


CHAPTER 1

AT THE CROSSROADS

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We stand at a crossroads.

The church is, at this very moment, in the middle of epochal change. We are dying, if not already dead, and our future is no longer in the hands of positional leaders. There is an insurgency rising up. It is a church revolution that you may not have heard of, because it is happening way out on the edge. The church is now in the hands of insurgents and revolutionaries, the young and the outcasts, the sarcastics and the irreverents. It is up to these people—the people on the edge—to lead the church toward hope and life. Perhaps you have sensed it too.



My road is winding. I grew up Lutheran, the daughter of Lutheran pastors and missionaries to Mexico, and I love my Lutheran roots. As an adult, I became a United Methodist because my husband, the son of an Assemblies of God pastor, could not handle the Lutheran liturgy. We found a common bond in The Methodist Church, and love the Methodist way and its Wesleyan theology of grace. Over time I became a

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mother, then a social worker, then, eventually, a pastor. Each of these roads is a part of my journey.

Currently I serve a church called CrossRoads. The name is fitting. The church sits literally at the crossroads of Central and Northern Avenue in Phoenix, Arizona. Some people come to this church because they see the name as they drive by, and they take it as a sign from God. Knowing they are at their own life crossroads, they stop in to see what God has to say to them. I love that.

Our name fits for a deeper reason too. Our church is living at a crossroads, just like that which is occurring in churches all over America. It is the juncture of life and death. It is the place where one stands and looks around—north, south, east, and west—and makes a life-changing determination on which way to go forward. Many churches come to this intersection point and just inch along in the same direction, oblivious that they just encountered three (or more) alternate routes to being the church in God's world. They ignore the signs and walk toward death simply because that's the only path they have ever considered.

Others arrive at the crossroads and recognize that what they are entering into is the valley of the shadow of death. Yet they stay there, hanging on to a slow death process that is both known and inevitable.

It is understandable, really. As a social worker in hospital settings, I witnessed people's knee-jerk reactions to the imminent death of loved ones, as they chose to slow down the inevitable, prolong life, and avoid death, instead of allowing for its natural march to come. I get it. It hurts to see death up close.

Sometimes we even put on the ultimate set of blinders: we keep a body alive even though it is already dead. At our request, doctors keep a person no longer living connected to machines that breathe and pump the heart for him or her, machines that keep a body looking pink and alive even though it is obvious by brain scans and physical exams that the person is already gone. Doctors do it to help a family get ready to receive the news that their loved one is dead, and they do it to prove they have done everything they can, so they don't get sued. It is called "life support," but the body

lying on the bed connected to machines is not alive. This is the ultimate push against death. It is an attempt to make it seem that we have the upper hand over death.

After many years of working in hospitals and encountering death weekly, I can tell you that the greater pain is in watching someone you love die a long, agonizing death. And the greater love is one that allows for a death that is less painful, even when more imminent. It puts love of the person experiencing transformation before your own comfort. When the death process occurs naturally and without intervention, it creates a memory of peace. When we have the courage to stay at the deathbed without prolonging pain, we get to see the experience of the “window of heaven.” We see death as a glimpse into the realm of the eternal.

The conventional church has been hanging around the crossroads of Graveyard and Decision Street for a few decades, without acknowledging that the location is death. We have chosen to inch along, ignoring a world that has changed. We have ignored the lack of young people in our midst. We have not acknowledged that we are almost all white. We have ignored the absence of new believers in our midst. We have sent our money “over there” and patted ourselves on the back, ignoring the homeless and hungry next door. We have allowed other agencies to do our charitable, missional work for us. We have continued to live in the Industrial Age, ignoring a culture that is now two ages beyond. We have dug our hole deep, yet pretend that we are alive and well. We can’t decide whether to live or die, so we hang out on life support.

There is a traditional United Methodist hymn titled “And Are We Yet Alive.” It is normative to sing it as a start for our annual gatherings. The title is the central question of the greater church. It is our custom to consider this question of life (or not) at every annual gathering. By “consider” I mean we sing the song, therefore asking the question, but we don’t take time to wrestle with the answer. We just move on to the business of the church. I used to say the answer to that question was a resounding yes. But now, I just don’t know. We are perhaps barely alive, but we have *fighting without and fears*

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within—or maybe today we have *fighting within and fears without*. The dissension is so loud it's becoming difficult to hear the grace. Are we alive, church? Or are we bones pretending to have flesh, blood, and soul?

The problem is that the world around the conventional church has changed. Drastically. While the church has been hiding inside the walls for fear of death and decline, the world around has encountered remarkable growth and change. The church, for lack of understanding, has become a fortress, walled-up and caring for its own, alone. We have done it with our structures, our local congregations, and our intimate friendships. We have forgotten to engage God, and we have encountered only ourselves. And for that, we are at a crossroads. For that, we are facing death.

SIGNPOSTS OF DEATH AND DECLINE

Statistics are signs of what has already happened. They are not signs that point us to a future, but signs of a bygone era. When we read statistics, we are analyzing trends that have already occurred. They are our present-past state of being. While many people get excited about statistics, I tend to understand them as exterior and past, and rarely internal and current. So if you know recent church history, the data that follow should feel familiar to you, and will not come as any surprise. (In fact, many books have been written with similar statistical tales of the state of the church.) It is perhaps what you have been living out in your current church. They are signs we have already seen.

In The United Methodist Church in the United States, between 1998 and 2008:

- the average worship attendance declined by 9 percent;

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- the number of churches declined by 6 percent;
- the number of baptisms decreased by 31 percent;
- the number of professions of faith decreased by 25 percent;
- the makeup of clergy is 88 percent white and 76 percent male (2008);
- the makeup of church membership is 90 percent white (2008);
- the average age of clergy rose from forty-nine to fifty-four;
- the financial expenditures per member rose 61%; and
- average church costs in 2008 include the following: 36 percent building and debt; 34 percent clergy and lay staffing costs; 20 percent apportionments, benevolence, and programs.¹

Weekly, forty-three thousand American churchgoers are leaving church, seeking other ways to attend to their spiritual connection. (In The United Methodist Church two thousand leave per week.)²

There is more. Pastors, once seen as valued and cherished persons in society, are now experiencing burnout as they lose their place of prominence and encounter the inability to perform the multitude of roles that come with dying and declining congregations. One study by *The Barna Group* looked at the role expectations of pastors and found:

*fifteen major, diverse responsibilities ranging from management to relationship building to teaching and scholarship. Companion studies indicated that there was no other person in a leadership position—in business, government, education, or non-profit work—expected to master so many and such diverse obligations.*³

Too many expectations and roles bring failure and burnout. A study of 963 pastors from The United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and the Assemblies of God (USA) showed that one-third of

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pastors left the church.⁴ Pastors and lay leaders are experiencing the signs of strain.

A recent *Huffington Post* report had this title: “The World Is Their Parish: Can The United Methodist Church Survive?” It states that newly touted forms of documentation within The UMC structure, called “dashboards,” are merely new forms of documenting “maintenance discipleship.” Kelly Figueroa-Ray, the author of the article, states:

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, was quoted as saying: “The world is my parish.” He did not say “the people that show up to this particular building on a Sunday are my parish.” The United Methodist Church has become a cushy institution, banking on performance measures kept by fancy gadget dials to help save it from the fate towards which all mainline denominations seem to be heading—slow death.⁵

The signs are everywhere. And they are not boding well for the church of Jesus Christ. A powerful video called “United Methodist Realities,” presented by The UMC’s General Council on Finance and Administration at a joint finance meeting for church leaders on pensions and health benefits, drove home the point clearly.⁶ It outlines the radical declines in a broad swath of statistical categories since the denominational merger that created The United Methodist Church in 1968.

If you are able, watch the video. I can imagine Jesus in our day, coming to The United Methodist Church and flipping over some tables in righteous anger. I can see his fiery eyes dividing right and wrong inside the church. I can see him turning over the tables of the ways we have sold our souls for a bill of goods that really weren’t that “good.” I can hear the tremor in his emotion-laden voice as he reminds us, “My Father’s house is a house of prayer.” I can see a tear fall from his eyes for the state we have gotten into. I don’t sense Jesus is pleased right now. And these signposts are shouting, “There’s trouble in the garden of God!”

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ONE CHURCH AT THE CROSSROADS

The church I serve, CrossRoads United Methodist, is a case in point. Six years ago, it was an aging Anglo congregation of about sixty to one hundred worshippers. Worship attendance mostly hovered in the sixties, but seasonally spiked near one hundred. The pastor before me had worked hard to bring healing to a group of people who experienced pain from the ongoing grief of decades of losing friends who had left the church. The church had been hemorrhaging members for most of their historical memory, and these people grieved the “glory days.”

CrossRoads started out as a church in the suburbs, way up north in the grapefruit orchards. With a dynamic young pastor and his wife, it quickly grew to be the magnet for the community, with about one thousand worshippers on a Sunday. When the founding pastor was asked by his bishop to move to another church at the height of CrossRoads’s growth, he struggled with the decision, and finally started a new church in another denomination. Most of the one thousand left with him, because he was their pastor. A few hundred remained.

CrossRoads spiraled downward. In the 1980s the church briefly rose when the lay leaders and pastor found a way to engage the neighborhood. Attendance returned to around six hundred. But at the pastor’s transfer to another church, which is the United Methodist way, the church’s attendance plummeted.

When introduced to the church, the elderly population I first met were those who had seen these two great periods surrounded by decades of decline. At my arrival, the church had experienced more than thirty years of decline. They were still grieving what they perceived as the mass exodus of people they had loved. So to say that CrossRoads was at a crossroads was just stating the reality. It wasn’t prophetic. It was apparent.

In the first order of business, we took a step forward and started a new service in a new style of worship. It grew slowly. Five years later, it is larger than the original service, more reflective of the diverse neighborhood around the church, and vibrant in its missional stance. There is still much more room

to grow until we are a full house. And when I say “full house,” I mean that in more ways than one.

But there has been a battle. We began feeding the homeless population nearby, hosting a ministry called Prodigal’s Home, led by Mike and Kim Ricker. The homeless arrived on our campus on Saturday mornings. They were fed a hearty breakfast and given a lively worship service. CrossRoads eventually joined in ministry with Community of Grace Lutheran Church and took on Prodigal’s Home as our own ministry. We served together well.

One day, all hell broke loose. The city of Phoenix presented us a cease and desist order, called us a “charity dining hall,” and said we were not allowed to feed the homeless hungry on our church property. The news media caught wind of it and told the story of some neighbors fighting against us. Apparently, some vocal neighbors didn’t want the homeless from “over there” to come into our neighborhood. (CrossRoads sits on the border of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, and they wanted the line of social demarcation to be maintained.)⁷

But that wasn’t half of what was going on. What the press didn’t hear was the rest of the story, or maybe I could say, the *real* story: the turmoil and dissension this cease and desist order caused within our own congregation. It was embarrassing enough to have media coverage of dissension between Christian and religious neighbors; what was even more disheartening was the struggle within our church. It almost did us in.

In retrospect, I can see that feeding the homeless was the vehicle that brought the internal problems of our congregation out of hiding and into the light. The essential problem was simply this: some people were fearful of the changes that were happening (and didn’t want to do anything that might make the neighbors mad), and others were trying to live out their lives as followers of Jesus Christ in the best way they could, including feeding the hungry of our neighborhood. This event exposed a deep division in the church. It was a clash of cultural time zones: the culture of the past and the culture of the present-future.

There was more. The greater institutional structure of The United Methodist Church assisted as we fought the city of Phoenix. They gave some funds and offered support. But at some point, as the real costs increased, support waned. The cost was literally too much to pursue supporting a prolonged and highly visible legal battle, and the denominational structure could not financially support one church at the expense of many others. This was an understandably difficult decision for any church structure to make, and yet one that let this local church know that the reality of priorities is for the local church to support the structure and not the other way around. It was the first time I saw the limitations of our “connectionalism.” The view saddened me and depleted the reserve of spiritual and emotional energy out of which we were operating.

Ultimately, CrossRoads settled with the city of Phoenix. The Rickers made the decision to take Prodigal’s Home back to the neighborhood of poverty, 1.5 miles north of the church. The neighbors who had complained were happy. Our settlement agreement was finalized with an agreement that CrossRoads United Methodist Church could feed the hungry in the future (just not this particular group of homeless hungry), and that we would not be cited, or fined, or disallowed to have food at any gatherings. The issue was swept under the rug. Many say it was a defeat for the church. Others called it a win. I say it was both. But not in the way you’d expect.

The defeat was that one group of homeless people did not have the backing of the church to remain free to be fed on church property. They were symbolically rejected. It told them they were not that valuable in the church’s eyes. They learned that wealthy people were acceptable on church grounds, and that they were not acceptable. They learned that our “love” was limited by funding, by city codes, and by fear. That is a mighty defeat. It must’ve made Jesus cry.

The win was that the church, and the church structure, were fully exposed for who we are. No more hiding. No more pretending. The ugliness reared its big head, and we all saw it in our very own midst. The offender was looking at us in the mirror. And that’s the win. Because, if you can’t see your own

problem, there is no way you are going to have the courage to deal with it. Without seeing and acknowledging our failings, there's no way we are going to be able to find a new way. There's no way we are going to be able to fight the good fight of being the love of Jesus in our world. We did many things right as we stood with those who were in great need, but the truth is, we saw the depth of division and the boundaries in our love.

There was one more incidental but significant win. Our whole neighborhood and city (and in fact, other parts of the world) began to talk about who we can feed, and where people can eat. We had major discussions around the questions "Who is my neighbor?" and "Where are homeless allowed to be? Is this a free country for them too?" We forthrightly debated our understanding of the story of the good Samaritan. It was told over and over again and interpreted a thousand ways. During this time, I was often "found" by a reporter wherever I went, which was a disconcerting experience for an introvert like myself. They wanted my (and in essence, the church's) take on neighborliness versus danger. I gave them what information I could, in small sound bites that sometimes made it on the news.

And if you think about it, this is good news! When we are talking about "Who is my neighbor?" this is good news—even when we are disagreeing. At least we are engaging in worthy conversation. (I can remember various heated discussions in the church over things like what color to paint the walls or the placement of the communion cups. This was definitely a better conversation to have.)

One day I was at a restaurant with a friend having lunch. I overheard the table next to me mention "Pastor Dottie." Now, not many people have the name Dottie anymore, and even fewer have "Pastor" attached to it. And so my ears perked up and I listened in. They were having a lively conversation about whether or not our church should feed the homeless on our property. Were we acting like a charity dining hall or like a church when we fed the hungry? They debated back and forth, and really, I enjoyed hearing their discussion from both sides. After we finished our meal and began to leave, I walked over to the table and introduced myself as Pastor Dottie. There was

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