be a disciple and are currently working to realign our ministry to that end.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? The COVID crisis has been apocalyptic for the church in the United States. Not in the sense that it has ushered in Jesus' return (although we can hope!), but instead in the original sense of the word: a moment of revealing. My concern for myself and my congregation is that after being confronted by all that has been revealed—the illusion of our control of the world around us, our uneasiness with death, widespread loneliness, mental health crises, massive social inequalities, racial injustice, and political idolatry—we will look away and return to "business as usual" when we are vaccinated and are free to populate our lives with the same activities and busy-ness which we previously enjoyed. The temptation to "amuse ourselves to death" is strong. As in John's Revelation, the apocalyptic moment is a gift, meant to show us truth and invite us to obedience. Knowing what we now know about the world, how do we live as those who are responsible for what we've seen? It's a significant challenge for us.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? There is so much to lament from these last months, but biblical lament is also accompanied by the conviction that God's mercy and grace remain new each morning. This leads me to hope, and specifically to hope that the winnowing that has accompanied this crisis can loosen the many improper attachments that we have cultivated over previous seasons of life. I hope this is true for the women and men in our church, many of whom have been asking probing questions about their vocations, their use of their time, and what lesser loves to which they have given themselves. I hope this is true for

our congregation, as we take stock of all the ways we spend our resources and time and ask again how we are forming our people and loving our neighbors. And I know that this is true of me, as I have been invited to consider my own patterns of abiding in Christ and how the Vinedresser is at work pruning in my own life. My prayer for all of these is that God would refine us through the trials and temptations of the last months so that we could be presented mature in Christ.

5. What have been the best sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? Two sources of encouragement come to mind. The first is the prophet Isaiah. In January of 2020 I began a study of this book, and I have been strengthened and nourished by Isaiah's words over the last year. In a time of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear, Isaiah's exhortation to look to the Holy One of Israel and to find rest and security in Him alone has been a balm and a firm foundation. Isaiah has reminded me that both moral discernment and faithful obedience must

be built upon a deep knowledge of God's character and faithfulness. Through Isaiah, my prayer life has deepened, and my leadership has been markedly less frantic. The second is Augustine of Hippo. Augustine lived in a time of great change and his life was marked by paradoxes: a deeply introspective person who constantly surrounded himself with friends; a pastor who wrote hopefully about the City of God as empire declined around him; a man whose intellect moved restlessly from one topic and controversy to another and yet who wrote movingly about finding rest in God. I've needed a pastoral mentor to guide me through the past months, and I've found a wise one in this fifth-century bishop.

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A Very Present Help in Trouble

by Ben Sloan

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? I was taught at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia by John Leith that the three main tasks of a minister are "preaching, teaching, and pastoral care." Of course, the ministry is much broader, but these are the basic tasks of a minister. All three areas were challenged in different ways. Preaching was challenged in that there may be a preacher, but none to hear. For months, we had no in-person worship at all.

What a blessing that we ramped up our online presence before the March 15 shutdown. The joke was that every minister had become a tele-evangelist. We immediately learned about lighting, streaming venues, and how to communicate worship online, and we picked up many viewers from churches without these capabilities. We also began worshiping outside, at first in the parking lot, then at the lake, using an FM mini-transmitter and speakers. Crowds gathered. The teaching was similar. It was fairly easy for my Associate and me to set up Facebook Live devotions. But getting people to Zoom into Sunday School was not so easy. We could fenagle around the preaching and teaching to offer something to those who wanted it. Pastoral care was by far the hardest. Ministers were banned from visiting hospitals and nursing homes where those who were sickest needed help. Our people often faced their COVID illnesses alone. We wrote a devotional entitled, "Alone with God."

But there is no substitute for being there. The importance and singular necessity of prayer stood out. Letters, postcards, emails, etc., were not getting through to the sick. Even cell phones were often taken away from some in hospitals. The loneliness of shut-ins, those in nursing homes, and the sick (COVID and non-COVID), was a huge spiritual issue that was primarily left in the hands of God, while we often sat helplessly on the sidelines.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? At the beginning, we asked: How did ministers handle this in the past? How did the church respond during other pandemics, for example, the Bubonic Plague or the 1918 Flu? There were debates among ministers about what and how to do things. There was the roller coaster of ever-changing public health advice. Our best laid plans could change through a momentary government proclamation. In the end, I think we learned to trust God more, to be more flexible, and to be more open to His providential leading. We learned again that God uses means—talents, medicines, and vaccines—as answers to prayer.

While our society debated what is essential and non-essential, I remained convinced that the corporate worship of God is essential. Others may disagree. But fear coupled with a rational cause can easily get out of hand. Isolation has its own set of temptations: 1)

Forgetfulness of God; 2) Depressing loneliness; 3) Drug and alcohol abuse; 4) Domestic abuse; 5) Internet perversions from pornography to paranoid “group think” to mean and degrading social interaction, etc. The church is called to minister, that is, to serve God and the people as much as we can. This means the church should be ready to welcome people back when they are ready to come and take part. Some have made a big deal saying, “Out of love we are closed.” Perhaps we should rather say, “Out of love we are open when you need us to be.”

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? Surprisingly, getting people to bring their children back to Sunday School. Ironically, children have been coming back first to sports, then to school, but many parents do not see the need for Christian Education in an increasingly secular world.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? We are seeing more vaccines and more people coming back. We have learned how much we missed each other, how much our faith means to us, and how resilient many have been in keeping it. There is almost a

glow and an amazement that is wonderful to see on the faces of normally-more-emotionally-subdued Presbyterians when they come back to worship. “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the House of the Lord’” (Ps. 122:1) has a vibrant new meaning.

5. What have been the best sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? The greatest source of encouragement has been relying on the vertical dimension (prayer and scripture) more than the horizontal dimension (fellowship and service) of the Christian life. Perhaps God is trying to wake us up to Himself by slowing our busy-ness and taking many distractions away. Death, job losses, financial stresses, and general heartache, cause us to cry out for God who is “our refuge and strength, and a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).

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God’s Ordinary Means of Grace

by Aaron W. White

1. What has been the greatest challenge for you as a minister during this crisis? I found the hardest aspect to be that *life goes on*. What I mean is that while COVID had the spotlight, there were other important concerns in our congregation. As I write this, I am preparing to do a funeral for a three-year-old boy who fought a long and difficult battle with cancer. It is hard to imagine something harder than this. So, while COVID took the limelight, COVID was not what wore us out last year, though it certainly didn’t help.

I think the most difficult thing that I have dealt with is wondering what God is up to. I am a firmly committed Calvinist, and I treasure God’s sovereignty since that is the only thing that will, in the end, give any of us the assurance of salvation we desperately need. His sovereignty, however, is a double-edged sword. I have found myself in the place of the psalmist very often asking, “How long, O Lord?”

I think, finally, I have personally struggled to *look* busy. This is a point of pride that needs to be defeated by the Cross. In a year when we did not have in-person worship for several months, many events canceled, and so on, I believe the perception of my job could be that I was not

really up to much. The complete opposite is actually the case, and I was busy doing many things that are not in my wheelhouse. I want to note, however, that despite all these difficulties and how tired my elders and I are, God *has* worked to further His Kingdom in our midst.

2. What do you think you and your congregation may have learned through this crisis? The most important thing that I *hope* our congregation has been learning is that the church is borne up by God’s ordinary means of grace. It is by the regular reading, hearing, and hearing preached the Word of God, taking part in the Supper, observing baptisms and being baptized, and praying in community that the elect are made effective in ministry.

3. What do you see as the greatest challenge facing your congregation in the future? I am always fearful that either they would look to me to save them, at which point I will fail them almost immediately, or that they would seek to be their own savior. In a year when all the experts are recommending ways that one can save one more moment of one’s life, I have observed that the messiah complexes natural to all sinners are being encouraged with greater force. As the church, we must always be pointing to the finished work of Jesus Christ

and declare to all who will listen, “I am not the Christ. I must decrease and he must increase.” The trouble I see with not making the gospel the major message of all that we do, is that we make an experience like 2020 simply an interruption from which we learned nothing, instead of a disruption that gives us the opportunity to be made new. Without the gospel at the center of all things, confessing we can do nothing to save ourselves but that God has done this work of saving first to last, we are the world with a Jesus tag slapped on us.

4. What good do you think might come from this crisis? We like silver linings, don’t we? Isn’t it OK to admit that some things are merely a total loss; that they really were terrible and there was nothing redemptive about them; that the lesson learned was the perseverance of the elect? Part of me wants to say that 2020 was terrible, divisive, stands unresolved, was horribly managed by many of those who “lead” us in government, and that we just need to put it behind us and move forward. A silver lining could lead us to end up thinking it was us all along, and our many precautions, that upheld us in 2020, and we end up back at square one confessing the wrong savior again.

However, I believe the important lesson we can walk away with was expressed by one of my ruling elders:

“We have been shown how little we actually do have control over anything, and how powerful and wise God is compared to our limited knowledge and accomplishments.... To know and sense God like that is a huge honor and that I got to have it bashed over my head as a reminder this past year is a lesson I hope not to forget anytime soon.”

5. What have been the best sources of encouragement for you during this crisis? My wife, kids, elders, and colleagues. The partnership I have with my wife is the richest blessing in my life. I am also revived often by my kids. Because of COVID, our family has spent much more time together, and that has been a place of deep encouragement for me.

My elders and other men in the church have been a great blessing during this time. I also have three pastor-friends with whom I am in almost daily contact. We share life together, discuss issues we are facing, and come together for honest confession and forgiveness.

Aaron W. White, Ph.D., is Pastor of First Presbyterian Church (EPC), South Charleston, Ohio

Theological Mystery of Words

by Richard A. Ray

Once upon a time, when I was only fifteen years old, I boarded a weather-beaten old passenger liner and sailed out from the New York harbor. I was on my way, by a very roundabout route, to a little city in the Austrian mountains. The ship was registered, I suppose, in some place around Argentina. The food was terrible but who cared? I was with a group of Boy Scouts, most of whom had never set foot outside their own states. The voyage was planned to last ten days or so, with a visit to some place called the Azores, followed by an expedition into the Casbah which was located in the port city of Algiers. After that eye-opening experience we were then to finish by cruising across the Mediterranean Sea and into the Bay of Naples. Finally, after the whole thing was over, we were to end up in Paris. Pretty unnerving for a guy from Louisiana. Oddly enough, as I think back about it now, I had no books with me. I had not yet discovered what I later found to be indispensable, in fact one of the most important things for me, the mystery of words.

It was, nevertheless, a journey filled with new thoughts. Keeping watch over the crew scrubbing the decks around midnight introduced me to, in case I should ever need it, an entirely new approach to mopping. And, of course, the open horizon, without another ship in sight, made me wonder if Marco Polo had known what he was doing when he took a different route.

The most interesting moment came when I ambled into a large sitting room on the main deck. Everyone there, seated in overstuffed chairs, was dressed like he was going to pay a visit to an archduke somewhere in the Pyrenees. I had on short pants. And then, as tea and dainty cookies were being served, these four men who looked like they might have escaped from Count Dracula’s underground laboratory came out. I sized up the details. Black suits, black ties, scarce hair on balding heads, instrument cases. This was not an encouraging sight.

I had taken a cup of tea and as many cookies as I could hold in one hand. Then I watched as they unpacked and started playing their instruments. I realized, pretty quickly, that I was really not all that accustomed to string quartets. My mother, who had understood the southern requirements for cultural education, had, contrary to certain misgivings, occasionally taken me to a concert. However, those expeditions were nothing like this. I started checking out the way to the door. Even though I hadn't fallen overboard yet, I still had a creepy feeling that I was about to lose my grip on something. The Boy Scout motto was the somewhat overly optimistic slogan, "Be Prepared." (For precisely what, I always wondered. I really wanted to know). I definitely was not prepared for the music that I later came to surmise was written by someone like Haydn. To my own surprise, I overcame my wariness and, not only stayed that afternoon but returned day after day at four o'clock. I accepted the incongruity of it all even though I felt that I was an ambassador from the twentieth century. It was a little mystifying. Outdated Latino-Euro ambience. Drapes that had probably been hung in the good witch's castle for about one hundred years. Carpets that Napoleon had replaced when he landed on the island of Elba. Paintings by someone who had flunked out of Michelangelo's weekly art classes. Serving dishes that had definitely not come from Macy's.

There was, to my surprise, something more intriguing about it than any of that. I had been unaccountably touched by the whole experience. And yet, I did not really know how to think about it. Having too few books in my own history to provide perspective, I could not bring it together. It was as though I had been admitted into a world where I was being gradually summoned to swim in greater depths. I was certainly aware that I had never swum in this pool. Later, when books began to give me tickets to other destinations, I had begun to lose many of those hesitations.

In time I might have been tempted to reformulate a line from the book of James to the effect that faith, without the flight of soaring books to lift your life is, if not dead, at least permanently grounded. I would not have guessed it at this stage, but I would learn in time that such literary flights would not always be an easy trip. Books sometimes displaced the horizon in your world without warnings and left you with questions that you had never asked. They could take you into places from which you were not sure that you could return. And when and where, I have now forgotten, books on theology eventually came my way they usually introduced a haunting dimension. They answered few of my questions, often seemed to be remarkably assured, and frequently seemed to have been written for someone else. They only deepened the spiritual mystery.

Years slipped by. I was able to enroll in a college that took me far away. And yet, while the campus had most of the resources one might want, I was not completely at peace. There was to be discovered, however, a way out. Just to the north of the campus were the woods. And as the years passed, I frequently left the campus for the forest, and it was there that I discovered something different. No unusual drawing room. No string quartet. No tea and cookies. But something more solitary and more sublime.

I had discovered books by then, and I usually took a significant work of some kind with me. And there, seated beside the river, I began to understand. It had to do with the play of sentences that, formed into books, admitted us into the minds of those who had lived before us. They had become invitations that were nearly irresistible. When I read Frans Kafka's *The Trial*, Henry Adam's *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, or my aunt Lillian's *Southern Plantation* I realized that I had begun to sail on seas that were filled with wondrous things. And in a sense, I became even more bewitched than when I had been listening to Haydn's string quartets. It did not have to be a book that was on an edge, like those by Flannery O'Connor or James Joyce, from whose minds' words flowed as from mountain springs. It was actually my experience that most authors that I read welcomed me into uncharted territories and left me, as it were, clinging to a cliffside path. I could not escape the thought that when we had been given the gift of words and sentences, God had entrusted us with a very great mystery. And a very exacting responsibility.

It was not long before I began to explore the books whose authors had undertaken to write about God. They flowed through my life. Past seminary, past further graduate school, past other times and places until I met one whose sense of obligation to both the Scripture and the spiritual life had exceeded many others in his own time and even in many years that lay ahead. It was the third century scholar Origen of Alexandria who later settled in Caesarea. The most well-read expositor of Scripture in his day and the founder of a library and a school, his adventurous cosmic speculations stirred some and deeply unnerved others. Nevertheless, here is a remarkable thing to remember about him. His tidal wave of pious insight, recorded in Greek, rolled on until it washed up on the shores of Cappadocia and enfolded those who have been credited with the development of the well-known Nicæan doctrines.

These in time included those which were constructed into the universal creeds that were intended to call forth the unity of the Christian church. Gregory of Nazianzus, who studied under the rhetoricians and philosophers in Athens for ten years and his colleague known later as

Basil the Great had also edited a number of Origen's writings which they entitled the *Philocalia*. And this led to a broader spread of Origen's thought. Their young student and prodigy, Evagrius Ponticus, left their sides, settled in the Egyptian desert, and became the most prolific writer and advisor in the early wilderness monastic tradition (*The Praktikos* and *Chapters on Prayer*, Trappist, Kentucky: Cistercian Publications, 1972; *Ad Monachos*, New York: The Newman Press, 2013). It was only a short period of time before his formulation of the moral life became integral with the thought of John Cassian who in turn provided guidance for the Christian ethical life as later interpreted by Gregory the Great.

And on it went. From one mind on fire to another. Or as it was later put in more general words, from one generation to another. Regardless of how the miracle occurs, in the hands of those skilled with words, the power of Christ continues to burn until it reaches us. In the course of this process people still hear the voice whispering mysteriously to them that they are summoned to join this stumbling procession.

Approximately one hundred years later a theologian from a Latin tradition was born. His inspiration was to follow an alternative historic path, one that would be deeply argued and significantly structured in different ways. His brilliance unfolded gradually and developed into a more dialectic way of expressing his convictions. Even when the Roman emperor Justin had forbidden Christians to teach, he proceeded to develop a significantly distinctive pattern of thought. Its sheer cognitive authority easily swept into the searching minds of many of those who came after him. He had studied philosophy for many years previously before being touched and redirected by Scripture. In the course of that he had become a Christian. And in the ensuing years he became the first person to write a systematic metaphysical treatise on the Trinity in Latin.

Marius Victorinus had been born in Africa between 281 and 291, made his way to Rome, and was stirred into the intellectual caldron of the age. This complex mix combined the Roman classical tradition, the Hellenistic Neoplatonist writers, and the Christian communities. At an early point, Victorinus translated the Greek texts of Neoplatonists, likely those by Plotinus and Porphyry, into Latin, and thus he paved the way for them to fall, years later, into Augustine's hands. Augustine read them and in his *Confessions* at 7.9.31 he recorded his indebtedness to them. Who would have thought that this mysterious flow of words would come together so indirectly in the formation of a Christian mind?

There is still more to consider. Victorinus had absorbed some interesting intellectual sources into his own mind, ones that we are not likely to check out from our local library. In 1978, Mary T. Clark of Manhattanville College wrote this in the introduction to her translation of Victorinus' *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, "To get the most out of Victorinus' treatise on the Trinity one should be familiar with all of Neoplatonism as well as the commentaries on the Categories of Aristotle, the commentary tradition concerned with the Sophist, the Parmenides, the Timaeus of Plato, with the 'Chaldean Oracles' and especially with the anonymous commentary on the Parmenides, a common source for Victorinus" ("Introduction," *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981, p.18). This, of course, is more than a little overwhelming for almost anyone. Nevertheless, perhaps we might gather our thoughts together with a point of view like this, "a well-fortified mind could be a joy for the Lord to use."

What really remains for us to consider about him is the way in which the spiritual heat within his Christian faith, smoldering and melting, remolded the intellectual language of his culture. Through his own gifts, he extended the meanings of words and created neologisms (new terms) that had heretofore been unknown. Their use then continued throughout the long era of medieval studies in philosophy and theology.

So here we have the wonder of these two currents together, one from the Greek heritage and one from the Latin. While they seem to be magnificently distinctive, with different kinds of words, they meet each other. The cultural balance works. And perhaps we will find that even in other fields of expression and art, our voices give new perspectives to one another.

And thus, as we look more deeply into all of this, it tempts us to think that words become markers of the hidden movements in our souls. That which we learn molds us. That which we use discloses us. That which we increasingly hear in public discourse shames us. And that which is changed by the influence of political ideology worries us. More significant yet, can we become sufficiently perceptive to recognize the consequences that are at risk when we begin to shred the mystery that has been held in trust, like sacred diamonds in the crown of faith, in history's traditional theological terms?

Victorinus' unusual facility with philosophical concepts led to his remarkable capacity for defending this heritage of Christian theology and blowing away the misjudgments of the surrounding Arian critics. Mystery, one might say, when formed in us by Christ,

gives to us the wondrous dance of spell binding words. And that is where the awesome responsibility begins.

Looking back, I wonder about the unexpected pauses in any of our journeys. Could an antic transhistorical step into another time, on an old passenger ship at sea, have created a sense of curiosity in an adolescent mind? And later, could those afternoons beside a river in a forest, thinking about the books that I was reading, have suggested to me that words could become the jewels that enable our minds to measure more than time? And could a discovery, in a very amateurish glance, into the realms of music have disclosed that Antonio Vivaldi, who in time became a priest, and J.S. Bach were born only seven years apart, one in Italy and one in Germany, and perhaps as a partial result of that their compositions provided lilting contrasts. They are endlessly different. Together, however, they give us complementing melodic structures out of different minds and cultures, both being composed to the glory of God.

What this suggests are a few exceedingly difficult questions for us. Why did God pour theology into the beauty of the swirling, complementing mystery of words? Did he intentionally leave us with these very fragile, malleable mediums to indicate his truth? We have no more than speculation about that now. What we do come to recognize is that the personal struggles in our lives are in a remarkable balance with the broken places in the words that bear spiritual truth. And words do break and come unglued even as we treasure them. Neglected sometimes for years, word's meanings are often more frail than one might think. However, this might not be so bad. We can eventually even begin to trust a certain type of frailty, not because we are naive about its incompleteness but because we are beginning to be aware of something more than strength. Perhaps, in this respect, it is like the Cross.

When poised directly against brokenness we are sometimes surprised by trust. Theological insight does not ride on the rails of mathematical certainty. But does trust not come to us, in precarious moments, from the echoes of words that we barely understand? And that, actually, may be both the irony and the beauty of it. Who can understand a piece by Vivaldi or Bach, or even our old nemesis, Haydn, for that matter? They come to us as gifts. And who can truly understand a gift?

Each gift remains a mystery until it is opened. This is especially so with words that have the ring of theology about them. Formed through something akin to frailty, molded through what some have called askesis, that is a disciplined life, and inspired by the well of scriptural wisdom, we hardly know how to go about opening them.

There is, however, in this case, the nuance of a promise about them. It may be a very faint promise, for after all it has come a long way, like the light from a distant star, for after all this promise has been reverberating across the years until it has come to us.

Who wants to overlook a promise of this kind? It may seem strange to us at first, but a present could hold an exceptionally valuable promise. However, even opening a present like this can sometimes be delayed. And theological words, as presents, can sometimes seem to be the trickiest of all. They tease our minds until someone beyond our minds, the one who actually gives them, breaks them open. Even so, is there not a sense in which theological words are always destined to remain beyond our grasp? We may not know the meaning of such a melodious flow of his words until we are eventually summoned home. However, while we are still here, does he not send us, like Vivaldi and Bach, into vividly balanced dimensions of beauty, into words, touching, dividing and recombining as they go. It remains a voyage, like one around the Azores, of bewilderment and wonder.

To be assured, this many faceted mystery may even take us further. Will someone really come? Seated on a wooded riverbank, we may feel that we have only been trusted with a small gift, a gift of waiting at this point. But that is not so small a gift. One day, when we least expect it, someone may be preparing to sprinkle handfuls of words that glow like diamonds into our brains.

One never knows, it might also be true that, even if we have hardly ever touched a book, he still calls us to serve him in illuminating ways. After all, who knows the origins of thought, who has wrapped the gift of wonder in words, may also have more ways to speak of Christ. The intensity of something we are yet to grasp, the empty tomb, if we put it that way, does shatter all things, including the beauty of our words and the limitations of our minds. To enjoy our little time of waiting, before our journey leads us to that which is the awesome best, we might even want to sit a spell. To sum our courage and to listen to, well, perhaps I really ought not to suggest it, something like Haydn's Cello Concerto in C Major. That could even remind us that the most mysterious words, the ones for which we all wait, will in time tell us even more than we could ever ask.

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John Azumah is a Presbyterian pastor, preacher, evangelist, professor of theology at the University of Ghana, and author of many books and articles. After serving from 2011 to 2019 as Professor of World Christianity & Islam at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, he is now the executive director of The Sanneh Institute, Ghana, and serves as visiting professor at Yale Divinity School and presidential visiting fellow at Yale University.

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Earl Palmer has served as pastor of University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, Washington, Union Church, Manila, Philippines, First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, California, and The National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C. He has authored many books and commentaries, leads Earl Palmer Ministries, a vibrant writing, teaching, preaching, and mentoring ministry, and has been called “the best expository preacher in America of our times.”

Richard Ray is chairman of the board of the Presbyterian Heritage Center, Montreat, North Carolina. He has served as a pastor in Arkansas, Virginia, and Tennessee, managing director of John Knox Press, professor at Stephens College and Pittsburgh Seminary, and president of King University, Bristol, Tennessee. He has served on the board of the Grandfather Home for Children, Calvin Studies Society, and is on the board of advisors of *Theology Matters*.

Lorenzo Small is pastor of First United Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina. After several years in the corporate world, working for companies such as 3M Corporation and Eli Lilly & Company, he was called to preach, served as a Baptist minister, and was later ordained and installed as pastor of Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, South Carolina. He is a graduate of Union Presbyterian Seminary (Charlotte) and a member of the Foundation for Reformed Theology.

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