

MARS HILL GRADUATE SCHOOL

HOSPICE CARE FOR DYING CHURCHES:  
INITIATING END-OF-LIFE-ISSUES CONVERSATIONS WITH CONGREGATIONS – AN  
ORGANIZATION-DEVELOPMENT AND PASTORAL APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

Christian church congregations are dying, and they are dying lonely, painful deaths. This is a circumstance, when discussed in terms of individual persons (e.g. one's grandparent), which is considered at least sad, and at most unacceptable. These days, in pursuit of a vision of "the good death,"<sup>1</sup> individuals pursue Hospice Care – in-home medical and companion care customized to help each dying client or patient die with as much autonomy and comfort, and as little pain, as possible, typically emphasizing spiritual elements of care, including the fact that it is often conducted in close partnership with a supportive community of family and friends, and is simultaneously designed to assist this community to more effectively help its dying member to die with dignity, grace, celebration, grief, and an increased sense of closure and completeness. This ambitious, somewhat "unscientific" (in terms of its willingness to look outside traditional medicine for help), multi-disciplinary approach to caring for those who are dying, as well as *caring for those who are caring for those who are dying*, is a perfect model from which to draw a new vision for the Church caring for its dying local congregations.

This Integrative Project will ultimately propose that dying church congregations need Hospice-styled Care, as paralleled with current psycho-medical understandings of Hospice Care. This will be done by proposing preliminary concepts: first, that the death of an organization, like a local church congregation, is parallel to the experience of an individual's death; second, there is a necessary blurred distinction between dying churches and their typically elderly or dying individuals who make up that church body; and third, that theologies of both Hospice Care and general Christian belief regarding afterlife, death, and dying are necessary in order to develop a vision of Hospice Care for dying congregations.

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<sup>1</sup> A twist on Plato's philosophical pursuit of, and standard of, the inherent and universally desirable "Good Life."

The Project will conclude with a vision for Hospice Care for dying churches, including a vision of multi-generational worship as a surrounding community of care for both dying individuals who typically make up a dying congregation, and also for dying churches themselves.

## WHY HOSPICE CARE IS NEEDED FOR DYING CONGREGATIONS

Death is different from dying.<sup>2</sup> “Death” is the concept which we can discuss with ignorant gravity when in our youth, or indignant sorrow when at the funeral of a child, or with logical rhetoric when advocating for senior citizens. Death is also something we can hold in the back of our private mind; the constant realization that things as we know them End.

But “dying” is not a thing to be considered, it is a fire through which we must pass. The process of dying *is a process*, an experience, and all the thinking, wishing, praying, philosophizing, theologizing, fearing, or ignoring of it will not prevent the experience of losing one’s life as we know it, or of losing a loved person. For that is the hidden meaning of the definition of “dying:” the process of losing life as we know it – the loss of relationship as we know it – and the loss of control.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that the subject of “death,” and *especially* the process of “dying,” are avoided in popular discourse, public thought, and common conversation.

This is perhaps why the Christian Church in the U.S.A. has had difficulty dealing with its own process of dying, especially among so-called mainstream denominations. What do we do with a local church congregation which has dwindled and dwindled, along with its finances, down to seven or twelve faithful, grey-haired souls, leaving the church building’s gas bill outstanding on the first of the New Year?

This ought not be a surprise – that local congregations can, will, and possibly even should die – yet it is a near-crisis for some denominations in the U.S.A. today. Why? Although we

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 40. Long eventually describes a “third form of death, added by the gospel: death in Christ, death defeated, death as experienced in and through Christ.” (p. 45).

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1975), p. 5.

usually think of individual persons when we think of dying, or maybe pets and other animals, perhaps even flora and fauna, the process of dying also happens to other things which may not come so readily to mind: such as dreams and hopes, empires, friendships, organizations, companies, clubs, and ~~church congregations~~. These ephemeral, conceptual things which die are more difficult to comprehend as going through the process of “dying,” since in the cases of these ephemeral ideas, the “body” left behind by the departing “soul” is not always physical, and is certainly not just a human body. For example, what does it look like when our hopes die? It will likely affect our attitudes and behaviors, but no “body” is left behind. What happens when an empire dies? In the case of an empire, at least, there may be broken, buried artifacts to be uncovered later by archeologists, but it is more difficult to take into account the economic, artistic, militaristic, and macro-psychological human-consciousness impact which that empire’s fall had upon the world.

More to the point: what happens when a local church congregation dies? What happens to that congregation’s impact and involvement in the surrounding community? What happens to the “body” remaining, made up of brick-and-mortar building and other economic assets? What happens to the other “body” remaining after an organization’s death: individual members of this dying church, who are very likely dealing with the dying process in their own individual physical bodies?

In the face of our experience of the process of dying, in the face of a cultural context which often refuses to even admit that dying happens, and in the midst of the reality we now face of dying church congregations in the U.S.A., this project proposes a new way of thinking about help for, and a new way of interacting with, dying congregations by asking: How can we apply hospice principles of individual medical care to organizations, especially local churches, who are

facing death in their lifecycle? How can we offer a good death to a dwindling congregation?  
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How can we help such a congregation die with dignity and grace, celebrating their work and heritage, hoping in their legacy, surrounding them with a loving family, and offering medicine to dull the organization's pain of dying, and trusting its soul in the afterlife to God?

## CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL CONTEXT OF DEATH AND DYING

Neither death nor the process of dying are discussed in depth in our culture, individually or organizationally. Perhaps not talking about them is an attempt to dull or ignore the painful process of separation of relationship that are dying and death. As hospice nurse Patricia Shirley notes: "Our culture does not do well in preparing people to discuss end of life issues. We use words like 'passing' or 'passed away' – but it's the severing of relationship that's painful!"<sup>4</sup>

In this contemporary Western age of living longer and more easily, when our attitude toward death is compared to previous generations and centuries, death has taken on a new meaning. Since death no longer stares us in our existential face every day, we are limited by our very experience to speak of death-like realities today that affect us *while we live*, invoking disturbing images of zombie-like existences. These death-like realities are termed: "social isolation," "burnout," "loneliness," "boredom," "workaholism," "relational distance," or the "absence of self-care," from which is derived the more colloquial "me-time." In a culture which avoids discussing literal dying and death, the lack of so-called "me-time" may have become a new definition of death, one in which we are comfortable discussing.

This avoidance affects contemporary perspectives on organization development principles. For example, despite the myriad of books in the so-called Organization-Development

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Shirley; R.N., M.A., personal interview, 6 October 2010.

field, much material has been written about *growing* an organization, even guiding it through adolescent-paralleled stages of *maturation*, but little material has been written about how to *plan for an organization's death*. Contemporary perspectives on organization development principles, especially from a lay-person's perspective, tend to extend not so deep as to be concerned about how one's local church fits into and is expanding the Kingdom of God, but instead, is primarily concerned about the legacy of one's own values embodied in the organization (i.e. "how will my grandkids know what I stood for if this church dies tomorrow?"). In other words, the death of an organization seems to be closely linked with the death of its individuals' collective values and articulation of legacy. This helps explain why the death of a church congregation, especially for long-time, individual members, who themselves may be facing their own death, is about more than just another empty building up for sale. A local church's death, as its congregants themselves age and die, is about its individual members' deaths, certainly physically in terms of their bodies and souls, but also metaphysically in terms of their dreams, values, and legacy. In other words, when an organization dies, its member's dreams and values are perceived to die with it.

### WHY IS DEATH SO DIFFICULT?

Death and the process of dying are difficult to speak of for several reasons. First, as intimated above, death is literally not as obvious today in Western culture as it used to be, nor compared to other parts of the world today. Second, death has become equated with "failure," especially in a consumerist capitalist society which values growth and monetary and production flow. Third, as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has made clear, death is the loss of relationship and

control.<sup>5</sup> Finally, because of general cultural avoidance of the topic, there exists no “Vision of the ‘Good Death.’”<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, despite the current popularity of the term “Sustainability” in social-revitalization and ecology 2011 by aaron mcdonald movements, it is rarely discussed in anthropological, let alone organizational terms, regarding the necessity of death and the process of dying *as part of sustainability*. After all, even from a simple organic, biological perspective, we know intuitively, as Dr. Dwight Friesen argues: “Death is a major component of sustainability.”<sup>7</sup>

That said, death is so difficult, because the relationship is severed. There is a dramatic transition of relationship between the living and the dying, often thought of as an absence of relationship. Death changes our relationships.

## HOSPICE THEOLOGY OF AFTERLIFE, DEATH, AND DYING

How can the field of Hospice Care help us deal better with death and dying? Death and dying are natural, not simply unavoidable. This perspective allows us to embrace the process of dying, in all its ugliness, as a beautiful and necessary thing, even to bless it, and possibly to enjoy it. This is the beginning of a Hospice theology of afterlife.

One of the unique strengths of Hospice Care is that it helps us *pre*-pare for the dying process. Natural death is potentially far less traumatic than unnatural death (e.g. premature or violent premature death). However, since neither are often discussed before they occur, in

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> With apologies to Socrates.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Dwight Friesen, dialogue in class “MDiv Practicum 2 (section 1)” for Mars Hill Graduate School, 6 December 2010.

Western culture, the potential increases for both of them to be traumatic, simply by nature of surprise and general unpreparedness. On the other hand, if natural death were discussed openly and preparation was made for natural death (as Hospice Care does) then neither death nor dying would surprise us. If dying congregations could discuss, like Hospice Care leads its patients to do, preparation for death in terms of relationship-mending, relationship-strengthening, story re-telling, authentic conversation about fears and hopes for the afterlife, and anxiety-reducing planning of healthcare and memorial services, then the severing of relationship that is death could potentially be seen as a final farewell – albeit painful – instead of a sudden and surprising absence. In this kind of preparation, Hospice Care helps us take ownership (which is not the same as control, for we truly cannot control death) of our own death and process of dying. As veteran Hospice nurse, Patricia Shirley firmly contends: “There is something healthy in taking ownership of one’s own death.”<sup>8</sup>

## CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF AFTERLIFE, DEATH, AND DYING: WE TRUST OUR SOULS TO GOD

What does it mean as a Christian to experience the process of dying? And what does it mean for a local congregation, a body, of Christians to experience the process of dying?

The first step in developing a Christian theology of afterlife, death, and dying, is to note, along with many other religions, that to die does not equal ceasing to be, but instead is a leaving, a graduation, a portal between here and the after-life, a passing, a separation. The Christian hope comes distinctly here, that the *telos* of the “passing” through death is bodily resurrection. One of

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<sup>8</sup> Shirley, personal interview, 6 October 2010.

the questions confronting the current project is: Is this hope of bodily resurrection applicable to church congregational death?

A Biblical theology of death leads us to understand three things: First, that although all things die (death), God's power has defeated true Death, that is, the Curse of separation from God (Death). Second, we understand that God uses even this Curse of Death and physical death, both, to reveal God's Self and to relate to all of Creation in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and to sustain all of Creation ("unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies..."). Third, God desires to redeem all things, including resurrecting our human bodies.

Finally, in setting the groundwork for a Biblical theology of death, it is important to name what we do *not* come to know from a Biblical theology of death: namely, whether animals have souls, what happens to any soul after death, the timeline of what happens to a soul or a body after death, and even, to some extent, what happens to the human body after death (e.g. "Is DNA reconstructed yet imbued with more holy power, or is an entirely new body formed when we are resurrected"?).

A Biblical theology of death allows no sure footing. In fact, the Bible does not even exactly explain Death's origins, why *it* was given as a curse, and not some other punishment. On the one hand, Death and death were first a curse from God as a consequence for disobedience in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3.19). On the other hand, it was through Jesus' death that Death was defeated (1 Corinthians 15.55), and the possibility of death reversed in resurrection made possible (Romans 6.5, c.f. 1 Corinthians 15.52), all of this according to God's plan from the foundations of the world (Hebrews 11.10, 39-40). Therefore we are left with the confusing sense that although God never desired Death, God intended it all along.

As we trace God’s broader story through the Bible – the story describing God continually attempting to restore relationship with humanity – we see a beautiful, but strange redemption by God, even of this curse of Death. The story goes like this: Sin led to Death, which led to the Law’s grace, which led to Jesus being condemned and crucified according to the Law’s ultra-holy requirements which he was accused of transgressing.<sup>9</sup> Thus, God redeemed Death by dying. Now, Death is no longer the capitalized “D” evil power of “Death,” but is simply the lower-case natural experience of “death” (or more properly, the verb “dying,” highlighting the experiential process of death).<sup>10</sup> God has taken away Death’s sting and redeemed Evil’s power so that it is now simply death (or dying), the transitory step from this life to the next. In other words, Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection have defeated Death (separation from God), and redeemed the curse of dying (the process of cellular deterioration) into the means by which we can be joined to God more closely!

It is precisely at this point that a Biblical theology of death becomes truly hazy. What actually happens after death (i.e. after the process of *dying*)? This question matters immensely, for the answers seem to actually help us determine how to *live* in the present. For an extreme example, if nothing happens after dying, then we can pronounce, with a common ancient Roman Stoics’ tomb plaque: “‘*Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo.*’ (I was not, I was, I am not, I don’t care).”<sup>11</sup> Yet the desire to know what happens after death requires a question aimed at the very presupposition behind our desire to know: Why do we need to know what happens after death in order to obediently live the way God has commanded us to live presently? In absence of a clear

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<sup>9</sup> Ironically, Jesus was condemned to death by religious leaders who used their non-grace-filled interpretation of *the same Law*!

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>11</sup> Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 20. Quoted in Thomas G. Long *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 60.

answer, we are left living in and expanding the present Kingdom of God come to Earth, while we hope for the eventual fulfillment of that Kingdom in the afterlife. Unfortunately, living in the middle of this tension is difficult. It seems that the reactions against this tension-filled way of living are either to indulge solely in the present, or to long solely for the future, instead of both. We see dying congregations either indulging solely in the present by working very hard to maintain things “as they have always been,” or we see congregations longing solely for a successful future, having given up hoping for joy and effectiveness in the present.

God is not even very clear on the subject, in terms of choosing a “side”; neither indulging solely in the present nor longing solely for the future. On one hand, God promises that the next life, after death, is more important than this life, and furthermore, that the *next life’s* rewards and punishments ought to motivate us to obedience in our Earthly *present* living.

On the other hand, God promises to redeem all that we know presently – all of Creation, including our mortal bodies – in the final resurrection (see John 11.25 and Hebrews 9.28). This “other hand” helps us see our embodied present as good, and to love it, and to realize that the Kingdom is already at work, revealing Itself by redeeming all things even now.

### **Jewish Roots of Christian Theology of Afterlife, Death, and Dying**

Let us examine the Jewish roots of any Christian theology of death. Michael Kerrigan writes, in *The History of Death*,

In early centuries at least, Judaism was remarkably vague about the destination of the dead, who seem, indeed, to have been out of sight and out of mind.<sup>12</sup>

The Hebrew Scriptures describe death as “sleeping,” and those who are dead as “sleeping with their ancestors.” There are biblical references to the Hebrew concept of “Sheol,” the place of the dead, but its definition is not terribly specific (even the belly of Jonah’s large fish is called “Sheol”<sup>13</sup>), which is why translators of the Greek Septuagint easily translated “Sheol” as “Hades,” the Greek conception of the underworld where the dead lived and ruled. Talmudic references to “Abraham’s bosom” were understood as synonymous with paradise, and thus Shalom and God’s presence; this understanding is even preached by Jesus in Luke 16. 19-31,<sup>14</sup> which happens to be the only reference to “Abraham’s bosom” in the Christian canon.<sup>15</sup>

The Psalms seem to clearly delineate between God’s judgment and wrath reserved for the disobedient and evil and the rest and protection afforded those who remain faithful to God’s commands, although at times it is unclear as to whether the language connotes judgment in the present, or in the afterlife, or both.

By the time we arrive at the New Testament, Matthew, a very Jewish author, likely writing to Jews, introduces us wholeheartedly, more so than the other gospels, to the concept of

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Kerrigan, *The History of Death: Burial Customs and Funeral Rites, From the Ancient World to Modern Times* (Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press, 2007), p. 72.

<sup>13</sup> See Jonah 2.2-3. Note the poetic alliteration of שָׁ, which may have more to do with the word choice of “Sheol” than a theological consideration.

<sup>14</sup> It is unclear as to whether Jesus is using the character of Abraham and the setting of a dead person’s presence with Abraham to make his point about the prophets bearing witness to himself, and/or whether Jesus is sanctioning the concept of Abraham’s bosom as true simply by telling a parable about it. Of course, a further element in question is whether Jesus is sanctioning the idea of Hell, a place of eternal suffering, simply by telling a parable involving such a description.

<sup>15</sup> For a brief overview of how confusing are the multiple terms for biblical afterlife locations, and for a curiously *certain* opinion on their definitions and implications, see, among other websites: <<http://www.gotquestions.org/sheol-hades-hell.html>>.

separation between the righteous and the unrighteous; for example, naming “gnashing of teeth” six times and “darkness” three times (Matthew 8.12; 13.42; 13.50; 22.13; 24.51; and 25.30) as descriptive of what it is like for the unrighteous to be banished from God’s presence.

Jesus taught that heavenly rewards and treasures ought to motivate us on earth (see following section for more complete analysis).

The apostle Paul wrote plainly that he believed a bodily resurrection, in the same power which raised Jesus from the dead, promised for our future is motivation enough for us to continue loving God and each other (1 Corinthians 15.42) as we wait in the present for all of Creation, including our bodies, to be redeemed (Romans 8.22).<sup>16</sup>

But somewhere between Paul and the Protestant Missionary Movements of the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries, there crept in a different interpretation of the hope represented by our afterlife with Christ and the resurrection of our bodies.

### **Western Missiology of a Christian Theology of Afterlife, Death, and Dying**

The history of Christian biblical interpretation toward a Biblical theology of death leads us to a case study, of sorts, demonstrating the ill-effects of a certain type of theology of Death, summarized by the words of a well-known gospel song: “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through.”<sup>17</sup>

This theology of death has greatly affected Christian missionary efforts since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, paving the way for a “save your hide before it’s tanned” (similarly called “turn or

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<sup>16</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Words and Music by Albert E. Brumley, 1965 – © Albert E. Brumley & Sons. For a truly quaint MIDI version of this hymn, visit <<http://my.homewithgod.com/heavenlymidis2/nothome.html>>. Note, although this song was published in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, its sentiment pervaded Christian Missions centuries prior.

burn”) Missiology. This message breeds fear of death – due to the “last chance” that life on earth represents for knowing and choosing God as one’s Savior – but strangely, it simultaneously breeds an embrace of death<sup>18</sup> for those who have entered into correct relationship with God, since one’s eternal afterlife is secured on that same basis (that is, a believer is secure in the presence of God in the afterlife). However, this “embrace” of death often seems to come at the expense of all else in the present, including one’s physical body, and certainly natural creation, since according to this view, one’s immaterial soul, and its relationship with God, are the primary concern, instead of the embodied human or the rest of Creation (both of which will decay and/or be destroyed when God comes in the Last Days to judge and to recreate Heaven and Earth).<sup>19</sup>

Sadly, As James Engel and William Dyrness observe, in their book *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?*, this de-emphasis on the embodied present has also allowed Western (political) imperialism models of church growth to annex indigenous cultural expressions of the Gospel and Church practice and replace them with very Western ideals and practices, even Western funeral rites and Western theology of the afterlife and Western ideals of the dichotomized souls and bodies, all because the embodied present (including indigenous culture) has been trodden beneath the primacy of saving souls from eternal damnation after death.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Embrace of Death is well-known in many so-called “Shame-based cultures,” where courage is the highest virtue, even above life. For one example of this, consider the poetic description of the ancient King Leonidas addressing his Spartans with “Undaunted valour, and contempt of death,” according to Book I of *Leonidas: A Poem*, by Richard Glover (London: “Printed for R. Dodsley, at Tully’s Head in Pallmall,” 1737), p. 10. Accessed 11 November 2010 from Google Books: [http://books.google.com/books?id=xU8JAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=leonidas+contempt+death&source=bl&ots=R3ij4NOQJh&sig=hENQvUjPFjhbqvioXvxQ56wXJ8&hl=en&ei=rzncTJydBpD0swOi5onlAw&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=leonidas%20contempt%20death&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=xU8JAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=leonidas+contempt+death&source=bl&ots=R3ij4NOQJh&sig=hENQvUjPFjhbqvioXvxQ56wXJ8&hl=en&ei=rzncTJydBpD0swOi5onlAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=leonidas%20contempt%20death&f=false).

<sup>19</sup> Platonic separation between Material and Immaterial, Body and Soul are obvious influences on Western Christian theology of death and afterlife. See Donald Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), see p. 21.

Where did this Mission theology draw from biblically? Certainly Jesus' own life and teaching did not demonstrate this same emphasis, that is, the primacy of avoidance of damnation.

As Engel and Dyrness assert:

The goal of Christ's Great Commission is not simply to provide a lifeboat for lost souls [ala D. L. Moody]. It is nothing less than creation of *communities of common people doing uncommon deeds* [italics original].<sup>21</sup>

This definition of "missions" radically moves the motivation of Christian mission away from saving individual souls from damnation to communally experiencing and using the power of God to transform the present, as argued eloquently by N. T. Wright in various writings.<sup>22</sup> Thinking of "missions" this way closely mirrors Jesus' own lifestyle, as well as the descriptions of the early Church as it grew, recorded in the book of Acts. Both Jesus and the early Church focused on the present proclamation of God's Good News, that is, the Kingdom is *here, now*, even *in you*, for the purpose of revealing this Kingdom throughout the world, first in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, then the ends of the Earth (Acts 1.8), instead of the avoidance of damnation after death.

### **Jesus' Theology of Afterlife, Death, and Dying**

However, before we foam at the mouth over imperialistic Christian Missiology, and the very real harm this has certainly caused in the world (especially increasing negative perceptions

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<sup>21</sup> James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Wright's *Surprised By Hope*, p. 5.

of present geographical location and present embodiment), we must return to wrestle with Jesus' own words about avoiding punishment in the afterlife, recorded in such writings as the Sermon on the Mount, where, according to Dale Allison, "Jesus asks people to behave in a certain way in order to enter the kingdom of heaven and avoid eschatological condemnation."<sup>23</sup> Jesus *did* preach avoidance of eternal damnation, even if he did not focus on it. Jesus' definition of a holy life was actually an *ultra* holy life, where even anger and lust are damnable, not just murder and adultery. Jesus' motivation for living such a holy life was often heavenly reward:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6.1-4).

Apparently, even Jesus taught that the afterlife was about reward. This smacks of fodder for Christian imperial foundations. But is there another way to interpret this? Some are desperately asking: how does Matthew 6.1-4 help us develop a more present, and embodied

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<sup>23</sup> Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination*, in the series: "Companions to the New Testament," ed. Charles Talbert (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), p. 160.

theology of life *and* death which is not focused on “turn or burn” Missiology, and the associated escapism from the present?

To make matters more confusing, we must contend with Jesus’ own words about the transitory and seemingly “less important” realm of embodied present when he says:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? (Matthew 6.25)

And again, when Jesus was arrested and did not defend himself: “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world...’” (John 18:36). Fortunately, for our argument, Jesus at least mentions in Matthew 6.25 that the body is “important.” Yet theologians and other interpreters have read, preached, and believed a subtle teaching remains behind Jesus’ words: This world does not matter as much as the next world.

*This world does not matter as much as the next world.*

This assumption lies at the center for an understanding of how a Christian theology of Death which regards the afterlife higher than the present, *to the detriment of the present*, has become formed throughout the centuries of biblical interpretation. Nor did it take long in Christian history for this idea to surface.

Not long after Jesus ascended from the Earth, various Gnostic writings attempted to explain Jesus’ incarnation-death-resurrection in purely spiritual terms, greatly distinguishing between the certain human body called “Jesus’ body” and Jesus the spiritual entity, the Son of God, who inhabited that body (among other theories). Their point was that this world does not matter as much as the next world.

Much later in history, and oceans distant, Sojourner Truth named herself thus because of her view that she was just a visitor on Earth, soon to be taken to heaven to be with Jesus. Michael Kerrigan, also mentioning Sojourner Truth, declares:

Evangelical Christians have often taken very seriously the belief that their mortal existence is just a preparation for the life that matters, the one that they will lead with their God in the hereafter. Such a view would sit well with the beliefs of the animists of Madagascar, for whom... Real life begins when that burden is laid down and the unencumbered soul is free to join the ancestors.<sup>24</sup>

Is this the culmination of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Biblical theology of death: a Platonian (or Gnostic, or Stoic) concept of the “holier” soul finally freed from the “baser” body? In the names of Annie Dillard and Wendell Berry *let it not be so!*<sup>25</sup> For, as Dillard and Berry show us, all that God created was first described this way: “...and God saw that it was good.” Dying, then, cannot be for the purpose of escaping this “bad” materiality. Yet, also, we know that dying cannot be for the sole purpose of rotting into nothingness or nonexistence. For the Bible teaches that we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (see Micah 6.8) *in the present*, and that we love God and neighbor more than we love ourselves (see Matthew 22.34ff), in this brief time we have on Earth, precisely *because* our bodies will live eternally, where we will live in relationship with both God and neighbor, and precisely *because* (though Postmodern Christians tend not to

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Kerrigan, *The History of Death: Burial Customs and Funeral Rites, From the Ancient World to Modern Times* (Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press, 2007), pp. 38-9.

<sup>25</sup> I have invoked the names of Dillard and Berry not only because they are two of the few Christian writers who have developed a literary theology of love toward the embodied present, based on the Bible, but also because they are two of my favorite authors in this regard.

like it) there is real reward and punishment in the afterlife (see previous Matthew texts and 1 Corinthians 3.13-15).

### **The Goodness of Death**

How can death be good? If this world is not as important as the next world, yet we are called to cultivate the Kingdom of God in the present; if both Death and death were curses from God, yet God used Jesus' death to defeat Death and death; if our ultimate hope for ourselves and all of Creation rests on the same resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead, then how can the process of dying be good?

“No one ever likes to see a church close its doors,”<sup>26</sup> said a pastor who's church had recently faced that crises and was still nervous about the return of that possibility. However, after experiencing the joys and especially the pains of living our embodied life, death is sometimes seen as a sweet and anticipated end to suffering. Furthermore, the transition from life to death could not be more marked, and this, as we noted previously, is the kind of marking that humans long for in creating narrative, stability, and healing, even healing from the loss of the presence of the one who has died.

Finally, regarding the goodness of death, let us remember that even that which was originally a curse has been redeemed by God-Incarnate, Jesus, whose incarnation, death, and resurrection defeated the ability of dying (death) to keep us separated from God eternally (Death). Alongwith the necessary passage of death, is the concurrent hope that our bodies will be resurrected, and at that time we will fully know, just as we will be fully known (1 Corinthians 13.12).

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<sup>26</sup> Pastor Don Horrell, Haller Lake Baptist Church, Haller Lake neighborhood, Seattle, Washington. Personal interview 15 March 2011.

## Conclusion: We Trust Our Souls to God

In the end, one of the clearest things we can conclude about a Biblical theology of death is that there are positive and negative consequences in life-after-death based on how we live on Earth, embodied as we are, in the present.

Pastor Rob Bell preaches it best, when he describes Earth as the training ground for Heaven: “What if Heaven crashed into Earth today? Would you be ready for Heaven?”<sup>27</sup> Thus, we practice loving self, God, and others while we live on Earth, so that when we die, loving the same beings will not be so challenging, or surprising.<sup>28</sup> This theology’s of death implication for the proposed practice of hospice care for dying congregations is that we must take seriously our present experience, including the experience of dying, whether as individuals or as organizations, and we must engage our experience in love, with the hope that we will be better equipped to love more deeply and be loved more deeply in the afterlife, both as individuals and organizations. This means that a hospice nurse for dying congregations must be willing to lead the dying congregation and local supporting congregations into an awareness of that congregation’s death (or at least its dying process even if that process leads to restoration of life in the present instead of death), to the point of conscious experience, for the purpose of practicing to be better lovers in the afterlife.

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<sup>27</sup> From Rob Bell’s sermon series “The Flames of Heaven,” begun January 2006 at Mars Hill Bible Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan <marshill.org>. Available for purchase <[http://www.marshill.org/cart/index.php?main\\_page=product\\_info&cPath=57\\_93\\_40&products\\_id=220](http://www.marshill.org/cart/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=57_93_40&products_id=220)>.

<sup>28</sup> C.S. Lewis also describes a belief that we “grow into” our heavenliness upon reaching heaven in *The Great Divorce*, also implying that we *continue* growing after our earthly life.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross also speaks about death in this type of framework, albeit from a distinctly non-Christian perspective, even titling her book: *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*. In this view, death itself is only one other step in living, for afterlife is only a new stage of development.

On the other hand, the implication of the type of Christian theology of death characterized by the hymn: “This World is Not My Home” has significant implications for hospice care for dying congregations. For example, this theology can be demonstrated in the tenacious commitment by some dying congregations to continue striving to accomplish their goal of saving souls from Earth, even if that commitment is through behaviors, programs, and practices unchanged from the “booming” years of the congregation’s ministry 10-30 years previously, those practices from that era (especially Evangelical Protestant) tending to focus on saving souls to the point of near exclusion of topics such as embodied present and stewardship of the present. The difficulty presented to the congregational hospice nurse in this case is the potential tenacity of a congregation to desire to continue this primary work of saving souls, along with the simultaneous potential unwillingness to focus on “present” things, such as the possible need, in the face of bankruptcy, to consolidate financial resources and assets with another congregation in order to increase the potential for *long-term* kingdom-building work with God.

The true work of dying, according to our growing model of hospice care for dying congregations, is a focus on the organization’s past and present life, including the dying process. Where does this leave the future of the congregation? In summary of this excursus on a Christian theology of afterlife, death, and dying: we trust our souls to God.

Oddly, then, we have answered the question of “What is a Biblical theology of Death and dying?” with a statement about a Biblical theology of Life. This is most appropriate, since besides the Bible’s focus on stories and teachings about persons and peoples living life on Earth with God, a second thing the Bible emphasizes is trust in God, as a good Parent, for the things we need most. Therefore, in our faithful and loving living on Earth and in our painful and relieving transition through the redeemed process of dying, we trust God to fulfill the promises

God has made to care for our souls and resurrect our bodies, in the power of God's Son, Jesus, no matter when, how, or why that happens. Truly, we trust our souls to God.

DYING ORGANIZATIONS ARE LIKE DYING PEOPLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH A  
HOSPICE NURSE WHO ALSO PHILOSOPHIZES ABOUT ORGANIZATION  
DEVELOPMENT

Dying organizations are like dying people. Parallels can be drawn between individual life-cycle and organizational life-cycle, including death. For example, not only do individuals experience birth, maturation, aging, dying, and death, but so do organizations, particularly church congregations. Organizations and individuals are similar in at least three meaningful ways: First, an organization – truly the essence of an organization – is a vision, an idea, or an expression, and is ephemeral much like a human soul or personality.<sup>29</sup> Second, as organizations transition – for example, into a stage of dying – they must do so with much dialogue and consensus, similar to the human tripart – body, mind, and soul – which often requires “permission” from itself and loved ones in order to cease functioning.<sup>30</sup> Third, when organizations die, they leave “bodies,” much like humans leave their remains.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Although an individual's soul, or even personality is the ephemeral part of an individual, the distinctness of a person lies in the same ephemeral nature, but that which is nonetheless self-cognitive and universally recognizable “I-ness” of that individual. Similarly, an organization can be spoken of in terms of a distinctive “ethos,” or organizational personality.

<sup>30</sup>“It seems dying people need permission to die.” Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, *Final Gifts* (New York: Bantam, 1993), p.71. This idea is also cited in other Hospice care-givers' books and in Kübler-Ross' work.

<sup>31</sup>It could be argued that buildings and other physical assets, paperwork, and finances are not the lifeless “body” of an organization left behind after it dies, primarily because an individual also leaves these things behind *in addition to* their physical body. However, I believe an organization's building, physical assets, etc. *are* its “body,” since it leaves nothing else behind but memories in the hearts of people who knew it – and that is common to both organizations and individuals.

The most important *difference* between organizations and individuals is that when organizations die, they leave behind actual individuals, who used to be members of that organization, but who are now simply unidentifiable individuals. Most of the vision for Hospice Care for dying congregations is centered upon the recognition that organizations are *made up of individuals*, and thus, when it comes to caring for dying organizations, we really mean caring for individuals who collectively make-up an organization. After all, as Pastor Don Hurnell notes, ““The church is a spiritual body, but also a sociological entity.”<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, as Dr. Dwight Friesen observes, we lack “linguistic muscle”<sup>33</sup> to discuss organizations and their affect either living or dying. Yet, we sense intuitively that individuals need markers for beginning and ending, as do organizations.<sup>34</sup> And, according to the Christian theology of afterlife, death, and dying, we must go through death in order to enter new life. Perhaps on an organizational level, this means that an organization must die to its old roles and ways of being, in order to enter into a new way of being as an organization with new roles in the surrounding community. Patricia Shirley, a Hospice nurse, leads us there next.

### **Interview of Patricia Shirley: Hospice Nursing and Organization Development**

Patricia Shirley<sup>35</sup> has been doing Hospice and Caregiving work for as long as her own children can remember. She currently works as Director of BEELONG Adult Day Services, a facility for adults with cognitive or physical challenges, or both, with clients ranging in age from

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<sup>32</sup> Pastor Don Horrell, 15 March 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Dr. Dwight Friesen. Personal conversation, 7 February 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Kim. Personal conversation, 11 February 2011. This observation also draws heavily from the macro-sociological-perspective taken by Stephen Bly in *Iron John* (paperback, New York: Vintage, 1992), regarding the need for both initiation and death rites, particularly in Western cultures where they have been lost.

<sup>35</sup> The following section takes all quotes from Patricia K. Shirley, RN, LCSW, Director BEELONG Adult Day Services, Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania. Personal interview, 6 October 2010.

50 to over 90 years old. Although she has only been working there for four years, she has dreamed of working at this type of location for sixteen. When 50 years old herself, Patricia realized that she needed further education to prove her credentials in order to continue doing this work in which she finds such fulfillment, so at age 55 she completed a Master degree of Licensed Clinical Social Work (LCSW). This fact demonstrates the broader determination and intentionality which underlies all of Patricia's life and work.

When asked why she is drawn to Hospice work specifically, she answered:

I find so important the fact that this stage [i.e. dying] is just as important as any other. Head Start programs receive a lot of attention, but not as much time has been given to providing outlets for expression for these people.

She adds:

Every stage is important- I like being involved in this one. Helping people talk about what has been important to them [i.e. legacy] – the relationship and validation of a life lived – this is what I'm called to do; I'm not a theologian. I'm grateful to have a job where I can interface in this way.

Working directly with persons at this stage (i.e. disabled and/or end of life), Patricia says about these people: "God uses different circumstances and persons to reveal his face differently – to smite our hearts uniquely."

If she were not working in the Day Care facility at which she currently works, she says she would be doing more focused Hospice work instead, that is, working solely with patients who are nearing death, and their families. Regarding Hospice work, she believes that:

Most people want to die at home. Most people are not afraid of being dead, but [rather] of dying, and pain, or their bodies doing embarrassing things, or causing pain to loved ones.

Therefore, the purpose of Hospice Care, she describes this way: “It [Hospice] is an affirming service to people.”

She notes (as quoted previously in this paper):

Our culture does not do well in preparing people to discuss end of life issue. We use words like ‘passing’ or ‘passed away’ – but it’s the severing of relationship that’s painful!

This is why she agrees that Hospice work is also for those *living*, for those who are experiencing the letting go of their dying loved one(s). This concept of community, especially familial, support in the midst of the relationship-severing process of dying is an incredible tool for healthy change, Patricia insists:

Hospice Care facilitates life-review, as well as the healing of open relational wounds, bringing closure to the life of the one dying and closure to various relationships in the form of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Bringing together Patricia's love for Hospice work and her love for the Church, she pictures, one day, a diaconate<sup>36</sup> structure where a local church trains and ordains deacons to do Hospice work on behalf of that church.

A young chaplain, whom Patricia knows, told her that he has learned that dying people do not always want to talk, but simply want someone with them: "They don't want to be alone," she concludes, then adds: "The church could help with that [by training hospice deacons]."

Practically, she points out:

Without new families, and younger people [as deacons], there won't be people who have the energy to care for the elderly or dying, even though older people themselves could pray for each other or do things on the telephone – call each other, verbal check-ins for meds, etc.

She goes on to outline how churches could ordain Hospice deacons:

I don't think most people are equipped to do it; it would require special training. Maybe a Graduate program could inform, and then churches could take the next step – especially regarding answering [theological] questions about the 'other side' [i.e. afterlife] – or 'will I see God?' and their not uncommon conclusion: 'I don't think God will want me.'

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<sup>36</sup> *Diaconate*: A church leadership polity based upon deacons – leaders who are established as such based on their particular calling and talents and spiritual gifting from God – which tends to be driven by committees of deacons, and usually oversee all elements of the church's functioning, including overseeing the office of pastor.

Patricia Shirley has a practical and beautiful vision for how to help individuals church members participate in Hospice Care for each other. In fact, for Patricia, caring for a dying organization – such as a local church – and caring for its dying members are one and the same!

We don't do church in general very well – that is, we don't identify and meet the needs of people in the congregation. Unless lucky enough to have a parish nurse, a church just doesn't do good caring for elderly. Often nurses are generally sensitive people generally – sensitive to nonverbal cues, caring, etc., so a parish nurse is effective [at a basic level in caring for the dying church members, and by extension, caring for the dying church].

When asked how local churches can be helped to die well, she responded:

Wise people can help organizations end, and end well, and celebrate, and note ways the group has gifted community and each other... and not feel shame about ending. Leaders need to prepare themselves and congregation beforehand to be able to decide all together when it is time to die.

When asked the question: “How do you hold together the need to move toward dignified death but also the hope for revitalization? – in other words, what does hope look like when trying to die well?” – Patricia related both positive and negative examples. Positively, a Bible study she was part of decided among themselves to end. Her husband, (a doctoral student in educational group processing dynamics) had trained the group leaders in group communication dynamics,

allowing them to engage *as a group* the difficult topic of ending together. Consequently, throughout the process of ending (i.e. dying), members of the group felt less scared and anxious. The group also had support from its church leadership team. For a negative example of holding together the desire for a dignified death and the hope for revitalization, Patricia related the story of the closing of her church in March, 2010, which saddened and angered both her and her husband. The church had been vibrant, with more than 400 members at its peak, but then split multiple times, including “vicious fights over leaders’ personalities,” until only 30 people were left in the large building. She notes wistfully, remembering making music together: “It’s hard to sing together when it doesn’t sound like a crowd singing with you.”

The sad story of her own congregation’s death concluded this way: the Presbyterian Session decided to close the church, which included supportive actions such as Session representatives, acting as consultants or counselors, trying to get congregants to talk about their feelings in a series of congregational meetings. Eventually, the Session (not the local congregation) set a date for closure for the church. The church decided to hold what Patricia calls “a funeral service, basically.” Invitations were sent out and many people who had left the church throughout the preceding years returned to say goodbye to it. “It was a three-hour service, no one wanted to move, they just kept singing all the songs they knew,” remember Patricia. Now Pat and her husband are planning on moving as soon as their house sells, partly because of the death of their beloved congregation.

Afterward, some people in that congregation felt hurt that their feelings were not important enough for the Session to keep the church open. These people were right, Patricia believes, even though these people tended to be “needy people” to begin with, she also noted.

Patricia concludes that the congregation's death was the inevitable thing, even the necessary thing, given the context, but that more people could have taken ownership. The process should have involved the same meetings, but instead of the Session authorities telling the local church they would close, the authorities should have asked the congregation, according to Patricia: "What do you see can continue in this church? What energy do you have to contribute? What do you need from us?" Unfortunately, the Session simply decided and swooped in to tell them, which just did not sit right with Patricia. She is angry with this result, she says. If the alternative she describes had been followed, she admits that the end result likely would have been the same – the closure of that local church – except that members would have felt more part of the process, instead of not being respected, or seemingly not considered intelligent enough to participate in the process. What irked her most was that people existed *within the congregation itself* who were trained and capable (people like her husband) of leading the church through these tough, potentially healing questions as they helped their church face its own death, but these people were never invited by the congregation's leadership nor the Session leadership to use their gifts on behalf of their local church body.

Because of this negative personal experience with congregational death, Patricia describes the purposeful ethos of any local church organization in terms of integration, hoping out loud: "It [the congregation] has a life of its own, but honors the individual lives that are involved." Again, Patricia forces us to blur the lines between the life (or death) of the church and that of the individual members of that church.

Truly, God has used Patricia's passionate vision for Hospice Care in and for dying local churches "to smite our hearts uniquely,"<sup>37</sup> and awaken our pathos and imagination to envisioning a new way of relating to dying congregations.

## A VISION OF HOSPICE CARE FOR DYING CONGREGATIONS

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As Patricia Shirley helped us understand above, there is a close and blurred line between dying churches and their dying members. If one enters into the work of Hospice Care for dying organizations, it is inevitable that one will find one's self caring for the dying individuals of that organization. This is work which requires conscious effort to enter. After all, who, besides a few people like Patricia, wants to be around death; *rigor mortis*, bowel release, the death rattle, the cold, clammy skin, the sightless eyes? Who wants to be around death? Who wants to help people die? Yet for some, like Patricia, they could not do anything else and feel truly alive. They know this to be true because they want to be there at the bedside to hold the hand of those passing from death to life in their final breaths, to accompany them with singing,<sup>38</sup> both individuals and churches.

We come at last to the issue which we have danced around many times throughout this project: What do you do with the individuals who remain after an organization of individuals chooses to die? Unlike the death of an individual, in which case the body can simply be buried, when an organization dies, the individuals who made up that organization remain. What is to become of these individuals? Should they be forgotten and discarded? If their organization's

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<sup>37</sup> This concludes the large section quoting, throughout, Patricia Shirley; R.N., M.A., personal interview, 6 October 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Taken from the title and content of Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

death involved an official merger with another organization, should they be incorporated into a new organization as members only or as leaders too, merged into the leadership team? Or should they be encouraged to live out their days as an organization in “hospice,” continuing to meet together by themselves, not being forced to participate in or join any new organization? Just as we seek to end an individual’s life with dignity, celebration, respect, and love through Hospice Care, so we have seen that dying congregations deserve the same treatment as they face organizational death; this includes caring respectfully for the individual members of a dying congregation. Ideally, then, members of a dying congregation would find a new home through the support of the “familial” support of other local congregations, perhaps through incorporation into another local congregation(s).

### **Multi-generational Congregations: Mutually Blessing Each Other**

Now we come full circle. A vision of “The Good Death” has lead us, almost inadvertently, to a vision of “The Good *Life*.” multi-generational worship and supporting community, including “relatives” and “friends” of dying churches and church members, surrounding a dying church, which includes its elderly or dying individual members.

This multi-generational vision of Hospice Care can be difficult to communicate to both older and younger generations in a Post-Denomination religious-cultural context. The communication block centers around the interplay between adaptability and death. Older demographics tend to see death as negative primarily because it *causes* adaptability. This is negative because adaptability is seen as instability and therefore weakness. Younger demographics, in direct contrast, tend to value adaptability *itself* as strength. This causes older

demographics to see any death, or process of dying, or change, including adapting and merging, *as bad*. For example, the extreme change required in a transition of being cared for by another person or organization besides one's own can easily be viewed as *bad*. Simultaneously, but directly opposite, younger demographics see anything *besides* embrace of death and dying as immature unhealthy. Unfortunately, this polarization can cause younger demographics to despise older on the basis of the older's refusal to "embrace" death and its consequential adaptation, while it can simultaneously cause older demographics to despise younger on the basis of the younger's refusal to "settle down" and embrace constancy.

To bring reconciliation to this cross-generational milieu (or *mêlée!*), we must recover a commonality which we can all celebrate. We find our common ground to be the repeated retelling of the Christian story. This can be very deeply experienced, both communally and repeatedly, by returning to the first Christian funerals, which, as Thomas G. Long describes in *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, were celebratory re-tellings of the Gospel Story,<sup>39</sup> focused on the soul of the departed,<sup>40</sup> and the community's journeying with that soul as far as they possibly could,<sup>41</sup> then entrusting that soul to God's powerful mercy in the afterlife.<sup>42</sup> Long wrote this book, originally intended, as he writes in his prologue, to be a therapeutic aid for coping with death, but it became a call to recover the metaphor of "Journey" within the Christian funeral – to refocus funerals on the dead person, and how that departed soul fits into the larger Gospel Story, instead of how typical contemporary funerals focus on grief-management for the community left behind. Long reveals that the Christian funeral is fundamentally a retelling of the Christian story because, in ancient Christian practice, the theme

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<sup>39</sup> Long, see pp. xvi, 46, 78.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 46, 72.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

of the funeral was the “completion of baptism,” thus allowing all participants to recall their own experience of baptism, and to recall their hope for complete union with God, through the resurrection power and faith of Christ:

The theme of the service was the completion of baptism, and the church accompanied a brother or sister to the place of union with God through the resurrection of Christ.<sup>43</sup>

In the end, Long helps us see that diverse generations of Christians can unite around a common vision of celebration for the souls of the departed. The current paper proposes that it is a simple extension to apply this principle of celebration of the departed soul *also to the “souls” of dying churches*.

To return to the vision of the old blessing the young while the young engage in Hospice Care of the old, we note one unanswered question: in light of this vision’s proposal that the young should take care of the older, and the insinuation that older, dying congregants should be incorporated somehow into nearby loving churches (i.e. “relatives”), What role do older *individuals* play in a their *new*, growing, healthy church?

The answer lies in the intuitively obvious reality that older people have more experience and inherent lessons-learned (and simply more stories to tell!) which should be passed-down to younger people. Therefore, older people stay involved through blessing younger people. Meanwhile, young people encounter death through Hospice Care of older people, and learn from the stories and lessons passed-down by their elders.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

Finally, we return to the wisdom of Hospice nurse Patricia, who, speaking of the parallels between church planting and churches dying, believes that “just as multiple generations are needed to begin a church, so multiple generations are needed to end a church.”

### **Einstein’s Model of Making Room for New Growth in the Kingdom of God: A Stretching of the Fabric of Space and Time**

Previously, it was stated that when an organization dies, its member’s dreams and values are perceived to also die<sup>44</sup>. Einstein would disagree if the same principle were applied to energy. Therefore, to apply Einstein’s principle of energy to organization-development models of organizational death (without his permission), we might conclude that the death of a single congregation does not cause cessation of that congregation’s values and dreams, nor does it cause shrinking of the global Church. In fact, the death of a congregation may actually “stretch” and expand the *principle* of the Kingdom of God, even as embodied in God’s Church. For if the Kingdom of God is here now, and is like leaven, like a mustard seed, like a man who sowed seeds, etc., then it is a Kingdom of palpable metaphor, a Kingdom which is so close that we often miss it with our usual senses. If this Kingdom exists in such perpetual concrete-but-too-close-ness, then it is possible to envision this Kingdom as fluid and dynamic, more so than the properties attributed to our three-dimensional, sensational world. It could be, for instance, that when one congregation dies, it literally makes room in the spiritual realm of the Kingdom of God, or even makes compostable material in that Realm, for a new congregation to spring up into life. This may be near, or across the globe, but the Kingdom of God, like a fabric stretched over the top of our visible universe, is stretched and pulled, tightened and slackened, by the

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<sup>44</sup> See section titled: “Contemporary Cultural Context of Death and Dying”

dynamic interplay of organization development; new births, and also deaths. When a local church dies, perhaps it mysteriously opens space for new life elsewhere in the Kingdom of God.

PERSONAL ANECDOTE: A VISION OF HOSPICE CARE FOR DYING  
CONGREGATIONS

**Call Me a “Hospice Nurse”**

I hope to be a “Hospice nurse” to dying church congregations. I ultimately hope to pastor a multi-generational church where older members literally have their hands held by young members as they are helped to die with dignity and grace, and listen to the wise words and stories of the old; and where older members literally lay hands upon younger members to bless them, saying: “Go. Do. Be who you were created to be. May God bless you.” Similarly, I hope that the ideas, assumptions, and values – often held distinctly by a particular demographic – of the dying generation are metaphorically held and comforted and cared-for and learned from as they die; and where the younger generation’s ideas, assumption, and values are metaphorically touched and blessed by the older generation, saying: “I do not understand, but bless you... because I remember we did new things when we were your age.”

I see the role of a “Hospice nurse” being much like a consultant, except that in the case of congregational death, the nurse has a much deeper investment in the harmonious and pain-limited process, especially given the theological philosophy, stated earlier, that the Kingdom of God is a dynamic fabric of Space and Time, able to subsume death of a church body in one place and time, only to resurrect that energy in another congregation in another space and/or time.

Hospice nurses for dying congregations would be extremely invested in the process, because according to this theory, the more harmonious and painless an organization's death is, the more harmonious and painless is the entire Kingdom of God, throughout all of Space and Time.

Furthermore, I see the role of Hospice nurse also being much like a community organizer. Just as a medical Hospice nurse coordinates, trains, and encourages the primary circle of caregivers for the patient (that is, close relatives and friends of the patient), so a Hospice nurse for dying congregations would gather, train, and encourage other local congregations to help care for the patient congregation. This would prepare the way for multi-generational worship (as noted previously), celebration of the longevity and the affects the dying congregation has had on the local community during its lifetime, and end-of-life-care-directives, much like a Will, making clear the final wishes of the dying congregation for the use of its remaining assets and the treatment of its legacy and memory.

With a loving Church community surrounding those churches which are dying, and their elderly members who may also be dying, and with a commitment to Hospice Care, giving and receiving, respectively by both older and younger generations, and finally, with a common desire to celebrate, journey with, and entrust to God the soul of the departed (both organizational and individual), there is hope for our dying churches and their members.

### **Being Open for Anything, Whether Death or Revitalization: A Case Study of Holy Cross**

#### **Lutheran Church, Ojai, California**

Both the "Hospice nurse" and the congregation need to be open to any result once the process of care has begun, but primarily the possibilities of either organizational death, or

organizational revitalization. The Spirit of God moves in mysterious ways, and God has resurrected local churches before. Take for example, Holy Cross Lutheran Church of Ojai, California<sup>45</sup>. When I visited Holy Cross in August 2010, the new pastor was still being paid only a half-time salary, which had been the case for one year. Yet, the board of directors was finally feeling secure in their ability to attract new-comers – especially through families of Middle-school children with whom the new pastor has connected and begun a flourishing youth group. The board was also finally feeling optimistic to soon increase their pastor’s salary from half to full-time, and to begin dreaming about positive impact on the community including partnership with other community churches and organizations, notably Helping Hands of Ojai, a multi-faceted organization which includes a consignment store and coordination of Meals on Wheels. When Holy Cross hired Pastor Ben Unseth in 2009, they were desperately low on attendees, money, and morale. Pastor Unseth was hired for several reasons, mostly based on the hope that he could help Holy Cross grow again. Neither he nor Holy Cross were thinking in terms of Hospice Care. This highlights a question I have been confronted with throughout my research: Does a vision of Hospice Care for dying congregations inherently lack faith or at least optimism? Is my dream absent of God’s resurrection power and desire on behalf of God’s Church?

Instead of seeing a vision of Hospice Care as absent of faith in God’s resurrection power, I see Hospice Care for dying congregations as a supreme act of faith in God, trusting God to raise the dead. Instead of trusting God only for revitalization of an existing congregation, I see a vision of Hospice Care, as it prepares an organization for death, to be fully trusting the fact that resurrection power can only truly be experienced and applied to that which is dead, that which has come to the end of its own power, and now must throw itself onto the powerful mercy of

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<sup>45</sup> Personal Interviews conducted in Ojai, California 7-19 August, 2010. The following information about Holy Cross Lutheran Church of Ojai, California, was obtained during a two-week visit by the author, during which time the author interviewed the pastor, various members of the board of directors, and members, past and present.

God. As I suggested earlier, there is no way to know *how* God will resurrect a congregation; God may do it thousands of miles away, and in another era. This notion of trust despite not knowing the future strengthens the case for Hospice Care to be an act of faith in God. I conclude, therefore, that this vision of Hospice Care for dying church congregations is an act of supreme faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and will one day give life to our mortal bodies, speaking both in terms of our physical bodies and our organizational “bodies.”

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APPENDIX 1  
**Historical Outline of Western Church's Attitudes Toward Death**

Early Church	– Death Expected and an Honor (Martyrdom and Jesus' immanent return)
Post-Constantinian Church	– Death avoided (Now Church was powerful)
Medieval Church	– Death inevitable (Black Plague, etc.), or Noble (Crusades were meant to unify Christians), when we will receive Reward
Reformation-Era Church	– Death is noble (but in a more factitious way, i.e. “for the cause” of Catholicism, Luther, etc.)
Enlightenment Church	– Death is all there is (physical decay and metaphysical nothingness are more “real” than the pipedream of immortality)
U.S.A. Church	– Death is not our destiny (Inhabiting the New Israel is destiny, death to all “Canaanites” who attempt to hinder this destiny)
Modern[ity] Church	– Death controlled (via health and technological advances)
Evangelical Church	– Death a relief (it is our God-provided Escape out of this sin-infecting planet, and our chance to be more intimate with God)
Liberal-Political Church	– Death is not God's purpose for humans or Creation
Conservative-Political Church	– Death longed for (as Escape), and fought for (as Punishment for injustice)
Emergent Church	– A) Death is a painful and beautiful part of reality: unknown, necessary, a portal to immortality, and sobering agent to our present living; – B) Death is a painful part of our reality, so painful that we will openly acknowledge this without engaging it beyond metaphor (i.e. not actually befriending death)

APPENDIX 2  
**A History of Judeo-Christian Attitudes Toward Death and Dying from Judaism to Postmodernity**

[The following is a paper submitted by Isaac Unseth for TCE 507 Church History II, at Mars Hill Graduate School, for Dr. Craig Barnes, on 11 October 2010, originally entitled: *We're Not as OK as We Think We Are: Postmodern Christianity's "Embrace" of Death is No Embrace, and is No Different from Modernity's Desperate Combat Against Death.*]

Excerpt from "For Death" by John O'Donohue:

From the moment you were born,  
Your death has walked beside you...

Yet when destiny draws you...  
You are quietly befriending your death;  
So that you will have no need to fear  
When your time comes to turn and leave.<sup>46</sup>

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"I'm not afraid of Death, but I am afraid of dying"<sup>47</sup>.

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Religions are often seen as useful in providing hopeful answers to our fears surrounding death and dying. Christianity, uniquely, offers its very founder (i.e. Jesus) as an example of not only life, but also of dying. Jesus of Nazareth's story – the story upon which Christianity is based – is not *only* about Jesus' teachings, miracles, fulfillment of prophecy, nor only his example for how to live, but is all these things and most importantly about his act of dying, which itself provided the opportunity for the life-giving resurrection-power of God to be revealed literally (in Jesus' bodily resurrection; and in the implicit hope for our own bodily resurrections in the future), and metaphorically (revealing God's desire to create, sustain, and resurrect life everywhere and at all times).

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<sup>46</sup> John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> Mr. Jesse Patrick, personal conversation, 17 July 2010. Mr. Patrick, the author's Great Uncle, related this when facing surgery to remove cancer in his 85-year old body.

What happens when we die? Did God intend Death from the beginning? What does resurrection mean? The answers to these questions matter mightily, since what we believe about death and afterlife directly affect how we live (or refuse to live) in the present. For example, if God did not intend for humans to die, there may be a power of Death contending with God (Who is Light and Life). Furthermore, if this power of Death is more powerful than Life, it would explain why we see all around us so much suffering and dying. If one concludes from this that Death is the sustaining force of the universe, there is no reason to live. Despite existential evidence for this kind of view, there is a ubiquitous “will to live” documented in humans throughout history, in ancient archeological evidence of mass human migrations for the purpose of survival, in the annals of wars fought for preservation of state or idea, in Ernest Shackleton’s journals, in the creation of the World Health Organization, and even in what could be viewed as death-avoidance movements such as pharmaceutical health-supplements. It appears, despite evidence of the universe’s entropy, that humans, collectively, deeply believe that Life, not Death, holds ultimate power in the universe.

As stated previously, what we believe about death and dying directly affects how we live in the present. If, instead of believing that Death holds ultimate power, we believe that Life holds ultimate power, we may live in the present with a sense of purposefulness – of fulfilling our Destiny – simply by continuing to live. Religions generally teach that living in the present is not itself the only goal, whereas living eternally, immortally, is. In fact, some religions de-emphasize present-living and venerate eternal-living to the point of degrading life in the present. Religions tend, however, to offer at least some present-living ethical system by which we are to live *in light of* the future eternal life. Often, the motivation for living ethically in the present is either reward for Earthly good deeds or punishment for Earthly bad deeds upon entrance to the eternal

realm or divine dimension. How does Christian doctrine compare to these generalizations about religions?

What does Christianity tell us are reasons for living in the present in any certain way *in light of* the promise of future eternal realities? First, we must note that we are speaking of the difference between theoretical *life* and experiential *living*, just as we spoke of the difference between theoretical *death* and experiential *dying*. Second, we will study Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as the basis of what Christianity believes about both future eternal realities and living in the present in light of those future realities. Jesus' death was seen as a defeat on the "battlefield." As Terence Nichols writes: "Christians have traditionally seen in [Jesus'] death, coupled with the resurrection, the ultimate victory of life over death, of love and good over evil, and of God over Satan"<sup>48</sup>. This victorious view of Christ's death has contributed to the ideal of martyrdom throughout Christianity, for if one can witness to one's faith at the moment of death, as Jesus did, then one may be victorious, as Jesus was, over the powers of evil.

After Christianity's annexation by the State, however, because of Constantine's Edict of Milan, in 313 AD, Christianity no longer faced immediate martyrdom. Later, martyrdom became associated with missionary ventures, particularly to the frontiers of the known Western world, such as today's United Kingdom, or today's Middle East, or today's SouthEastern Asia, and even later to the frontiers of Africa and the Americas. By the time of Protestant missionary endeavors, such as 17<sup>th</sup> Century Moravians, the concept of martyrdom was represented in the fact that missionaries packed their belongings in a wooden coffin, symbolizing their belief that they would die in the foreign land (China or Africa, at that time), or en route. This martyrdom spirit, first in the earliest Christians, then later in the missionaries, contributed to a fervor for

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<sup>48</sup> Terence Nichols, *Death and Afterlife: A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), p. 40.

action and a passionate commitment on behalf of the global spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Christian Church, as it grew more and more established (again, from the time of Constantine's Edict of Milan), became more and more preoccupied with death and with the process of dying, especially as the Church settled down, literally in the forms of church-owned land and buildings<sup>49</sup>, and metaphorically in the sense of 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> generation Christians (and beyond). The Church became more interested in death and dying for a two-fold reason: Because Jesus had not returned as quickly as his disciples had first insinuated, Christians were now passing away and needing burial rites – forcing questions such as: Is there a Christian way to bury a body differently than Judaism or paganism? What happens to the body after death? Is there a non physical part of the body, and what happens to it after death?

Thus, relatively shortly after the ascension of Jesus, followers of Christ had to decide what they believed about the body, the soul, resurrection, heaven, hell, and related issues such as funeral practices. Again, looking simply at the life of Jesus for models or answers, we find some confusing paradigms. For example, Jesus' first public miracle was to create wine for bodily enjoyment at wedding feast (both the wedding and the wine represent physical pleasure and embodied relationships at a feast). Then Jesus taught in his sermons that giving to the poor and having one's eyes opened to very Kingdom of God in our midst, here-and-now, was more valuable than all the wealth we could ever accumulate. Jesus once communicated with the dead: when Elijah and Moses appeared, and Jesus himself was "transfigured" before the disciples' eyes (insinuating the soul's ability to be "called back" to this visible, Earthly realm). When Jesus' "gave up his spirit," hundreds of dead bodies resurrected near Jerusalem, which begs the

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<sup>49</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vatican\\_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vatican_City)>. Accessed 8 October 2010. This article records that the property which is the present day Vatican City was deeded by the Emperor to the pope at the early date of mid-8<sup>th</sup> Century AD.

question: What had happened to their souls between their bodies' death and their bodies' resurrections? Something similar happened to Jesus himself, for his body was dead and buried for more than 36 hours, before his body was resurrected from the tomb. Finally, Jesus' own resurrected body was the same body (as evidenced by the absent body in the tomb), but very different from his first body, for he was now able to conceal himself (in the story of the road to Emmaus), and to pass through walls (in the story of doubting Thomas).

Drawing from Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection, we can see that the early Church concluded four things regarding the early Christian attitude toward death and dying. First, Jesus' own life demands an admittance that the physical body is an important part of knowing God (even in the fact that Jesus came incarnated as a human baby, in addition to the teachings about every day living, such as giving wealth to the poor), and that the physical body is an important part of the hope of resurrection (i.e. that this physical body will, even if transformed, be substantially resurrected). Second, according to Jesus' own death and resurrection, there must be admittance of an intermediary state, where the personality or soul waits to be reunited with the physical body<sup>50</sup>. Third, according to Jesus' own teachings, there is a final judgment which awaits all humans who die, and which appears to be the purpose of Time, when all wrong will be set right and when our chosen relationship with God or apart from God will be fully realized (see Luke 12.13 – 13.30). Fourth, in light of this final judgment, "Death is [simply] what we call the transition to afterlife"<sup>51</sup>, the temporary separation of body from soul, for the purpose of judgment and resurrection to new life.

As the Western Church matured, and became even more established, and grew across cultures and grew more politically powerful (eventually subsuming the power of the "Holy

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<sup>50</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 99.

<sup>51</sup> Nichols, *Death and Afterlife*, p. 54.

Roman” Emperor), so the concept and theology of death became more established – immovable and dominating. Building on Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo believed that the resurrected body would be made up of the same substance as our Earthly bodies and would simultaneously be somehow more spiritual through the soul’s transformative work on this substance<sup>52</sup>. More than 700 years later (in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century), Thomas Aquinas, “resurrecting” Aristotle’s philosophy and showing its compatibility with Christianity, would conclude, similarly to Origen, Gregory, and Augustine, that the soul will transform the body at the resurrection. What Aquinas emphasized even more, however, was the perfect nature of the soul unified to God in the afterlife, and that this perfect, immaterial, unified-with-the-divine, soul would actually animate the resurrected physical body with the same “spiritual” perfection which the soul experienced after death. Thus we see that in 700 years time, the concept of the soul as eternal had shifted to become a doctrine of the *perfect* immaterial soul baptizing and saving the *imperfect* physical body through resurrection at the final judgment. This shift hints at the dualism (often blamed on Plato) between body and soul which has eaten at the Christian doctrines of death and afterlife ever since.

Martin Luther (in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century) believed that after death, souls sleep, without consciousness, until they are resurrected with the body<sup>53</sup>. Terence Nichols points out that this was different from Catholic theology (which still teaches that souls depart this Earth at death immediately to purgatory, although this doctrine has been muted to heaven and hell, yet still immediate), and also different from much early Church theology (which taught that all souls are

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., see pp. 59-66.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

relegated to Sheol or Hades, often separated good from wicked, until the time of final resurrection and judgment)<sup>54</sup>.

Closely following the time of Martin Luther and the Reformation, René Descartes and the Enlightenment countered all the preceding Church doctrine regarding the soul, the afterlife, the eternal, the divine, and death. Descartes was one of the first to publically doubt certain assumed ideas, such as our own five senses. Within 200 years, Charles Darwin was one of the first to publically doubt humanity's uniqueness as divinely created beings. Even earlier than Darwin, John Locke and other political theorists pioneered the doubt that individuals mattered *less* than the collective good. Thus, three major themes related to death and dying, and counter to Christian theology, emerged (and remain) from the Enlightenment. First, doubt as to non-quantifiable data and the limits of sensory experience toward perceiving "full" reality; second, doubt as to the eternal nature of any human's soul; and third, the idea of the individual as distinct from the community.

No matter what doctrinal statements the Church (or Science) produce about death, the process of dying still stings, and so humans have created rituals surrounding the process to ease the pain and mark the passing of life. Although this paper does not focus on ritual practices of dying, it is important to note one example, from the Middle Ages, demonstrating how our theology of afterlife issues affects our practices and attitudes toward dying. By the time Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274 AD) began integrating Aristotle's philosophy of spiritual primacy with Christian theology of body and soul, the practice of inscribing tombs with a name and date began to become commonplace (whereas before anonymity of burial locations was generally the custom for all but the aristocracy). By the 1700's, the installation of memorial placards, often naming accomplishments of the deceased, on tombs was more common. Phillipe Ariés, a 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

Century French historian, suggests this progression was due to an artisan “middle class” growing in its desire to escape the anonymity of living through memorializing their death<sup>55</sup>. We can draw from this snapshot a sense that as the Church wrestled with what it meant to be both spiritual and physical beings, and then began to emphasize spirituality over physicality during the Middle Ages, partly influenced by Thomas Aquinas’s reintroduction of Aristotelian logic, the practices and attitudes of the common people toward death within the Holy Roman Empire began to exhibit a search for meaning in their physical existence, eventually creating memorial placards for their own tombs. 600 years later, by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Death has become an industry, based on this same need to memorialize<sup>56</sup>.

This brings us to the quickly-changing Post-modern present. We note again that present U.S.A. culture generally does not face death, and in fact, tries to avoid it actively through obsessions with fitness, the dream of “retirement” (i.e. living well and healthily into one’s older years post-career), and pure disassociation (e.g. social network-ing via the internet and anecdotes of “losing track of time” by engaging in this behavior). Regarding Postmodern Christians, who tend to be demographically located under 40 years old (i.e., less than halfway to death, according to life expectancy rates in the U.S.A.<sup>57</sup>), there is a similar lack of facing death, perhaps primarily as a reflection of the general culture, but certainly aided by the fact that the process of dying is simply not apparent in this demographic. Not many Postmodern Christians, nor those involved in anything related to the Emergent Church movement, are old and being forced to face the fact that their bodies are decaying more rapidly than ever before. A swift perusal of any shelf-full of so-called Christian Postmodern books, including topics of general theology, church growth, or

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<sup>55</sup> Phillipe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 47-49.

<sup>56</sup> Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death, Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), see the first chapter.

<sup>57</sup> <<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/lifexpec.htm>>. Accessed 10 October 2010.

leadership, reveals no chapters dedicated to, nor any indices entries pointing to topics of death or dying. Postmodern Christianity has not needed, largely due to its demographic, to develop neither a robust theology nor healthy attitude toward death, and especially toward dying.

Instead, Postmodern Christianity deals with death and dying in a different way: theoretically and philosophically, and most often, *metaphorically*. After all, the process of Deconstruction, a “foundation” of anti-foundationalism (i.e. Postmodernity), is a handy parallel to death. Therefore, it is not too much of a leap for a Christian to refer to deconstruction of a concept as “death,” and then refer to the reconstituting and rebuilding of that idea according to Christian principles as “resurrection.” More likely, however, even Christian Postmoderns would feel more comfortable calling this sequence a “paradigm shift” rather than “death and resurrection.” This, then, is the current attitude toward death and dying in the Postmodern Church in the U.S.A.: Death is a paradigm shift, a theoretical and metaphorical transition from one stage of the journey to another stage, and Resurrection is a higher stage of clarity and spirituality. Death is not dying, nor is resurrection living. Death and Resurrection are metaphors, not reality.

If, therefore, death and resurrection are simply metaphors and not truly believed, hoped for, or “lived into” (i.e. how we live in the present based on what we believe about the future), how does the Postmodern Church in the U.S.A. interact with dying and resurrecting? This paper proposes that because metaphor has become the primary definition of both death and resurrection for the Postmodern Church, the processes of *dying* and *resurrecting* (i.e. *living*) are relegated to a vague Postmodern-culture-at-large definition which insinuates that dying and resurrecting are inherent archetypes and systems within the universe, such that we must assume the pain of death and the unbelievability of resurrection are inevitable and therefore, instead of fighting this pain

and unbelievability like our Modernist forebears, we must face and even “embrace” the pain of death and the mystery of resurrection. However, because the word “embrace” is a key word in Postmodern Christianity, it is this paper’s further proposal that in this sense the word “embrace” is still a euphemism for not fully engaging the actuality of dying and resurrection.

With apologies to Mirislov Volf<sup>58</sup>, consider the fact that an embrace may actually be the best form of defense, such as we see in boxing, where fighters needing a respite, attack each other by trying, counter-intuitively, to get closer to each other; close enough to embrace each other, effectively minimizing the distance necessary for throwing violent punches to the point of negation. Thus, we see that an “embrace” of the enemy or tormentor can actually be a form of defensive protection and avoidance.

Although the Postmodern Church speaks more openly of the concepts of Death and Resurrection than the previous era’s Church, it appears that there exists the same, if not increased, fear of the processes of dying, and of living. “Increased” only in the sense that yesterday’s religious certitude created definite (if arbitrary) guidelines for how to live, how to view death and dying, and what to hope for regarding the afterlife and present ethics in light of the afterlife, while today’s relativistic pluralism can potentially create more anxiety when one is willing to actually follow the “rules” of Postmodernity (and there certainly are rules, at least in the cultural expression of this philosophical mindset) by practicing concepts such as Deconstruction to their complete conclusion (i.e. freedom, but accompanied by despair).

Finally, the Postmodern Church, by truly dealing with Death, and helping its members die well, could help its members live well. Death, certainly, is a painful separation of relationship, yet its impending nature simultaneously providing a heaven-sent opportunity to

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<sup>58</sup> Mirislov Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, where Volf explains the only way toward reconciliation between us and the Other is to communicate and behave toward each other, attitudinally, in the image of an embrace.

restore and strengthen current relationships, to assess a life well-lived, to reduce anxiety by planning for details of end-of-life healthcare and memorial services<sup>59</sup>, and to practice give up our own power by trusting in God's loving, almighty power to defeat Death by raising us to new life some day.

If the Postmodern Church could prove itself more willing and capable of dealing realistically with Death and dying; Resurrection and living, that is, helping its members grow old and die well (even beginning the process in their twenties), it could provide the necessary Christian voice of Hope in our culture of Postmodernity, which is otherwise destined for deconstructive despair in the name of "embrace." I hope that the Postmodern Church, itself currently only "embracing" death and resurrection metaphorically, can become the Church *in Postmodernity*, reclaiming its earliest heritage of proclaiming the future hope of bodily resurrection through Christ's power as the guiding narrative and hope for our present *living*. In this way, whether the Church's members are old or young, we can begin to prepare for dying, by truly living, and living like God will raise us again.

While researching, I exchanged emails with a long-time friend about the issues of postmodernity and death. The following is an excerpt from our dialogue, and serves as the conclusion of this paper:

"The Postmodern Church only deals with Death and Resurrection metaphorically, not realistically, that is, not in the verbal forms of *dying* and *living*. In fact, I'm beginning to think that the Postmodern catch word 'embrace' - when used regarding Death, is really just more extreme avoidance than our Modernist forebears, because instead of running away or putting up the defensive boxing gloves like they did, we are actually cutting in even closer, as a boxer does in order to mitigate the distance needed by his

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<sup>59</sup> Ira Byock, *Dying Well* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), p. 53. Quoted in Terence Nichols, *Death and Afterlife: A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), pp. 183-4. See also the nearly exact reflection in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1975), p. 2.

opponent to land a punch, to the point of negating that distance in an ‘embrace’ of the ‘enemy’ (i.e. that which we fear; in this case: Death and Resurrection). In other words, instead of truly combating our fear, like Modernity did (although foolishly, I think, by trying to defeat Death via Knowledge via Science, especially via Technology and Medicine), Postmodernity has simply tried defense via offense, that is, ‘embracing’ our fear so that we don't have to deal with it fully. It is as if we are boxing with the concept of Death, and we assume that hugging it in order to decrease its ability to hurt us is the same as reconciling with it! That's like an observer who, while watching two boxers hug in the 10th round, leaning wearily against each other, concludes that the boxers must truly love each other based on that display of affection! Therefore, I think Postmodernity fears death as much, if not more, than our Modernist ancestors (who, by the way, invented dietary supplements in the forms of multivitamins, etc., in order to help us live forever), even though Postmodernity more openly discusses Death and Resurrection. That's the historian's view. The pastor's view, I think, is going to require some serious thought regarding not just behavioral embrace of Death and Resurrection (i.e. being willing to discuss them metaphorically), but friendship, reconciliation, and peace with both Death and Resurrection, that is, the processes of dying and of living. But that's not a paper to be written, that's a lifestyle.”

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“For Death” by John O’Donohue [unabridged]

From the moment you were born,  
Your death has walked beside you.  
Though it seldom shows its face.  
You still felt its empty touch  
When fear invades your life,  
Or what you love is lost  
Or inner damage is incurred.

Yet when destiny draws you  
Into these spaces of poverty,  
And your heart stays generous  
Until some door opens into the light,  
You are quietly befriending your death;  
So that you will have no need to fear  
When your time comes to turn and leave.

That the silent presence of your death  
Would call your life to attention,

Wake you up to how scarce your time is  
And to the urgency to become free  
And equal to the call of your destiny.

That you would gather yourself  
And decide carefully  
How you now can live  
The life you would love  
To look back on  
From your deathbed.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 72.

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