

Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand

A Future for
Your Congregation
beyond More
Money, Programs,
and Innovation

When
Church
Stops
Working



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Preface

You probably picked up this book because you're concerned about the church and its decline. The good news is that you're in the right place. This book will discuss why the church is in crisis, offering some suggestions for what we can do about it. The bad (or, at least, disorientating) news is that this book will reveal that what you think is the problem isn't really the problem. And the actions you think will help the church may make things worse. This book aims to provide a broader view of the challenges before us, giving us perspective that might keep us from walking in the wrong direction. The book will encourage you to do something, but this something might be more paradoxical than you expect. The point of this book you're holding is to address the church in crisis, but in a way you probably haven't considered.

Since the release of my (Andy's) *Ministry in a Secular Age* series, I've been getting two kinds of emails. The first type comes from pastors who appreciated those books. They've found that each book names something they had felt but been unable to articulate. After expressing their appreciation for the

books, they ask me directly, “But how would you say this all to laypeople, particularly people on church boards or sessions or councils? I mean, it resonates with me, but I don’t think my lay leaders can wade through all your cultural philosophy and theology.” Good point.

I usually respond by assuring them it can be done. Believing it’s possible or calling my bluff, some have been nice enough to invite me to Zoom, or visit in person, with those very boards, sessions, or councils. These pastors basically introduce me to these groups with “This is Andy Root.” They then turn to me and say, “Now Andy, tell them all the things about all the stuff.” This book will try to do what I do in those presentations: discuss “all the stuff” about our secular age and the challenges the church faces in a way that all who care about these things can understand. Yes, it was hard to limit the footnotes, but you will thank me later.

The second type of email goes something like this: “Dear Professor Root, I’ve found your books very helpful in naming what’s happening and in providing a theological vision. But I’m still stuck on what to do with it all. What steps or actions do I take after reading this? What do my lay leaders and I do next?”

This book is an attempt to respond to these emails as well. It synthesizes the whole *Ministry in a Secular Age* series in a format aimed at lay leaders. I hope that folks working in sales, IT, education, e-commerce, or not working at all—pretty much any job but pastor or professor—can all read and profit from this book. My aim is to provide a book that pastors can read together with their board, session, or council. The hope is that this little book both serves as a translation of the big ideas from the *Ministry in a Secular Age* series and provides a kind of map of what small steps can help the church today.

Preface

Yet, to be fair, the map doesn't really contain detailed, step-by-step directions. It's surely not a GPS system or even IKEA instructions. There are no six steps or worksheets or inventories (although there is plenty you can discuss with others). If there were, it would go against everything I've described as the crisis we face in the church. Instead of a map, the next steps are a process of being formed, an invitation to find the stories and visions that can lead the church beyond the crisis of decline and into the crisis of an encounter with the living God.

These are big and important questions that I hope you will wrestle with in community. Read this book with others, together leaning into what it means for your congregation and ministry. There are big ideas in this little book, but also a lot of handles that will help your church and ministry. There are no quick fixes. As a matter of fact, the very assumption of a quick fix misinforms and malforms the church and the church's leaders.

I keep saying "I" because this book is the offspring of the six other books from that series I've authored. But I haven't written this little book alone. If you read through the preface of those six other volumes (though why would you unless you're a major preface nerd?), you'll see that in each one I thank Blair Bertrand, whom I've known for twenty years. We met next to a dumpster at Princeton Theology Seminary, an ominous place to start a friendship. That friendship quickly shifted to the hockey rink, but we forged our friendship around theological ideas more than around men's league hockey. Blair has been reading my work and providing some of the best engagement with it for two decades. He read some of my earliest seminary papers and every book since. No one understands my project more than Blair. This is true in part because Blair's own project has similar points of emphasis. Blair is one of the best,

most insightful readers I know. But he is more than that. He is a wonderful teacher, able to take the most complex ideas and translate them for laypeople. Blair has led several church councils and sessions in the same way we hope this book will lead you. Blair comes to this task as a skilled scholar and seasoned pastor. It made all sorts of sense for me to invite Blair to coauthor this book with me.

To begin our thanks, I want to first thank Blair both for his friendship and for his help in shaping this book for you, the reader. The origins of this book go back to Bob Hosack. In the academic world, people talk about their Herr Professor, using the formal German title as a sign of deep respect. If there is such a thing as a Herr Editor, for me it's Bob. Bob had the vision for the Ministry in a Secular Age series and for this book too. After hearing that the Lilly Endowment was investing in a project to work out the implications of the Ministry in a Secular Age series, Bob suggested the book you're holding. I want to thank Bob for all he has done for me. And I want to thank the Eli Lilly Endowment, particularly Jessicah Duckworth, Chanon Ross, and Chris Coble, for funding a grant called Relevance to Resonance. I've worked on that grant (and many others) with my dear friend David Wood. David's impact on American Protestantism is immense. He has mentored and shaped so many pastors in the church. Watching him do that directly through our grants has been a marvelous experience. As always, I want to thank Kara Root for her faithful reading and editing of my chapters in this project, like all others.

Both Blair and I would also like to thank Eric Salo for his superb editing work. We appreciate that he was gentle when he killed all the footnotes. We'd also like to thank Kenda Creasy Dean, to whom this book is dedicated. Her scholarship has always been done in loving service to the church. She insists

that the Holy Spirit doesn't just live in ivory towers but is on the loose in the world. For book nerds like us, her insistence that ideas make a difference in the world only when the world can understand them has been a challenge and an inspiration.

I (Blair) want to thank Andy. There is an African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Anyone who knows Andy knows that he works fast. People often wonder if he ever sleeps, because it seems like he always has a new book coming out (for the record, he does). He most often works alone, going fast. To partner on this project was a risk for him. He had to go forward together, a bit slower but in the end, I hope, a bit farther than he might have done alone. I also want to thank the elders and lay leaders I have had the honor of working with over the years. My thanks go to Debi Chadsey and Debbie Jones, who took a chance to hire me the first time, to passionate denominational leaders like Jo Morris and Jen DeCombe, and to visionary elders like Jim Christian and Rod Thomson. There are so many more folks who have kept it real, skewering any pretension I might have, and who have led the church forward into a hopeful and faithful future. The first lay leader who shaped me was my mom, Sheryl Bertrand. Singing in the choir, organizing the women's ministry, chairing the church council, my mom has done it all. She has always shown me that the church is an imperfect but good community where we might encounter each other and God. Any errors that remain in the book are Andy's (and, I guess, mine), but the strengths come from the questions and efforts of a host of lay leaders we have been privileged to work with. Thanks.

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Why Your Church Has a Problem, but It Isn't What You Think

Church in Crisis: Influence, People, and Belief

“Make America Great Again.” No matter who you are in today’s America, these are fighting words. Some believe the decline of the US is real: they want to return to a great past. Others scoff that America was never great: they strive for a better tomorrow. The irony of the slogan is that it spurs everybody into political action but for different reasons, some based on a wistful sense of the past, others based on dreams of a better future. At their best, conservatives want to recapture the greatest parts of yesterday, while liberals strive to build progressively toward a better future.

Sometimes we lose the fact that both groups, conservatives and liberals, don't like the current situation. Conservatives look around and see decline, while liberals point to dreams deferred. The present gets measured against a golden past or a perfect future. How can the present measure up when the criterion is always something we imagine, not something real? Sure, both the past and the future are "real," but the funny thing about time is that we cannot live in either the past or the future. We can tell ourselves stories of the glory days and we can imagine tales of what might come, but we can't actually be in the past or the future.

This is true of the church just as much as it is true of America. "Make First Church of Somewhere Great Again" prompts gut feelings in First Church's leaders. Conservatives wring their hands about how the church has declined. Liberals fret that the church will never reach its full potential to transform society. There is a feeling of not enough: too little influence, too few people, too fragile belief. Conservatives try to recapture something lost, and liberals marshal the right changes to make a difference. While both sides might differ in approach, recovering or reimagining, what they hold in common is that both believe the church does not have enough at the moment. The answer to the problem of not enough is *more*, regardless of tactic.

This dynamic plays out in the polarized culture wars that rage in very public settings. On one side there are battles over prayer in schools or the Ten Commandments in courthouses, attempts to influence public piety and morality. On the other side there are fights for racial justice and advocacy for marginalized groups, efforts to influence the future of society toward the common good. At the root, these are fights over the proper separation of church and state.¹ There is a formal division: legally there is no state religion, but materially the church still

plays a role in the life of the people. The culture wars provide an obvious example, but there are many ways that the church tries to insert itself into the public conversation. There is some sense that in the past, the church was the moral conscience of the nation, or that the church should act prophetically and call the nation to account for its actions.

COVID-19 only sharpened the blending of religion and public life. Some, in the name of Christian freedom, rejected public health orders about masking or gathering. Others, in the name of Christian charity, advocated for lockdowns and vaccinations. Even if First Church of Somewhere is not particularly conservative or liberal, is not a declared soldier in the culture war, its leaders had to decide how the community would navigate their Christian commitments in relation to public health mandates. Whatever the case, the church had to relate with public health policies, recapturing or creating its status as the moral conscience of the nation-state.

In the wake of the pandemic, First Church of Somewhere wrestles with questions of fewer people. There is a minor industry analyzing the demographics of church attendance, and there is no shortage of material. Even the idea of church attendance is up for debate. What should we measure? Besides worship attendance, we could look at dollars going to community ministry, number of church users per week, or how many hits (and for how long) our online content generates. Most church consultants say you need to pick the right metrics and continually measure them to know your church's health. But choosing which metric is dizzying and far more complicated than a leader at First Church of Somewhere can expect to understand.

Despite all of this analysis, the motivation to measure is the same: How can we get more people? When leaders sit in a meeting to discuss budget and worship and the future, some

remember days of yore when the church was bursting at the seams. Others look at the local megachurch with envy and wonder why people would flock there. (And not here! Our theology is better!) At no point does anyone ever suggest that First Church of Somewhere has enough people; all of them know the solution: more people.

In the quest for more people, the leaders of First Church of Somewhere face a choice. Either they must define belief narrowly so that those who hold that belief will find them attractive, or they must pitch a big tent in terms of belief to capture the many ways that people find meaning. The first strategy resembles that of a restaurant that has one thing on the menu (pizza, burgers, shawarma, etc.). The second place has a huge menu with a bit of everything. If you've ever had to choose a restaurant for a group, you know that the narrow menu can put some off, but the large menu makes no one happy.

Realistically, the leaders of First Church of Somewhere might realize that it takes a lot of resources to offer a large menu of programs and activities. If they are a small church with little money, they might double down on some of their core beliefs and pitch a kind of niche church experience. Once they have taken that approach for a while and have gathered resources, they could introduce another program or activity. As they expand, they will need to stay true to their mission and their core beliefs, which is hard because new programs bring different people who make meaning in different ways. Large churches face the problem of unity (a common set of beliefs) within diversity (different ways of making meaning). Push unity of beliefs too much and you exclude those who don't hold those beliefs. Emphasize diversity too much and you introduce conflict and apathy because people either defend their beliefs or don't care enough to take part.

A Terminal Diagnosis

Like many, the leaders at First Church of Somewhere believe they know the problem in the church: too little influence, too few people, too fragile belief. We see this in their constant search for more resources and more relevance. The lack of resources and relevance pains leaders, making them anxious and stressed. Some feel this pain acutely because they have some sense that the church had more resources and relevance in the not too distant past. It is more painful to lose something than to never know what you are missing. Others pine for a better future, promised but not attainable. Nostalgia and hope are powerful emotions that, in this case, both lead to pain.

Adding to the problem is the fact that the church is in a vicious circle. If we had more resources, we could be more relevant, but we can't be more relevant without more resources. Church leaders feel the loss and vicious circle in their gut, and so they understandably look for a way out.

Luckily for them, just as many people who recognize the problem have a solution. The cure is to be more effective and therefore increase resources while using them efficiently. Coupled with effectiveness is a drive for innovation. How many times have we heard that we must creatively meet the needs of the surrounding community? The solution is the right balance of resource management and effective innovation, which makes our church grow sustainably.

Church leaders can choose one of two aids in their search for effective innovation, both of which offer simple instructions. The first approach attempts to learn how successful churches have become more effective and innovative. They essentially say, "We did it this way and so, if you want to be successful like us, don't reinvent the wheel, just do it exactly as we did." They offer a very

clear and can't-miss, ready-made template for a church to fit into. The second approach offers a set process that any church can use to make its own decisions about how to innovate effectively. It recognizes that each church is different (so one template doesn't fit) but think that there is an underlying process that applies to all congregations. The outcomes differ from church to church, but how the two approaches go about doing it is the same. The first gives you a recipe; the second gives you some general cooking guidelines. In either case, you end up with a perfectly baked church.

As a leader, your job is to find the right recipe or the right process for your church. While writing this book, we combed our libraries for resources that give you just the right advice. Why reinvent the wheel? We noticed something strange. As we read, all of those books—whether published in the 1970s, '80s, '90s, '00s, or in a post-COVID world—sounded the same and gave the same advice: effective innovation. Fifty years separates our oldest church health book and the most recent. We point this out not to make fun of 2020 or to disparage 1970. Rather, we point it out because if the solution to the church's problem has remained the same for fifty years, then one of two things is true. The problem is wicked, meaning there is no actual solution, in which case we need to despair. Or those books misdiagnose the problem. Effective innovation has failed to solve the problem of too little influence, too few people, too fragile belief, not because of a problem with the solution but because those books are trying to solve the wrong problem.

We agree with those who say that there is a problem in the church today. We just don't agree with them that the problem is too little influence, too few people, too fragile belief. Much of the North American church is facing a crisis. Our read of

the situation is that the lack of influence, people, and belief is a symptom, not a problem. When we pull back and look at some larger issues going on in the world, we see a different diagnosis of the problem, and therefore we prescribe a different cure. Effective innovation has not stopped the crisis in the church because the crisis comes from the very place that effective innovation comes from: the secular age. Instead of helping the church, effective innovation actually worsens the crisis by driving us deeper into the secular age we find ourselves in.

Before diving into how effective innovation is a key part of the secular age and therefore a big part of our problem as the church, stop for a moment and think about your own health. Pretend you have some obvious symptoms, like a sore stomach, but you do not know why you have the pain. Understandably, you want to feel healthy. Your life isn't as good when you are in pain and worried about it. In theory, we know that without the right diagnosis, we can't get the correct treatment. In reality, we aren't always so open.

This truth, that we want a diagnosis because we want to get rid of the pain but we aren't patient with the long process of finding out the reality, becomes clear when someone we love goes to the emergency room. We want answers now! Just tell us what's wrong so we can do something about it. Never mind the fact that doctors spend years learning how to tease apart different symptoms to discover the underlying cause. We can see the symptoms, and a few Google searches later we know the cause. Waiting for doctors to confirm our diagnosis frustrates us, especially because many times, a commonsense diagnosis prevails. A patient's kidneys are shutting down, so the kidney specialist is called in. The doctor asks questions, runs tests, and confidently prescribes treatment. The patient recovers, returning to normal life with a story to tell. Probing beyond symptoms

to causes has resulted in a match, which even Google predicted, between diagnosis and the correct treatment.

But more times than we would like to admit, common sense leads us astray. A patient's kidneys are shutting down, so it must be a problem with the kidneys, right? Except it isn't. Rare, like one-in-a-million rare, autoimmune blood conditions can affect kidney functioning. In that case, the patient needs a blood specialist, not a kidney specialist. The kidneys are a symptom, but the diagnosis reveals they aren't the problem. Treat the kidneys and the patient will die because the real problem will continue. It is in these cases that Google really fails and angers doctors. The patient is convinced that they know both the symptoms and the correct diagnosis for those symptoms. "Just give me the cure that I already know," they say. Common sense confuses our symptoms with the true reason for why we feel the way we do.

Some of our hardest times are when we go to the doctor expecting a simple, commonsense diagnosis only to receive terrible news. Your stomach has been hurting for a while, so you think it's probably an ulcer (Google says so and your Uncle Ralph had one, so it makes sense). A day later, the doctor's office calls and tells you to come in because they found something more serious—cancer. Your normal life gets thrown into chaos, made worse because you always feel like you are waiting. Waiting to find out how bad it is. Waiting for a clear diagnosis. Waiting for a spot to open up. Waiting for the results of a test. Waiting for normal life to resume. There is nothing fast about cancer treatment, made all the worse by the impending sense that death is much closer than it was before the diagnosis.

We are both doctors, albeit not medical doctors. We have spent years studying the church, honing our diagnostic skills and coming up with prescriptions that can lead to health. You

might want to sit down for this. Let's start with the bad news. Your church is sick. But that isn't the worst part of it. We believe that someone has misdiagnosed it. The treatment plan commonly prescribed—effective innovation—will only cause your church to remain sick.

The good news is that your church can get healthy, though it won't be easy. The first challenge is to change your mindset: Your church is sick, but the problem is not decline. The problem is that the secular age has infected it. When someone, or in this case something, gets sick because of a larger, systemic cause, the complexity of the treatment ramps up. Focusing on the sick individual will only get you so far if the surrounding air is poisoned. Like helping fish in polluted water, we can't just treat the fish. We need to treat the pollution, which is a much bigger task.

The Secular Age in Three Parts

All of this may seem abstract, so let's start with three clear signs of decline that most churches experience. Symptom 1 of the secular age is a sense that the church and Christianity have less influence in society than they once did. Mainline denominations sending letters to government officials decrying various justice issues is a residual form of the moral power the church once wielded. Or a pastor attending a city council meeting to give their opinion about some legislation. Do elected representatives really care about what churches and pastors think? Usually no, because they don't count for many votes. Churches believe that the nation and the church once shared a common morality. The politicians less so. For many Christians, the prophetic task of the church is to hold the state accountable, a job that is possible only if the church and the state share the same sense of justice. Any time we hear calls about returning

to the Christian foundations of the nation-state, we are hearing symptom 1.

The cause of symptom 1 is that the sacred no longer sets the agenda for all of society. For example, our justice system no longer assumes a Christian foundation. The law against murder remains and has good reasons behind it even if society does not believe that the Ten Commandments are God's law. Other faiths prohibit murder without needing to rely on Moses and the stone tablets. Secular humanists forbid murder based on an understanding of human rights that makes no appeal to faith. Society agrees that murder is bad, though we have different reasons for believing that. Justice becomes what we can agree on regardless of our beliefs and practices. Appeals to "what the Bible says" don't hold up in court because we do not recognize the sacred as an authority for all of society. It makes sense, then, that if our public lives don't share the same foundation, then the church's influence over society can spread only as much as it can convince everyone else that it is right. The culture wars stem in part from attempts by Christians to build a moral majority or a campaign to advance their vision of the ideal society.

Symptom 2 follows from this. Whereas symptom 1 divides the sacred and the secular, leading to less influence, symptom 2 divides the public and the private, leading to fewer people in churches. Survey after survey tells us what we already know—fewer people are going to church. Those reports and surveys tell us about the rise of the "nones," people who respond "none" to the question "What religion do you identify with?" Even before the rise of the nones, there had been ongoing attrition, with each generation attending church less often than the one before. Fewer people express their faith in public ways. That doesn't mean that people don't have a faith or that people don't express that faith. But that faith has become private, not public.

Fewer people at church does not mean less belief, just like going to church doesn't mean you are super faithful. What it means, though, is that the connection between our personal beliefs and public expression does not line up with how it once was in the past.

Fewer people, symptom 2, stems from a divide between the public and the private. If our society can go along just fine without a sacred foundation—murder is still murder, whether or not I believe in the Ten Commandments—it becomes optional for me to take part in religion. My motivation for going to church changes from participation in a public profession of faith to participation in a private experience. Perhaps I go because I have strong personal beliefs about a moral cause (think abortion) or how society should be (think Black Lives Matter), and the church can help with that. Or maybe it is simply that I want my kids to live good, moral lives. There continues to be some vague sense that the church is the place where our children can learn how to be good. In that case, I go to church for the sake of my children, unless there is something else that would be better for my kids, such as travel soccer or visiting family for the weekend. I go to church if I get something out of it, but I don't go for anyone else. My personal beliefs don't connect to public expressions in powerful ways.

Now we come to symptom 3, which is the sense that belief itself has changed. The decline of denominations coupled with the explosion of nondenominational churches points to the fact that people have a very wide range of beliefs. At one point, if you were a Presbyterian or a Lutheran or a Methodist, it meant that you believed certain things about God. There might have been differences of belief between denominations that played out in how they organized and worshiped. But now you can walk into two churches from the same denomination

and you might think they have nothing in common. Or you can walk into a nondenominational church that holds to a very general understanding of God captured in their relatively simple faith statement. Because our society has split the sacred and the secular, the public and the private, people hold a wide assortment of beliefs about God. For the first time in history, it is possible that they can even not believe in God at all. We no longer believe a person needs to change their personal beliefs to fit public expression; we believe that the public expression should change to match the personal beliefs of everyone.

Symptom 3 goes deep to the core—it is now possible to not believe in God. The idea that a person could believe there is no God goes beyond simple atheism. Here, the divide occurs between the immanent and the transcendent. “Immanent” simply means those things that we can see around us, stuff that we can measure, objects that we can track and see their cause and effect. Immanent thinking gives us modern medicine and engineering because we can harness and control the natural processes of the world for our own ends. We understand illness to be the result of a virus, not some kind of spiritual punishment. The opposite of immanent is transcendent, meaning those things that are beyond our perception, above our ability to control and determine, even in some ways objects that are supernatural, that defy explanation. In most places and in most times, people have assumed that the world is larger than just what we can see, measure, and control. Humans normally assumed that there was a spiritual world and that it could interact with our material world. Sociologists sometimes call this an “enchanted” world, because the immanent and the transcendent permeate each other. It is now possible to not believe that, something unique to our time.

The Secular Imagination

Combining these three divisions—secular and sacred, public and private, immanent and transcendent—gives us the secular age we live in. Churches can try to solve the common problems of influence, attendance, and belief, but they are up against cultural forces much larger than the individual problems seem to suggest. Let's be clear, we do not believe that the cure for the secular age is some kind of new sacred age. That ship has sailed. Nor do we hold out much hope for the strategies used to combat these problems, because they find their inspiration within the secular age. We end up trying to win a game playing by rules that are stacked against us when we should instead reimagine the game itself.

In this book, we want to reimagine the church within the secular age. We believe God continues to act in the world, and because God acts in the world, we believe it is possible for the church to flourish. The first part of our diagnosis is that the problem the church faces today is that the symptoms don't follow common sense but are part of a larger problem we call the secular age, and the second part is that we miss that fact because the secular age has captured our imaginations. The sickness in the church fools us by hiding as the cure, a fact that we can't see because it was a slow trip to get here. If you want a healthy church, you are going to need to imagine a cure that doesn't depend on the secular age.

This talk of imagination can seem vague to those of us used to working in the real world. After all, imagination is the domain of artists, poets, and theologians, not carpenters, engineers, and accountants. Don't even mention imagination to those scientists dedicated to the cold, hard facts. For someone really invested in the literal or concrete, reality appears to be a

given that does not require imagination for us to use or understand. We disagree. Even people committed to a concrete or literal understanding of the world still use imagination all the time. Carpenters and biologists might imagine different futures for a stand of trees. One sees furniture and houses, while the other sees bioremediation or wildlife habitat. Neither actually “sees” these things, but they sense the possibilities inherent in the forest, possibilities shaped by their experiences and understandings of how and why the world works. It is that sense, that understanding of what this reality is and could be, that is at the heart of imagination. The trees are no less real or concrete whether a carpenter or naturalist looks at them, but their different imaginations open up different parts of that reality.

Because the secular age separates the secular and the sacred, making belief private and the immanent the agreed-upon public reality, the church has a hard time imagining what a public faith that witnesses to the transcendent looks like. Our imaginations are secular, so when we try to imagine the sacred, try to see God at work in our lives and in the world, we can do so only in secular terms. The problem is so deep that even when we experience something meaningful, something sacred and transcendent, the only language we have to describe it is secular. It is as if we have looked at the world with a secular lens for so long that when something sacred appears, we can’t see it for what it is, nor do we even have the language to describe it. Consider the carpenter and the biologist again. They both imagine a different goal, something they are working toward. One sees well-built houses filled with cheerful people, the other a natural habitat that is self-sustaining and healthy. Both are good. Who doesn’t want to live in a delightful house and have a beautiful environment? But we can’t have both. If the carpenter cuts down the trees, the biologist’s dream ends, and vice versa. How can we make

a decision if we do not have the ability or language to see what the other wants or sees? How can we choose whose imagined future is best?

The Secular Imagination: Acceleration versus Resonance

This choice between imagined futures plays out even more forcefully in our personal lives. In our limited lifetime we have to make choices to pursue some things and, because we are pursuing those things, leave others behind. We obsess over work-life balance, making sure that we give sufficient time to our various roles. Both of us want to be a good son, brother, husband, father, friend, academic, and hockey player, all while staying on top of reality TV, the latest music, our fantasy football pool, walking the dog, and doing the dishes. Each of those roles and desires makes demands on our limited time, so we must choose what we will do and not do. Efficiency is often the solution. We double up, listening to a podcast for work while we walk the dog. We think we can do more than we actually can, and we say things like, “After we write this book, life will calm down.” Except it never does. Add to this that each of those roles means that we have to decide about other people’s time, “Am I going to drive to this practice or play a game with this kid or help my aging parents with their yard work?” You see just how big the problem is. We need more time.

Here is where secular logic takes over. We have no way of knowing what task is valuable or how much is enough. The only thing we know is that we need good things and more of them. The busyness we experience comes from the feeling that we need to accelerate every part of our lives. Sometimes we notice this acceleration. We go on vacations where we pack so much in that it feels like an extension of our everyday life. When

we have to-do lists for our time off, is it really time off? Or we are so busy we cannot take a vacation. Or we hit a wall, have a heart attack, or stress causes our body to just stop. Secular logic tells us that there are two speeds—fast or dead. We can try to slow down, but we still feel the pull either to speed up or to give up. The secular age accelerates our lives, and we can only imagine more or nothing.

Our diagnosis is that the opposite of acceleration isn't dead or slow. The opposite of more is resonance. Resonance is an experience of fullness, of being in sync, of being so present to someone or something else that we feel like we have discovered ourselves again. We can resonate with something whether we are moving fast or slow. Often resonance is timeless. We look up at the clock and wonder how it got to be that time because we were so engaged in whatever we were doing that time became irrelevant. Or the moment is so full, so powerful, that something that takes seconds feels much longer. Resonance is all about connecting with the world, with the people in our lives, and finding a meaning that is greater than what we can see and explain. Resonance is about the sacred, the public, and the transcendent.

Resonance at Work and Love

Again, the carpenters and biologists who are reading this, those who love the concrete and literal, are wondering what the heck we are talking about. Resonance can seem fuzzy. That's part of the point. When we don't have the imagination for something, we can't really see it clearly, and when we can't see it clearly, we can't talk about it well. We can't imagine resonance because the secular age blinds us, and so we lack the vision and language to talk about it. But just because we can't see resonance clearly doesn't mean that we can't see it at all.

Many of us, most of us actually, including the carpenters and biologists, have some sense that there are moments in our lives that are more amazing than others. Often these moments come in a relationship or when we are doing something very meaningful. These moments rise above our everyday lives. They shape who we are and how we relate to the world. These moments surprise us with their power. They come to us just when we need them or force us to change in unexpected ways. Often these moments give us a sense of purpose and meaning that is difficult to articulate but that we know at some deep level is true and right and good. They set us on a meaningful trajectory.

Talking about these things is hard. We've gone to plenty of funerals where the eulogy for the deceased is simply an itinerary of their lives. Person X was born here, married this person, worked here, had this hobby, and now has died. Is life really just an accumulation of events? We don't think so. Times and places sometimes carry more weight than stops along the way. Who hasn't gone back to a place that seems very common to anyone else but is extraordinary to you because of what happened there? Relationships are not just facts; there are deeper qualities to them that make them rich and important. Life must have resonance; otherwise it is just busyness.

If the church needs more of anything in the crisis it faces, it is more resonance. More resonance will bring about deeper relationships and a clearer purpose. Instead of searching for more influence, we will experience deeper connection to God and each other. The crisis of fewer people in the church will fade because we will know how to have relationships that give us a full life. Questions about belief will shift from privately held dogmas to open discussions about God's actions in my life.

Earlier, we asked you to sit down to get the bad news. We live in a secular age, one that divides the sacred from the secular,

the public from the private, and the transcendent from the immanent. The secular age hides itself from us because we can only imagine the world in secular, private, and immanent terms. Our lives get busy, our relationships get strained, and our work gets difficult. This goes for our personal lives as well as the life of our church. We try solutions and try solutions and try solutions, usually by being more efficient and innovative, and yet we never seem to have enough influence, people, or belief.

Yet, there is some good news. The church has been here before. The first church faced uncertainty about how it should relate to the world around it. A few disciples huddled in a locked room were definitely no powerhouse in terms of resources. Even with all the teachings of Jesus, most early Christians didn't really know what to make of his life, death, and resurrection.

And what did Jesus tell them to do? Go and effectively innovate? Nope. He told them to wait. That is where we turn in the next chapter.