Evagrius of Pontus and the Demons in the Desert: A Phenomenology of Transition in the Church

By

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To the people and congregations in Arkansas, especially those involved in this project, who graciously allowed me to accompany them through transitions. They have given me their trust, shared with me their sorrows and joys, and revealed Christ clearly through their hospitality, generosity, and vulnerability. The journey has been a gift.

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Introduction

In a congregation in the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas, a crisis ensued during a clergy leadership transition. A recent seminary graduate had been placed conditionally as Priest-in-Charge, with the hope and expectation of all involved that she would become the permanent priest after a year of mutual discernment. However, just one week into this new priest's tenure it became clear that all was not well. The new priest had unknowingly stepped into the middle of a deep congregational tension with origins that preceded her arrival, and the fledgling relationships were hardly stalwart enough to bear the conflict. Despite considerable effort by the priest, the congregation's lay leadership, and the bishop's office, the call was destined to be short-lived. Angry words were publicly exchanged, and the priest left to serve another congregation shortly thereafter.

At the same time, another congregation in the diocese faced its own complicated transition. The rural community this church calls home had once been several times as large, and its demographic make-up had been significantly younger. Now, in the middle of a protracted transition from full-time to part-time clergy leadership, the congregation's members found themselves lamenting the lack of interest from priests in search of new calls, and they struggled to understand their declining attendance and tenuous financial situation. During a congregational meeting attended by the bishop, a parishioner voiced a version of an understandable and increasingly familiar refrain heard among smaller, aging congregations: "If only we had more young families, then church would feel meaningful again. Then we would be attractive." The bishop offered prayers and words of encouragement, but privately felt disheartened, and was frustrated with his inability to provide a concrete remedy to their plight.

Over the past thirteen years serving as canon to the ordinary in the Episcopal Church in Arkansas, I have witnessed this branch of Christ's body change in a variety of ways, and despite the discouraging tone of these brief introductory stories, there is much to celebrate. Congregations have been inspired to look beyond their doors, to listen and respond to the needs of the world, and to proclaim the Good News. Ministry to, by, and from ethnic and social minority groups has blossomed. Local formation for clergy has taken root and offers new leadership opportunities for underserved congregations. Diocesan clergy are collaborative and supportive of one another, ever aware that our common life depends on each other's toil. This clear evidence of the Spirit's work in the Church gives me a sustaining hope.

The Church has also changed in troubling ways. Following the trend of the wider Church, Sunday worship attendance across the Diocese of Arkansas has decreased measurably in the past decade.[1] This has been felt most acutely in rural congregations, but the larger congregations are not immune. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have exacerbated this numerical decline, providing the impetus for some congregations to close permanently. Transition ministers throughout The Episcopal Church have observed a decrease in the number of applicants for open clergy leadership positions in recent years.[2] Informal conversations among clergy and laity have revealed an uptick in generalized anxiety. There is concern about the Church's future viability, a longing for more stable times, and a spreading lethargy for creative thought.

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[1] *Average Sunday Attendance by Province and Diocese 2011-2020* (The Episcopal Church), accessed March 10, 2022, https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/30690. The Episcopal Church's Average Sunday Attencance decreased by 30.8% from 2011-2021.
[2] At the time of writing, this Diocese of Arkansas has eight open full-time rector positions, the most at one time during my tenure.

As the diocesan administrator responsible for clergy leadership transitions and general congregational health and development, I have noticed my traditional methods of engagement and formation lose their efficacy over the years. Where vestry workshops rooted in congregational development theory once inspired and motivated, they now tend to fall flat. Improving signage on a church campus and redesigning websites are still worthwhile endeavors, yet activities such as these don't address members' deeper worries. Even the congregations with the best websites are anxious about what seems to be Christianity's decreasing relevance in society.[3] The Church is changing at the macro level, and change is often emotionally difficult to bear. When our traditional methods of solving problems and restoring equilibrium become anemic, we can become anxious, troubled by unhelpful thoughts, and even act out in ways that may be harmful to ourselves and our neighbors.

The stories that opened this introduction highlight crises experienced in two different congregations undergoing change at the local level. While each of these congregations is situated within the ongoing transformation of The Episcopal Church, and the Christian religious tradition writ large, they also must contend with a more acute period of uncertainty within their own walls. This double dose of change is daunting. I have found myself echoing the bishop's sentiment following his visit with the rural congregation, unsure of how to comfort and guide these communities through the challenges of so much change all at once. This experience has prompted me to question the largely secular methods of problem-solving I am accustomed to using, and to explore ways Christians have historically dealt with existential problems. What might the

[3] See Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated" (Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021).

Christian spiritual tradition have to say about grappling with change, and how might Christians today utilize ancient insights not only to endure the difficulty of transition but also to grow closer to God, self, and one another in the process?

I am reminded of the story in Matthew of Jesus stilling the storm at sea and allaying the fears of his desperate disciples. Not only did he provide calm amid overwhelming chaos, but in doing so he also demonstrated a fresh and faithful way of living in a tumultuous world. The disciples were gifted with a new way of understanding chaos. While a storm is certainly formidable and capable of causing great destruction, its winds will weaken when confronted with faithfulness. The challenge and conflict caused by chaos are less of a threat when we trust in the power of love to prevail. This faithfulness is exactly what the Church needs to endure and transcend the storm it is facing. As a leader in the Church charged with accompanying congregations and clergy through difficult times, I want to build mature, faithful Christians. I want to fortify them in the face of the pain of transition and help them to see Jesus' presence during the chaos, and I want to mature and deepen in my own faith alongside them. I believe the tools to do this are within our tradition.

In this project thesis I will evaluate challenging transitions within the church like the examples above through a particular spiritual lens, drawing on the wisdom of Evagrius of Pontus, a fourth-century desert monk. Evagrius is credited as the first to codify the "eight thoughts," which have been distilled through the ages to become the seven deadly sins. These thoughts (gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride) are common to all, and particularly troublesome during anxious periods such as times of personal and communal transition. The language of sin that has

become associated with these thoughts can understandably ring as problematic in modern ears, eliciting uncomfortable feelings of shame or guilt. Evagrius' original interpretation of these thoughts, however, did not give them the moral weight they have amassed over the centuries. To the early Christians of the desert, the thoughts were simply obstacles on one's journey toward the divine. The thoughts cleverly obscure God's presence in one's life, and Evagrius encourages exploration and evaluation of the thoughts, not avoidance or repression. He proposes a method of self-evaluation and prayer to better understand these thoughts and mitigate their influence. This meaningful, albeit difficult, self-reflective practice cultivated a deep love for God, neighbor, and self in the hearts of early Christians. I believe it has the capacity to do the same for individuals and congregations today.

Might the congregation that chose to quickly end the relationship with its new priest after an early disagreement have been influenced by the blinding thought of anger? Was the priest's behavior also subject to the power of this troubling thought? Could the congregation lamenting its decline in attendance and the absence of young families be suffering from the thought of sadness, caught up in the powerful pull of nostalgia rather than looking for evidence of God's new work in their midst? Might things have played out differently for these congregations if Evagrius' spiritual tools had been at their disposal? Might they have been more resilient, and perhaps even able to grow deeper in their faith? How, also, might I or the bishop have attended to their needs more effectively had we been more familiar with anger and sadness as spiritual stumbling blocks, and with Evagrius' insights into their remedies?

To organize this exploration of Evagrian spirituality and its implications for congregational life, I have drawn on the field of organization development, employing William Bridges' three-fold transition model as a method and as the principal behavioral component of this thesis.[4] Bridges (1933—2013) was an author, consultant, and authority on transitions who worked with prominent secular organizations and churches to cultivate self-aware leaders capable of navigating the complexities of change. Organization development attends to "changes in the strategy, structure, and/or process of an entire system, such as an organization … or individual role or job."[5] It utilizes behavioral science knowledge to manage planned change. Bridges' strategy of evaluating and facilitating a transition process provides an organization development framework upon which to explore the various changes happening within The Episcopal Church, local congregations, and the lives of individuals.

According to Bridges' model, all transitions begin with *The Ending*, whether that be the end of a job, a physical move in location, the retirement of a leader, or the death of a loved one. A liminal period termed *The Neutral Zone* follows. This is a crucial time of evaluation and reorientation where the emotional impact of the transition is processed. The transition then ends with *The New Beginning*, when a path into the future begins to materialize and the experience of the transition becomes integrated into one's psyche.[6] The components of Bridges' model introduce and frame each of the four chapters.

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[4] The two principal organization development texts by William Bridges that I reference in this thesis are *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, 40th anniversary edition (New York: Lifelong Books, 2020) and *Getting Them Through the Wilderness: A Leader's Guide to Transition* (Larkspur, CA: William Bridges & Associates, 1987).
[5] Thomas G. Cummings and Christopher G. Worley in *Organization Development and Change*, 8th ed (Mason, Ohio: Thomson/South-Western, 2005), 2.
[6] In addition to Bridges' *Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning*, some may find author Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) to be a helpful complementary method of evaluating a period of transition. These stages were first outlined in her book,

Chapter 1, "Encountering the Demons of Transition," provides context and purpose for my act of ministry project, examining *The Ending* that The Episcopal Church and its members are currently experiencing both at a denominational and local level. This chapter studies the patterns in the storm, as it were, including an evaluation of statistical changes and apparent shifts in the focus and practice of ministry in the Diocese of Arkansas and beyond.

Chapter 2, "Making a Home in the Desert," begins a journey into *The Neutral Zone,* studying Evagrius as a historical figure and interpreting his contribution of the eight thoughts. Each thought is evaluated using primary and secondary sources for both its personal and congregational implications. The theology of desire that Wendy Farley explores in her book, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*, serves as a modern hermeneutic through which to understand Evagrius' spiritual system, and is a key element of the theological component of this thesis.

Chapter 3, "Congregations in Conversation with Evagrius," continues the journey through *The Neutral Zone* as a record and evaluation of the act of ministry I undertook. As a phenomenological exercise, I introduced Evagrius' thoughts to four different groups of people experiencing *The Neutral Zone* phase of transition. At the most basic level, I hoped to better understand what it is like, emotionally and spiritually, for individuals to exist in a state of transition. There is also a strong ethnographic element to this research in that the culture of these groups collectively reflect an experience of transition that mirrors that of the individual. They "develop shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and

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On Death & Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy & Their Own Families, and later in *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*.

language."[7] The members of St. Nicholas' in Maumelle were forced to vacate their beloved church building and move into a nearby strip mall storefront. St. Andrew's in Mountain Home and St. John's in Helena-West Helena were experiencing clergy leadership transitions. Participants in an orientation group for new clergy were navigating the transition from seminary life to congregational leadership. These four action research-based workshops were designed to provide spiritual support for participants during their current transition, reveal essential themes about the phenomenon, or lived experience of transition, and help me better understand my own ministry, ultimately increasing my "thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness, or tact," as I continue to interact with congregations and clergy in periods of transition.[8] These reflections, along with those in the chapter four, serve as the analysis component of this thesis.

Chapter 4, "Vanquishing the Demons of Transition," explores *The New Beginning* that organically emerges after the difficult work of *The Neutral Zone*. Drawing on insights gathered from the act of ministry workshops and Belden Lane's book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, I explore the transformative potential that adopting a spirituality of brokenness may have for congregations, the larger Church, and for myself, opening the door to a way of love that exists through and beyond the eight thoughts.

In her book, *Red*, poet and environmental activist, Terry Tempest Williams writes, "Every pilgrimage to the desert is a pilgrimage to the self. There is no place to

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[7] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Fourth edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 90.
[8] See Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, Second Edition (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 4, who notes that increasing one's thoughtfulness and tact is a foundational principle of the phenomenological research method.

hide, and so we are found."[9] I hope that by wandering with the people of the Diocese of Arkansas into *The Neutral Zone*, a stark desert landscape of transition, we may come to better know ourselves, recognize our common struggles, and learn to grow in faith and resilience, responding creatively and boldly to God's passionate love for us.

[9] Terry Tempest Williams, *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

Chapter 1

Encountering the Demons of Transition—The Ending

I recently made a visit to a small church in one of Arkansas's rural communities to talk with a priest facing the prospect of retirement. Members of the small, close-knit congregation had sensed it was time for new clergy leadership but had not been able to effectively communicate that to their priest. "He is like a family member to us, and we love him," the senior warden told me, "but the relationship has become tense. Things just don't seem to be working well anymore."[10] This priest's situation is unique in that he is a ministry team priest, having been raised up by his congregation and trained locally to serve locally while also working in a secular job. He came to this church forty-five years ago as a parishioner, worked as a manager in a local business, was ordained almost twenty years ago, and now, nearing eighty, is a ubiquitous presence at the church. He is not paid, and so the Episcopal Church's mandatory retirement age guidelines do not apply. It was evident that difficult conversations would need to be had and compassion cultivated in order to reinforce these relationships that had become brittle over the years. The priest and the parishioners of this small church are experiencing *The Ending* phase of transition, which William Bridges says is "the first, not the last, act of the play."[11] What follows is an evaluation of Bridges' model of *The Ending* as it pertains to transitions in the Church at the micro and the macro levels. This chapter maps the weather patterns within the storm of change.

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[10] Names, locations, and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.
[11] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 135.

The Ending consists of five subtle but distinct elements, which are not necessarily experienced in any order: *disengagement, dismantling, disidentification, disenchantment,* and *disorientation*. Both groups (a congregation, diocese, or denomination) and individuals (a parishioner or clergyperson) can cycle through these elements of *The Ending*. In the case of this priest, my recent conversation with him to introduce the upcoming reality of a leadership transition might be considered a moment of *disengagement*. Just as "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness," *disengagement* is often a moment or event that signifies a break with the past.[12] This event can be of our choosing, or it can be thrust upon us. What will follow for this priest is a gradual layering of emotional experiences.

Dismantling often takes place over time as one physically extracts oneself from the trappings of the past. The congregation will likely celebrate their priest's ministry in some way either liturgically or as a retirement party. He will need to clean out his office and hand over records and documents to those who will be taking up his duties.

Disidentification is a gradual period of re-learning that our sense of worth, purpose, and value is not associated with who we were in our previous job (marriage or location). We are still who we have always been—God's beloved creation—we simply no longer occupy our familiar, comfortable role.

Disenchantment is closely related to *disidentification*, but it can be somewhat more psychologically jarring. This is the period when one begins to understand that the narrative one had about oneself, others, or the world prior to *disengagement* was not necessarily the entire truth. A greater reality exists beyond the one's particular (limited)

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[12] Matthew 4:1-2, New Revised Standard Version.

view. For example, this priest may come to realize that although he thought that his leadership was essential to the future of the church, another leadership arrangement might, in fact, encourage creative thought and new initiatives.

Finally, *disorientation* is the emotional shock felt by these revelations. Bridges describes *disorientation* as the feeling that "the old sense of life as going somewhere breaks down, and we feel like shipwrecked sailors on some existential atoll."[13] Things that once were important can seem to lose their luster, and we face the emptiness created by the lack of what we once were or had. We are vulnerable to the age-old fears of death and abandonment. In more ancient language, the demons begin to attack in earnest.

Not unlike this priest, The Episcopal Church is experiencing *The Ending*, a systemic event that functions as the emotional backdrop for the local transitions explored later in the act of ministry component of this thesis. Depending on one's piety or politics, the identification and quality of the *disengagement* event(s) varies. In a spirit of lament, some may name the retirement of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer as the precipitating event, while others might list the ordination of women or members of the LGBGQ+ community. Others may understand these same events as hopeful signs of *The New Beginning* to come, heralding a more open and Spirit-filled Church. Rarely does everyone involved in a systemic transition go through its phases at the same time and in the same way, making a unified management strategy difficult.

In recent years sociologists of religion such as Diana Butler Bass, Phyllis Tickle, and Harvey Cox have explored the changes in the Church on a macro level, transcending any one event. Cox, for example, argues that the Christian Church has experienced three

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[13] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 125.

ages in its history: the Age of Faith, the Age of Belief, and the Age of the Spirit.[14] The first period (roughly the first 400 years after Jesus's death and resurrection) marked a time of faith or *trust in Jesus*. His early followers felt called to follow in his footsteps, to "go and do likewise."[15] The second age (the following 1500 years) marked a time when *trust in Jesus* gave way to *belief about Jesus*. Creeds and dogma came to the fore and the focus became more about having right beliefs rather than a missional spirit. Cox suggests that around the dawn of the twentieth century a third new age began to emerge. This Age of the Spirit is based on an *experience of Jesus*. "While dogma is dying, the spiritual, communal, and justice-seeking dimensions of Christianity are now its leading edge … A religion based on subscribing to mandatory beliefs is no longer viable."[16]

As viewed from Cox's millennia-spanning perspective, the Church has been in a ceaseless state of change since its inception. *Disengagement* events have been perpetually spinning its members through the elements of *The Ending* and on to the other phases of transition. If Cox is right, the Age of the Spirit, which we currently inhabit, involves a *dismantling* of our experience of the institutional Church. Some church members are literally having to turn in their keys, and bishops are more frequently called on to deconsecrate shuttered church buildings. Bridges notes that *The Ending* "begins with something going wrong," whether that is an event or state of mind.[17] When the old ways don't work anymore, it is time to pay close attention to ourselves and one another, to offer compassion to those grieving, to honor another's experience of emotion even if it is

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[14] See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, 1st ed (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 109.
[15] Luke 10:37.
[16] As quoted by Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity after Religion*, 109.
[17] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 134.

different than our own. It is a time to draw deeply from the riches of the Christian tradition, mining it for stories of resilience and faithfulness. It is also time for hope, for *The Ending* is just the beginning.

The Top Ten

The diocesan staff, of which I am a member, has had its own experience of *The Ending*. In 2012, three years into my tenure as canon, and five years into the bishop's episcopacy, the diocesan office was in sync about its mission of church growth in Arkansas. Staff relationships had deepened, and we had built trust among the clergy and laity of the diocese. Despite a loudening buzz about membership decline in The Episcopal Church (and the wider Christian Church in general) Arkansas had seen slight numerical growth in recent years, encouraging us to try and keep the trend at bay. The congregation the bishop served prior to his ordination had grown during his tenure as rector, and he was hopeful that the strategy he had employed there would be equally effective diocesan wide. This strategy, at heart, was based on congregational and organization development, or "a systemwide application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organization effectiveness."[18] I, too, was a student of church growth strategies having been a facilitator for the Cooperative College for Congregational Development, a consortium of seven dioceses in the southeastern United States that trained clergy and laity in the "processes that lead to organization effectiveness." Also, my predecessor as canon held a D.Min. in congregational development and had taught courses on the subject at The University of

[18] Cummings and Worley, *Organization Development and Change*, 1.

the South. Development was "in the water" in the Episcopal Church in Arkansas, and we were ready to watch our churches grow.

With the help of our gifted diocesan communication director, we distilled our development knowledge into a succinct, pocket-sized booklet entitled, *Top Ten Ways to Welcome the Stranger*. The idea was that congregations could easily understand and employ these no-nonsense best practices and see quantifiable results:

> (1) Get Ready: Can you articulate why you attend the Episcopal Church? (2) Spread the Word: People won't show up if they don't know where you are! (3) Improve Your "Curb Appeal": How we dress says something about how we see ourselves. The same is true for churches. (4) Take Time to Prepare: Worship services shouldn't feel hurried or last-minute. (5) Focus on the Worshiper: Think through the worshipers' journey from parking lot to pew. How are they welcomed and oriented along the way? (6) Make Connections: One of the best ways to incorporate newcomers is to help them connect with others. (7) Include Children and Youth: Your church should be ready for families with children, even if they rarely visit. (8) Offer Transformative Worship: Worship is the heartbeat of congregational life. Don't settle for "good enough." (9) Celebrate Together After Church: If done well, coffee hour can be a powerful way to build relationships within a community. (10) Follow Up: Newcomer ministry doesn't end after coffee hour. Visitors need to know that they have been noticed.[19]

Diocesan convention that year featured presentations on "The Top Ten," having enlisted endorsements from various diocesan clergy and laity on the effectiveness of these practices. We developed a corresponding web-based self-assessment that congregations could take to evaluate their facility with these best practices and pinpoint areas for improvement. I also embarked on a diocesan tour, visiting congregations to showcase "The Top Ten" as the bishop's strategy for growth in the diocese.

Reflecting on "The Top Ten" ten years later, I am proud of the project and believe that the content remains relevant today. Any congregation would benefit from a

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[19] Excerpted and paraphrased from The Episcopal Church in Arkansas, *Top Ten Ways to Welcome the Stranger*, 2012.

systematic effort to welcome the stranger. I have learned, however, that these efforts may not result in the kind of numerical growth that was originally promised. *Disengagement*, typically the first element of *The Ending* according to Bridges' model, came for us gradually over the following years as the diocesan Sunday attendance trend began to decline in earnest.

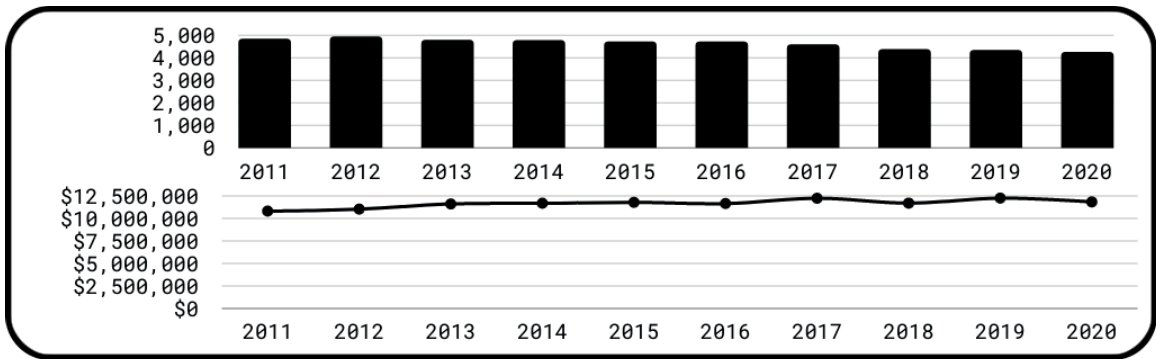

Figure 1. Average Sunday Attendance and Giving Trends from 2011 through 2020 for The Episcopal Church in Arkansas. Compiled from "Parochial Report Results" (The Episcopal Church, 2022), https://www.episcopalchurch.org/research-and-statistics/.

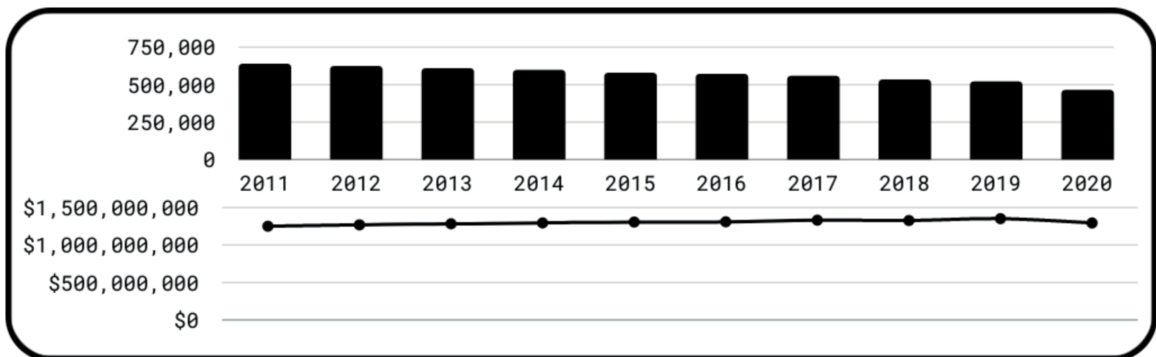

Figure 2. Average Sunday Attendance and Giving Trends from 2011 through 2020 for The Episcopal Church. Compiled from "Parochial Report Results" (The Episcopal Church, 2022), https://www.episcopalchurch.org/research-and-statistics/.

We began to see an approximate 2% decrease in attendance each year for a total of nearly 15% over eight years. In 2012 there were 4923 worshipers in church on

Sundays in the Episcopal Church in Arkansas. In 2020 there were 4244. Decline was nearly 26% over the same period for The Episcopal Church as a whole. Wrestling with these disheartening results, we faced the following basic questions: Were congregations not applying our method correctly? Was our method wrong to begin with? Or was the deeper trend of decline in the Church simply an inevitability? If the latter was true (which we began to suspect) then our basic assumptions about what was possible regarding numerical growth had to change.

In the years following the launch of "The Top Ten," we noticed an increasing resistance to conversations about attendance trends throughout the diocese. Congregations were understandably sensitive to the fact that there were fewer worshipers in the pews. The bishop began *dismantling* his use of classical development methods and metrics, and conversations about attendance at diocesan conventions and clergy conferences were intentionally avoided. *Disidentification*, or, in our case, attempting to see ourselves as a bishop's staff with a purpose and mission other than numerically growing the church, proved difficult. There was a stretch of several years when it felt as if we were simply going through the motions. We were *disenchanted*, questioning our past motivations and initiatives, scrambling to find a new project to motivate us. Our existential dilemma was clear: let go of our old way of doing things and open ourselves to the Spirit's direction or throw up our hands and go home. "Endings are an experience of dying," writes Bridges. "They are ordeals, and sometimes they challenge so basically our sense of who we are that we believe they will be the end of *us*."[20]

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[20] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 135.

Emerging Models of Ministry

For a bishop's office that appreciates data, a recent interpretation of the annual Clergy Compensation Report from the Church Pension Group (CPG) has provided valuable insight.[21] The information in the interpretive document, prepared by the Rev. Alistair So-Schoos, data scientist for CPG brings statistical validation and specificity to the generalized sense that the Church is in a dramatic period of transition.

So-Schoos offers descriptions of two models of ministry that currently coexist within The Episcopal Church, the Traditional Model, and the Emerging Model. Both are characterized by six core components. Clergy serving in regions where the Traditional Model still predominates, such as dioceses in the southeastern United States (Arkansas included), can expect tenured full-time employment at a single Episcopal congregation. They can also expect increases in compensation over time and a predictable retirement date. Due to certain resource constraints, such as fewer and aging parishioners, static congregational income, and rising costs, a new model has become apparent. Clergy in the Emerging Model can expect sporadic part-time employment in multiple churches and to supplement their income with secular work. Compensation increases are not linear or predictable, and retirement often blurs with active ministry. Currently 44% of priests are in the Traditional Model, while 56% of priests (only 36% of which are paid) are in the Emerging Model.

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[21] See Alistair So-Schoos, *Emerging Models of Ministry: Change and Adaptation* (New York: Church Pension Group, 2022).

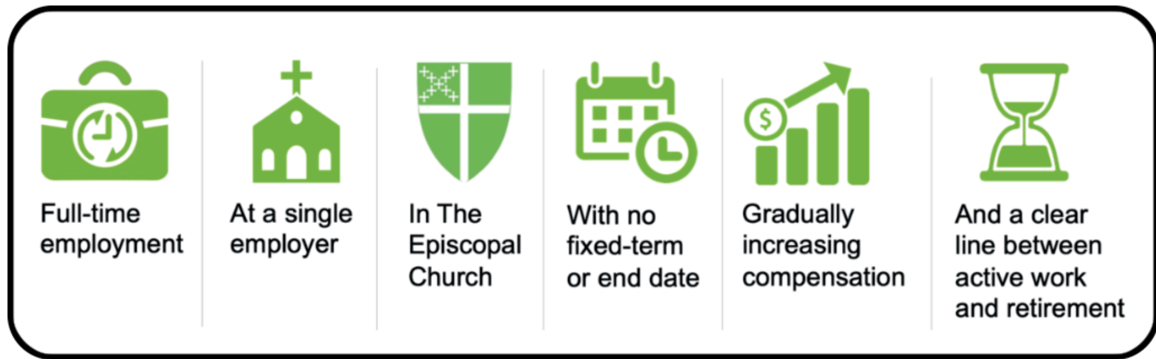

Figure 3. The Six Core Characteristics of the Traditional Model, from Alistair So-Schoos, *Emerging Models of Ministry: Change and* Adaptation (New York: Church Pension Group, 2022).

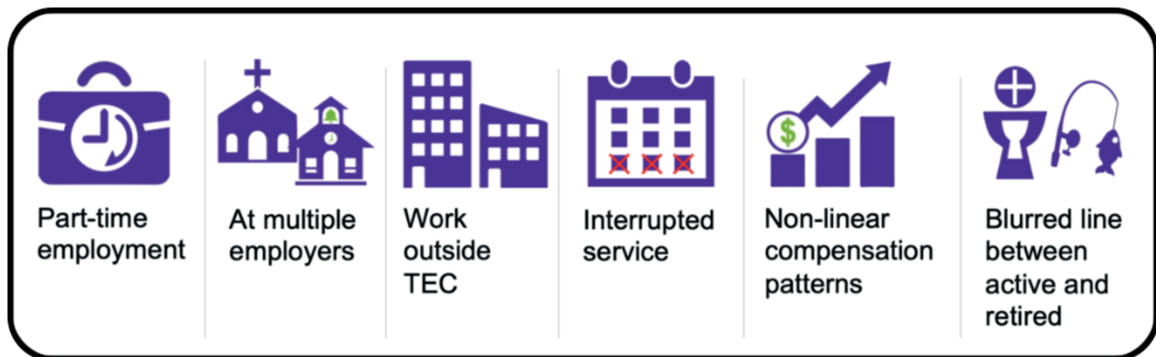

Figure 4. The Six Core Characteristics of the Emerging Model, from Alistair So-Schoos, *Emerging Models of Ministry: Change and Adaptation* (New York: Church Pension Group, 2022).

To better understand this new data and gather insight into its interpretation, I had a conversation with So-Schoos, who introduced me to the larger work the CPG was doing to explore The Episcopal Church's transition from the Traditional Model to the Emerging Model. CPG has long published its annual Clergy Compensation Report, detailing and tracking metrics such as age, clerical order, gender, position, the associated congregation's operating revenue and size, as well as its location.[22] When set alongside

[22] See CPG Research Department, *The 2020 Episcopal Clergy Compensation Report* (Church Pension Group, October 2021),

Parochial Report data (the annual record of congregational activity, such as baptisms, membership, income, and Sunday attendance) the Church-wide change in ministry model becomes apparent. I asked So-Schoos if one could judge these trends to be following a measurable trajectory. At this rate of decline, how much longer might we expect the church to exist? He acknowledged that this was a common question, and that popular Church publications liked to speculate on such things, but that an answer is far from clear. Calling to mind Paul's words to the Corinthians, "we will not all die, but we will all be changed," So-Schoos suggested that predictions about the Church's end were likely more distracting than helpful.[23] There are so many variables in play, such as a church's rural or urban setting, the numerical growth or decline of its town or city, and whether or not it has an endowment, that the only clarity we have is that the church is indeed changing—the best we can do is observe.

To that end, So-Schoos introduced me to three metrics that CPG has recently begun to track: the gender identity, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation of clergy. These demographic figures have been provided to CPG voluntarily and represent only about 40% of clergy in the church. As such, there is not enough data to confidently include these metrics among the core characteristics of the Emerging Model. Anecdotal evidence, though, suggests that as the Church becomes leaner it is growing in diversity, or has at least become more appreciative of its existing diversity. The time variable added to these three new metrics in the years to come will ultimately shed light on a trend many have observed. There are a significant number of rectors in same-gender marriages serving in

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https://www.cpg.org/globalassets/default/assets/domo/clergy_comp/reports/clergycompensationreport2020.pdf.

[23] See 1 Corinthians 15:51.

Arkansas today, for example, and most of our largest congregations are led by women. This was not the case a decade ago. So-Schoos noted that changes such as these may point to a hopeful future for the Church. "The assumption out there is that the only way for the Episcopal Church to survive is to have more people in the pews. That's certainly one way, but perhaps there are other ways as well. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will surprise us."[24]

So-Schoos is on solid, data-backed ground in his hopeful stance. An increase in diversity within a system is known to boost its resilience. This phenomenon has been widely observed in the natural world and within emotional systems.[25] It could very well be that the most fearless, courageous, Spirit-filled, and resilient form of the Church has not yet existed but awaits us in the future.

Until then, though, we are participating in *The Ending* of an institution that has defined our experience of Christianity for (according to Harvey Cox) over 1500 years.[26] *Disengagement, dismantling, disidentification, and disenchantment* have marked the path, and today I suspect that *disorientation* has begun to characterize the current waypoint. The COVID-19 pandemic has added a layer of complexity to the ongoing changes in the church, stressing clergy and laity personally and professionally in myriad ways. Some may argue that the pandemic has simply sped up the numerical decline. It may ultimately be impossible to differentiate the emotional strain caused by church

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[24] The Rev. Alistair So-Schoos, interview by author via Zoom, June 13, 2022.
[25] Permaculture practices reveal that planting a variety of species in close proximity "reduces vulnerability to a variety of threats and takes advantage of the unique nature of the environment in which it resides." See David Holmgren, *Essence of Permaculture*. (Hepburn, Victoria: Melliodora Publishing, 2020), 25-26. Regarding emotional systems, see "the herd instinct" in Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 66. A system that is able to balance togetherness and individuality, rather than tending towards homogeneity, preserves its strengths rather than succumbing to the desires of the chronically anxious.
[26] See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 109.

decline and the challenges of the pandemic, but *disorientation* is an apt descriptor of where many of us are.

In a sense, we have entered the desert without a compass or a map, confused as to which direction is forward and which direction is backward with no way to gauge progress. Ironically, though, this period of directionlessness is precisely what is necessary to rediscover our path. Individuals and communities within the Christian contemplative tradition have a rich history with desert landscape, leveraging its barrenness to minimize distractions and focus more clearly on God. *The Ending* leads into *The Neutral Zone*, a metaphorical desert landscape. It is into this rugged wilderness we now travel.

Chapter 2

Making a Home in the Desert—*The Neutral Zone 1*

As a creative marriage of organization development and Biblical interpretation, William Bridges', *Getting Them Though the Wilderness: A Leader's Guide to Transition*, is an often-referenced guide for leadership during times of transition. It recounts Moses's journey leading the liberated Israelites through the Red Sea, across the desert of the Sinai Peninsula, and into the Promised Land. According to Bridges' three-fold transition model, the Israelites had just experienced *The Ending* and were now literally and metaphorically wandering into the difficult terrain of *The Neutral Zone*. As a leader, Moses understood that a successful transition takes time, often much longer than those experiencing transition want to admit or accept. "The psychological insights of Exodus are very accurate," writes Bridges. "Every time we make a change of any depth or extent, we find ourselves in a confusing no-man's land between the old way and the new for some time." This time spent wandering is necessary, though, as "it transforms us into the people who are ready for the Promised Land."[27] Time is needed for the old way to lose its hold on us and for the new way to "feel like home."

Getting Them Through the Wilderness contains several insights into how a leader can help those in their charge make the journey. Bridges highlights the importance of nurturing hope for the future while facilitating a clean break from the ways of the past, and the value of nurturing relationships and communicating well along the way. The crux of the transformation that needs to occur, however, has to do with what Bridges terms "the dangers of *The Neutral Zone*." This involves breaking away from past attachments, a

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[27] William Bridges, *Getting Them Through the Wilderness*, 10.

process that can be deeply painful. "The fear that an organization will become a victim of its transition," writes Bridges, "lies behind the panic that often sets in when things are changing." He highlights "voices [that suggest] four different paths of escape."[28]

The first is "a return to Egypt," or the powerful lure of nostalgia. Despite the harsh conditions the Israelites suffered while enslaved, a collective memory of the "good old days," even though they weren't necessarily all that good, caused unrest within the community of travelers. The second is "a flight into weird answers." Golden calves and various other idols became objects of desire and promises of respite for the Israelites as they struggled with the pain of transition. Third, "an exit to greener fields," threatened to split the group, peeling off members who dreamed of a better life with the tribes that they passed along the way. And fourth, "an impulse to fast forward," was a persistent challenge. The people longed to skip over *The Neutral Zone* and get to the Promised Land as quickly as possible. Moses understood, though, that this liminal time of wandering was necessary for his people to make the psychological transition.

Deep within the Christian tradition these "voices" are well known, though by other names. Respectively, sadness is the desire for what was. Avarice is the desire for material things. Acedia is the desire for novelty. Pride is the desire to be in control. Although Bridges does not use this language in his description of the four "paths of escape," he, like the early Christian philosophers, knows the power of these universal human tendencies. It is in coming to terms with these tendencies, through the grace of God, that we are transformed and ready to behold the Promised Land.

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[28] William Bridges, *Getting Them Through the Wilderness*, 13.

What follows is a brief exploration of the history of human desire within the Christian tradition. Desire is the root of the troubling tendencies described by Bridges, but also, as theologian Wendy Farley argues, the root of God's love for us. Evagrius of Pontus, whose biography and eight thoughts are detailed in this chapter, echoes this sentiment. "Evagrius wants to teach us to change our relationship with thoughts and to discover the true nature of such thoughts," writes Martin Laird, "he does not want to teach us how to get rid of them."[29] One of Evagrius' sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* puts it plainly: "Take away temptations and no one will be saved."[30] It is my hope that by creatively introducing this theological material to congregations and individuals experiencing periods transition, as I do in the act of ministry component of this thesis, they may come to know God's presence and love not in spite of the troubling thoughts, but through their struggles with them, and that they will grow more resilient when faced with these thoughts in times of transition. The quiet desert, *The Neutral Zone*, although the very place where wanton desires and reckless thoughts are most rampant, offers its inhabitants the chance to come to know God in ways the busy world beyond simply cannot.

God is Desire

Origen, the second century theologian writes, "it is impossible for human nature not always to love something."[31] In fact, love is God's generous gift to us. We are loved zealously, and we love in return, yet our love often misses its naturally intended mark.

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[29] M. S. Laird, *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 79.
[30] *Apophthegmata Patrum* Evagrius 5.
[31] See *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs* in Origen and Rowan A. Greer, *Origen*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 228.

We "pour away the power of so great a good as love upon" unworthy, selfish pursuits.[32] One hundred years later, Evagrius of Pontus refined Origen's concept by systematizing the list of unworthy pursuits into eight thoughts and their corresponding virtues.[33]

These troubling thoughts, passions, or demons, as they are variously named, ruthlessly vie for our attention, obscuring our view of God, which is the one focus that truly will return our devotion.[34] Evagrius names the eight thoughts as gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride, and writes extensively about their intricate interplay with one another. The goal of attending to these thoughts is the cultivation of *apatheia,* or a state of being in which we are not overly influenced by the passions. "*Agapé*," the holy love of God and neighbor, writes Evagrius, "is the progeny of *apatheia*."[35] Contemplative love is the soul's natural state, a union with God that takes on the appearance of a sapphire glow. In Evagrius' words, "When the mind has put off the old self and shall put on the one born of grace, then it will see its own state in the time of prayer resembling sapphire or the color of heaven; this state scripture calls the place of God that was seen by the elders on Mount Sinai."[36]

Like Origen, Evagrius subscribed to the cosmology that all souls originally pre-existed in union with God. Due to "negligence" and "lack of vigilance," however, the souls fell from this state into three lower categories of angels, humans, and demons.[37]

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[32] Origen and Rowan A. Greer, *Origen*, 228.
[33] See Galatians 5:13-26 as a scriptural foundation for the work of Origin and Evagrius on this topic. Paul contrasts the "works of the flesh" with the "fruit of the Spirit."
[34] Describing the eight thoughts as "demons" may be problematic for some readers, as it recalls the Church's tradition of spiritual warfare. One does not need to subscribe to this ancient cosmology to find value in Evagrius' work, however. Evagrius often referred to the eight thoughts as *logismoi* in his writing, which is commonly translated from the Greek as "troubling thoughts."
[35] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 81.
[36] Evagrius, *On Thoughts* 39.
[37] Evagrius, *Kephalaia Gnostika* 3.28,1.68.

Each category longs for reunion with God but is hindered in this journey by the limitations of its fallen state. Humans, as Paul notes, "see through a mirror dimly."[38] According to this cosmology, Christ is a soul like the others but remained united to God during the original fall. Christ assumed human form to direct all fallen beings, including demons, back to unity with God. At the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, much of Evagrius' doctrine regarding the pre-existence of souls and his docetic Christology was condemned as "Orgienist" and, therefore, heretical. Thus his work containing this controversial theology, *Kephalia Gnostika,* largely disappeared from circulation. It is known today only in a partially translated, fragmented form.[39] Several theologians at the time saw great value in Evagrius' broader work, however, and continued to circulate it anonymously and under the pseudonym Nilus.

In *The Wounding and Healing of Desire,* Wendy Farley draws on these ancient themes to craft a theology of desire that speaks to the modern Christian. Regardless of how we became lost, she is fundamentally interested in our journey back to God. With help from fourteenth-century mystic, Julian of Norwich, Farley describes the human situation:

> Desire is a light in us, a "burning light" that cannot be completely extinguished. Desire is the great seal on our souls, marking where we have been "oned" with God in the instant of our creation. This oneing has nothing to do with the peculiarities of our individual lives, our particular hopes and longings, the affliction and misfortunes we suffer. "Caught up in this world of many things," we seem to have wandered far from this "precious oneing." But however far we seem to have wandered, desire is the beautiful, scathing brand that reminds us who we are and to whom we belong. This desire does not live on the surface of our minds, waxing and waning with particular wants and needs. It is the core and substance of our existence, the warp of our lives that stretches us from heaven to earth. We weave the particularities of our lives against this warp, and in this way

[38] 1 Corinthians 13:12a.
[39] Evagrius and Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), viii.

> the sacred and the profane, the ordinary and the holy, become one cloth and one flesh.[40]

From this perspective, desire itself is a precious gift from God, a marker that we are indeed made for God. Above all else, we long to find "rest in thee," as Augustine famously notes in *Confessions*, to rediscover our original connection with the source of all creation.[41] Julian of Norwich, calls this connection "oneing," or a state of being preciously knit to God in a subtle and mighty knot.[42] The rub, however, is that our desire is untamed and untrained, and so we are drawn to earthy baubles which inevitably let us down by their inability to return our love. In this way we are wounded by the very desire that draws us to God. Paul illustrates this counterintuitive condition well in his letter to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate…But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me."[43] Desire is so powerful it often feels as if we have no control over it.

Desire is erotic, according to Farley, in that it is dynamic and constantly in motion, pulling and pushing us through life. It animates not only our souls but our bodies as well. "Eros is the movement that characterizes the deep structures of the cosmos and the soul."[44] For Christians, the holy embodiment of desire is Christ, the Divine Eros, who seeks us out and calls us to God, even and especially when we are desperately lost. The Divine Eros is our focal point and our teacher as we navigate the cacophony of our desires. Through the incarnation, the Divine Eros reveals to us our inherent value.

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[40] Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 2.
[41] See Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.
[42] See Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love (Long text)* 53.
[43] Romans 7:15,17.
[44] Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, 102.

Humanity’s rightful place is in a state of union with God, that is, to truly and deeply embody a love for God, neighbor, and self.

Following the example and guidance of the Divine Eros, Evagrius and the desert ascetics chose to dedicate their lives to the discernment of desire. They left family and friends behind and relocated to a barren landscape that offered little distraction, insisting on eating simple meals, spending days at a time in quiet prayerful solitude, and engaging Scripture with their hearts, minds, and lips continually. However foreign, impractical, and occasionally distasteful the efforts of the desert ascetics might be to modern sensibilities, “these practices,” reminds Farley, “were only for this: to see the image of God in every person clearly and spontaneously, no matter how it might be dulled down by affliction and passion.”[45] Throughout the ages, the goal of Christian spiritual practice has been love.

Evagrius of Pontus

“It would be unjust to remain silent concerning the ever-memorable deacon Evagrius, a man who lived like one of the apostles.”[46] So begins Palladius of Aspuna’s engaging account of Evagrius’ life in his fifth-century work, *The Lausaic History*. After an auspicious beginning to a career in the church in cosmopolitan Constantinople, Evagrius of Pontus discovered that he desired something more than a worldly life climbing the ecclesial ladder. Thanks to Athanasius's recent chronicle of Antony's transformative desert experience, word was circulating that those who earnestly sought

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[45] Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, 43.
[46] Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 38.1. Palladius was a close disciple of Evagrius, and his travelogue provides the most detailed account of Evagrius’ story available. Written at the behest of a politician, Lausus, *The Lausaiac History*, is unique among fifth-century desert literature. Its intended audience was members of secular society rather than the monks themselves.

the peace of God were settling in the remote Egyptian wilderness. Seekers took up residence in the desert and engaged in practices “intended to cut through the noise of lives hooked on deceptions, materialisms, and games ... The desert itself gave them a landscape which mirrored what they sought for their own hearts: an uncluttered view through clean air.”[47] In the desert, distractions were few and the air was clear. It was an environment well suited to discovering the self and the divine, as the desert is a mirror of the contemplative mind. But its vastness is also perilous. God is there. So are the demons.

The map (Figure 5) and location descriptions below trace Evagrius’ geographical and theological journey. As with the Israelites of Exodus, his is a journey whose contours are familiar to many even if the underlying details differ. The modern student of Evagrius stands to discover not only a wise teacher of human psychology but also an honest and vulnerable companion through life’s most perplexing challenges.

[47] Columba Stewart, “Radical Honesty about the Self: The Practice of the Desert Fathers,” Sobornost 12 (1990): 25.

Figure 5. A map I created outlining Evagrius' journey from Pontus to the Egyptian desert, and following Evagrius' death, John Cassian's voyage to the West. The locations noted on the map, described in further detail below, tell a geographical story of Evagrius' life.

Alexandria

Evagrius' geographical and spiritual journeys are closely related, and in many ways, the story of Evagrius' life begins in the same region where it ends, in Lower Egypt with the Christian scholar and teacher, Origen of Alexandria. Despite Origen's posthumous anathematization by the sixth-century Church due to his controversial

theology, Origen's ideas greatly influenced the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), Gregory of Nyssa (331-396), and Basil of Caesarea (330-379) and, consequently, Evagrius, their disciple.[48] Origen's writing about the journey of the fallen soul back to God is foundational for Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, and like Origen and Gregory, Evagrius understood the spiritual life to be a perpetual journey of maturation and reconnection with God, consisting of warfare with troubling desires.[49]

Nicea

In 325, Constantine called the first ecumenical council in Nicaea. Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil of Caesarea became prominent defenders of its outcomes in the years that followed. Champions of Athanasius's argument, they maintained that Christ was "of one Being with the Father" rather than merely "like" the Father.[50] The fifty-five years between the first and second ecumenical councils (when the Nicene Creed was finally passed), was a theologically creative, yet divisive time, as many of the bishops who originally developed the Nicene Creed could not agree on what it meant. Evagrius came of age during this transitional period as the doctrine of the Church was crystalizing.

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[48] The Origenist Controversy sparked in 399, the year of Evagrius' death, when the Alexandrian bishop, Theophilius condemned "anthropomorphism," or considering God to be a material entity rather than a spiritual one. This disturbed many of the monks whose piety hinged on picturing God as a larger, more powerful human rather than an immaterial spiritual being. The monks revolted and threatened Theophilius's life, convincing him to reverse course and reject Origen's work—the source of the anti-anthropomorphism movement. Evagrius' writing and that of his disciples became politically contested at this point.

[49] See Origen and Rowan A. Greer, *Origen*, 25. "At the very least it can be confidently said that Origen prepares the way for Gregory of Nyssa's mysticism. Not only does Origen regard the hightest attainment of the Christian life as a gift of God enabling us to go beyond what would otherwise be possible, he also can describe our contemplation of God as endless and dynamic."

[50] See the discussion of the *homoousios/homoiousios* debate in William C. Placher. *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 1st ed (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 72-79.

Ibora

Ibora is the birthplace of Evagrius (345-399). Evagrius' father was a rural bishop whose jurisdiction was limited to several small communities in the Pontus region of what is today northern Turkey. His father's position within the church exposed Evagrius to the wider institution and enabled him to develop formative relationships with Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa.

Nyssa, Caesarea, and Nazianzus

The region of Cappadocia (modern day central Turkey) was home to the episcopal sees of the Cappadocian Fathers. Basil of Caesarea ordained Evagrius a lector during his childhood and Gregory of Nazianzus ordained him a deacon in 379. Both Basil and Gregory were strong proponents of the early monastic movement and likely influenced Evagrius' thought on the subject. Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's brother and Gregory of Nazianzus's friend, probably had a close relationship with Evagrius as well. They likely often discussed theology and church politics, as Gregory's views can be seen within Evagrius' work.

Constantinople

Gregory of Nazianzus had a brief but effective term as archbishop of Constantinople. He stepped down after the second ecumenical council in 381 to return to Nazianzus. Evagrius had accompanied Gregory to Constantinople for the council and chose to stay and cultivate his ecclesiastical career in the capitol. While in the service of Nectarius, the next archbishop, Evagrius gained a reputation for his powerful defense of the Nicene faith and persuasive preaching skills. The direction of Evagrius' life changed

after he fell in love with a married noble woman. He despaired over his inability to control his passions and vowed to leave Constantinople and pursue a more chaste life.

Jerusalem

Following Evagrius' departure from Constantinople, he landed in Jerusalem and was received by Melania the Elder at her monastery at the Mount of Olives. "Blessed Melania," as Palladius calls her, was a wealthy and enthusiastic patron of the desert spirituality movement.[51] She, a "desert mother," makes her own appearance in the *Apopthegmata Patrum*, or *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. While in Jerusalem, Evagrius is believed to have been gravely ill for six months. Melania encouraged him to embrace the monastic life of the desert, and only after he promised Melania that he would become a monk did he recover. He then departed for Nitria.

Nitria, Kellia, and Scetis

Evagrius lived in the monastic community of Nitria for two years, beginning around 383. Nitria, approximately forty miles south of Alexandria and home to over 5000 monks according to Palladius' account, was one of three great centers of monasticism in Lower Egypt during the fourth and fifth centuries.[52] Kellia, or The Cells, was a long day's walk south of Nitria. Its 600 residents tended to be more rigorous in their spiritual exercises, preferring even more solitude than Nitria afforded. Evagrius relocated to Kellia, where he lived the remaining fourteen years of his life. While in Kellia, Evagrius made use of his intellectual gifts to educate his fellow monks with Christian philosophies based in the work of Origin, contextualizing, defining, and systematizing the spiritual

[51] Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 46.
[52] Palladius, *The Lausiac History* 7.2.

exercises the monks were undertaking in the desert. He was a calligrapher and penned *The Praktikos* and *Chapters on Prayer*, among other works, during this time. Scetis, about twenty-five miles south of Kellia, was an even more remote center of monastic activity. Incidentally, today the site is a short drive from Cairo. Scetis is where the stories in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* are set.

Massilia

Evagrius' ideas and writing did not come to the West directly. They were filtered through another writer and monk, John Cassian (360-435). Cassian is believed to have been a native of what is today Romania, though some scholars think he was from Gaul (southern France today), the place he ultimately settled. He was highly educated and well-traveled. He spent considerable time in Scetis but is believed to have made the trek to Kellia on multiple occasions to learn from Evagrius. There is an uncanny similarity between Evagrius' writing on the eight thoughts and the principal content of Cassian's most well-known published works, *The Institutes* and *The Conferences*, both of which became required reading for early Benedictine monastics. Scholars believe that Cassian was intentional in hiding references to Evagrius, as Evagrius was a known "Origenist," and thus a heretic according to the Western Church. Cassian, however, obviously saw great value in Evagrius and carefully honed his theology to be acceptable in the West.

The Thoughts and Virtues

We would likely recognize a version of the following list as the "seven deadly sins," or the "capital vices," or "cardinal sins." However, it was first codified as the eight thoughts by Evagrius as a means for monks in the Egyptian desert to map their minds' meanderings during prayer time and in daily life.

A first step to becoming more aware of God's presence is to become more aware of ourselves. Despite the simplification of the "sins" in popular culture, this list is a deep well of wisdom that illuminates the human condition. It is not meant to induce feelings of shame or guilt. We are all naturally subject to the influence of these thoughts. Rather, this ancient list is meant to be used as a shorthand, of sorts, to identify the spiritual logjams in our lives. Once we know where they are and how they are constructed, the less formidable they become. And, through the grace of God, we can begin to dismantle them.

Researching each of the eight thoughts was an indispensable part of this project thesis, laying the foundation for the act of ministry component described in the next chapter and enriching my own understanding of the great value and timelessness of this ancient tradition. These descriptions aim, in part, to dispel the unfortunate influence that modern portrayals of the seven deadly sins have had on the reputation of this early, ingenious method of evaluating the human condition. What follows is my interpretation of each of the eight thoughts as they might pertain to modern individuals and congregations, drawing primarily on the writings of Evagrius and his disciple, John Cassian. This chapter concludes with an overview of the virtues that Evagrius connected to the thoughts.

The Thought of Gluttony

For monks, fasting was and is one of the primary ways to curb the bodily passions, whether they be related to diet (gluttony), bodily desires (lust), or the acquisition of material items (avarice). Fasting, or limiting one's food intake for a time, is a method of *askesis*, or exercise, one can undertake to better recognize God's presence, and to become aware of the many ways we consciously or unconsciously pull away from

God. Christians customarily fast in various ways during the liturgical seasons of Lent and Advent to hone their attention during these intentional times of introspection and expectation. As in the litany of penitence recited on Ash Wednesday in the Book of Common Prayer, we confess "our self-indulgent appetites and ways" in acknowledgment of their power to separate us from God, neighbor, and self.[53]

Gluttony, or the desire to be full, is over-consumption of food, but it is also more than that. It is action on the belief (again, conscious or unconscious) that one can gain satiety, comfort, wholeness, or long life from responding to the whims of one's passions. Thus, "controlling the unruly impulses of the body at the basic level of food consumption was the first step in mastering the disordered movements of the soul."[54] Jesus famously responded to this temptation while fasting in the desert himself: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."[55]

As we will see with the other eight thoughts, gluttony can find new meaning when explored through a metaphorical lens. For example, Sunday worshipers tend to find comfort and security when the church nave is full. The metric of Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) has gained prominence in recent decades as a bellwether of congregational health and vitality. A congregation with a higher, or growing ASA tends to be more attractive to clergy seeking a new call, as credit for a positive metric—whether it is deserved or not—is often given to the clergy leadership. Of course,

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[53] Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, According to the Use of the Episcopal Church.* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 268.
[54] Evagrius and Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxvi.
[55] Matthew 4:4.

community population trends affect a congregation's ASA as well, as do many other factors which are out of the congregation's direct control.

Regardless of the reason, when the nave is full, clergy and parishioners tend to feel better about their church. When the numbers dwindle it becomes uncomfortable. Discomfort can lead to panic and poor decision making, which contributes to generalized congregational dis-ease. Jesus' counter argument to the temptation in the desert seems apt here. Yes, having a full nave feels good, but a high ASA is not the sole sustenance of a church. God's presence and power becomes obscured by the temptation to judge success and failure by worldly measures.

According to John Cassian, desert monks were encouraged to keep a "threefold watch" when it came to confronting the thought of gluttony. One is to first, "wait for the lawful moment for breaking the fast; then, to be satisfied with a slender diet; and third, to be content with cheaper foods of whatever sort."[56] This vigilance is meant to increase our spiritual awareness, but it will also promote a healthy body and mind. Contemporary author, Michael Pollan, has offered a similarly succinct mantra for the modern day: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants."[57] That is, avoid processed foods, limit your portion size, and eat meat rarely. The church might benefit from this wisdom as well. Do record and analyze attendance numbers, but not too much, and celebrate the presence of the faithful you do have.

[56] Cassian, *The Institutes* 5.23.
[57] From Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

The Thought of Lust

Along with gluttony and avarice, Evagrius classifies lust, also termed fornication or impurity, as a bodily passion. Rather than manifesting in the psyche, like anger, sadness, or acedia, we bear this thought with our bodies. In *The Praktikos*, Evagrius writes with the monastic community in mind. He and his companions in the desert had taken a vow of chastity, eschewing sexual intimacy altogether, as they believed that sexual desire obscured one's vision of God. Throughout desert literature there are accounts of monks going to extreme, sometimes barbaric ends, to curb their affliction with lustful thoughts.[58]

For modern Christians beyond the cloister, such a vow is not customary, and the ancient, extreme methods of taming the thoughts are indeed distasteful. However, we do make vows that aim to contain and focus our sexual desires so that they do not grow to the point of becoming harmful to ourselves and others. The institution of marriage commits two people to a monogamous relationship, for example. Similarly, our baptismal vow to love our neighbor as ourselves and to respect the dignity of others helps guide our behavior. To borrow the famous concept from Martin Buber, it is important to treat one another as *subjects*—whole in body, mind, and spirit—rather than mere *objects* of utility or desire.[59]

In her book *Just Love* Margaret Farley acknowledges the difficulty modern Christians have evaluating their own struggles with lust. We have a tendency, particularly

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[58] See Evagrius and Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xx. Evagrius is reported to have stood naked in a cistern of water in mid-winter when tempted by lust. See also Palladius' account of Ammônios in *The Lausiac History*.
[59] See Martin Buber, Walter Kaufmann, and Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 46. print., 1. Touchstone ed, A Touchstone Book (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

in Western society, to moralize sexual desire. It has become so entwined with "defilement, sin, and guilt" that it is difficult to pull ourselves away from an emotional response to the topic. She suggests, then, that a new sexual ethic is needed, and we must look at the larger and related issue of justice. By first creating an ethic of justice and love—of relationality—we can then turn back to sexuality. Her guiding question becomes, "not whether this or that sexual act in the abstract is morally good, but rather, when is sexual expression appropriate, morally good and just, in a relationship of any kind."[60]

Despite what one might assume given his extreme practices, Evagrius did not say that sexual desire is morally wrong, rather, it is simply a part of our humanity. But, like other desires, it can consume us in unhealthy ways if left unchecked. John Cassian suggests that dealing with unwanted sexual desire takes a double remedy. While we must meet lustful thoughts with meditation and watchfulness, as we would the other troubling thoughts, we must also address them physically. Removing ourselves from situations where we might be tempted to act on lustful desires is a first step: "Seductive images and matter need to be removed from the body, lest lust attempt to break out into deeds," writes Cassian.[61] In the modern world where we are continually bombarded by sexually-driven social media posts, entertainment, and advertisements, Cassian's advice will undoubtedly prove difficult.

As is the case within any human institution, lust does occasionally cause great trouble within the Church. Despite ordination vows, marriage vows, or the vows

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[60] Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, Reprinted (London: Continuum, 2012), 207.
[61] Cassian, *The Conferences* 5.4.

encouraging mutual respect taken in baptism, managing lust continues to be a challenge for clergy and laity. In my experience serving as the diocesan intake officer, responding to reports of potential clergy misconduct through the canonical process in the Episcopal Church, issues involving inappropriate sexual comments or actions tend ultimately not to have to do with the morality of particular acts, but rather the harm done to personal and communal relationships. Jobs can be lost, congregations can crumble, and significant, lasting psychological damage can be caused. This is where Farley and Evagrius dovetail—lust can and will obscure our vision of God in self and others, and we are charged to become aware of it and curb it for these reasons, not because sex and sexuality in and of themselves are bad.

The Thought of Avarice

"The madness of covetousness is that it always wants more than whatever a person can accumulate," writes Cassian.[62] No matter how many watches or cars we buy, or however robust our investment portfolio, it seems there is always more to be had. “Avarice represents all ties to the transitory things of this world and to the material values of the dominant society.”[63] Unfortunately, Cassian paints a bleak picture in the fight against avarice for those who do not choose to live within a community of monks. If even the faintest embers of desire for money are left to burn, they cannot be extinguished, he warns. It takes wholehearted material renunciation to be fully purged of this thought.

This is not to say that we can't make strides towards loosening the grip money has on our lives. We loosen money's grip on us by loosening our grip on it—we give it away.

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[62] Cassian, *The Institutes* 7.24.
[63] Evagrius and Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxvii.

Bank accounts and budgets may be necessary for managing personal and church finances, but they don't need to be the primary drivers of how we think or act, and their balances are not markers of our value as people.

While the spiritual struggle with avarice is a personal one, the Church as an institutional system has a long history of grappling with this thought. Whether the material items be liturgical vestments or appointments, real estate, or relics, discussions (and arguments) about how to handle money and things are commonplace in church governance. The Episcopal Church, with its ample pension fund and incredible wealth in property, knows the struggle with avarice well. The recent rift in dioceses such as South Carolina and Fort Worth that were purportedly rooted in theological differences, particularly around issues of human sexuality, have culminated in protracted high-dollar legal battles over real estate and naming rights. This "madness of covetousness" has left nothing but a string of weary hearts and broken communities.

At the local level, the status of a church's coffers can fire up the passions like little else. Regardless if the church feels it has too little money, or if it has a healthy endowment, money can disproportionately drive decision making. In *The Praktikos*, Evagrius writes that "avarice suggests to the mind a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labor," the inevitability of famine, sickness, and poverty, and the shame of accepting help from others.[64] In the same vein, a parish vestry fears not being able to afford a priest, the inability to make mortgage payments or its diocesan apportionment, and the shame of being "demoted" to mission status. At the same time, a parish with great wealth is not immune from the pull of avarice. While much good can be done with a big

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[64] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 9.

bank account, congregations can also become protective of it to the point that cutting staff salaries or foregoing missional efforts trumps a dip into the endowment. Church leaders must continually ask themselves which master they are serving.[65]

In his work, *Antirrhêtikos,* or “Talking Back," Evagrius links passages from scripture to thoughts with which we commonly struggle. Regarding avarice: "Against the thought that is sparing in what it gives to the poor—for giving alms sets the intellect free from [troubling] thoughts, while regretting what one has given binds the intellect to the thoughts that impede it and that that damage its ability to receive the knowledge of God.” Evagrius quotes 2 Corinthians in response. "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”[66] Like the practice of contemplation itself, the act of giving away money helps clear our vision so that we might better see the presence of God in our midst.

The Thought of Sadness

Evagrius writes, "One who flees all worldly pleasures is a citadel inaccessible to the demon of sadness.... And so, if we have an attachment to some earthly object, it is impossible to repel this enemy."[67] To modern ears, this sounds like a preposterous standard, and it likely did as well to new monks attempting to find a home in the desert. They had cut ties with loved ones, transitioned to a meager diet, and were forced to find comfort in an austere earthen bed. Much had been lost.

Unlike other thoughts, sadness is not associated with a particular appetite or desire. Whereas gluttony gives rise to hunger, avarice to longing for material items, and

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[65] Matthew 6:24b.
[66] Evagrius, *Antirrhêtikos* 3.3.
[67] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 19.

anger to a compulsion for revenge, sadness arises from the inability to achieve these desires. A monk, then, who pines for the comforts of home experiences the thought of sadness, depriving him of physical and spiritual pleasures.[68]

We will always experience some measure of sadness in our lives, as we tend to have affection for many things. Grief in times of loss can be excruciating, as can memories of difficult past events. We can also experience sadness when we fail to achieve hoped for goals, particularly when we see others succeed where we have not, leading to a slight variation on the thought of sadness. Several hundred years after Evagrius, Pope Gregory I altered the list of thoughts, removing sadness and adding envy. Rebecca Konyndyk Deyoung notes that the envious are the "have-nots" who desire the goods of others, and it is not only their emotional state that is affected by this frustration of desire, but also their sense of self-worth. She terms envy the "comparison game," which leads to painful self-loathing.[69]

Beyond his brief descriptions of this demon in chapters 10 and 19 of *The Praktikos*, Evagrius delves into the more pathological aspects of sadness in *Antirrhêtikos*. The feeling of abandonment by God—an extreme manifestation of this thought—can lead to terrifying visions and physical sensations such as demons in the form of scorpions attacking the body, or snakes coming though the walls.[70]

As we will explore more fully in the act of ministry sections to follow, sadness is currently a prominent thought among the members of congregations. There is institutional memory of days when churches had more, and younger members. Church

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[68] Evagrius and Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxviii.
[69] Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2009), 28, 44.
[70] Evagrius, *Antirrhêtikos* 4.1, 4.33, 4.45.

members and clergy alike may also compare their churches to the “thriving” church down the street, envious of what they believe to be a better managed or more spirited congregation. Congregations suffering from the thought of sadness desire what they feel they do not have.

As with the other thoughts, experiencing sadness is not to be considered as a moral failing. Journeying through sadness is simply part of what it means to be human. It can be helpful to remember, though, that the attachments that cause us grief do not own or define us. As difficult as it may sometimes feel, the power of sadness is limited; our attachments only have power so long as we cling to them. According to Evagrius, then, we must look deeply to discover what it is that we cling to, “for [the demon] lays his snares and produces sadness precisely where he sees we are particularly inclined,” and through the grace of God and the transformative power of time, we may come to become less driven by these attachments. [71] When clergy and congregations cling to youthfulness as a marker of success, a lack of young families in the pews on Sunday mornings brings thoughts of sadness. When a sizable endowment is seen as a prize, thoughts of sadness arise when the corpus needs to be drawn upon.

John Cassian suggests that focusing on "things eternal" rather than our temporal worldly attachments is the remedy for this troubling thought. As Paul says, "So we do not lose heart.... we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”[72]

[71] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 19.
[72] 2 Corinthians 4:16a;18.

The Thought of Anger

Regarding the thought of anger, Evagrius does not mince words. He describes it as the most fierce passion, “a boiling and stirring up of wrath against one who has given injury—or is thought to have done so.”[73] Just as “the forming of a mist thickens the air,” anger thickens the intellect, and “as a passing cloud darkens the sun, a thought of resentment darkens the mind.”[74] Anger can lead to resentment and indignation, and can ultimately become both psychologically and physiologically debilitating. Evagrius alludes to disturbing images that can accompany unchecked anger.[75]

Anger is one of the thornier thoughts that we wrestle with, particularly in the modern age as certain forms of anger seem to have been deemed acceptable. "Righteous anger," for example, is a term we often hear. There are actions undertaken by others, whether personally or as part of a social system, that understandably elicit our anger. Becoming angry is natural. However, anger itself should not be our motivation for acting against another person. Anger blinds us to the humanity of our neighbors. It obscures the innate, loving bond we share with one another through Christ as children of God. Also, since anger blinds, it is nearly impossible to rationalize with an angry person. They simply cannot see an option other than "getting even," or "tearing it all down." Anger must be allowed to dissipate over time before productive conversation can be had.

In his letter to Eulogios, who was presumably a novice monk entering the eremitic community of the desert, Evagrius spends significant time detailing the ways anger can disrupt community life, and thus, the great responsibility a monk has in managing this

[73] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 11.
[74] Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 4.5-6.
[75] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 21.

thought. While monks spent most of their time engaged in solitary prayer and work, they came together on weekends for communal worship. They also occasionally visited each other's cells for hospitality and conversation on the spiritual life. Evagrius writes about anger in the real-life context of relationships, noting the impact malicious gossip can have on a community. "The person who loves to ridicule steals the soul of better people, ruining an unsound hearing with calumnies," and "Let your ear not partake of such a bitter drug, lest perchance you impart such a mixture to another."[76] Ahead of his time, Evagrius' insights anticipate modern methods of evaluating conflict in relationships, such as triangulation in Bowen Family Systems Theory: When person A is frustrated with person B, he goes to person C to complain. As a result, person B is still ignorant of the conflict and person C is now entwined with person A in his or her frustration.[77]

While Evagrius is clear that anger towards another person is never appropriate—we should always strive to see our brothers and sisters as manifestations of Christ—anger is "given to us so that we might fight against the thoughts."[78] The force of our anger is most appropriately directed towards its source, and when we can begin to see the influence of the thoughts on the actions of others, our compassion for them can grow. We are not to be in conflict with our neighbor, but rather with the thoughts, or demons, that inflame the passions. Like a desert monastic community, the success of a church depends heavily on the responsibility its members take for the health of personal relationships.

Cassian offers wisdom for when we are infected with the "poison of wrath." First, we must address it. "For if we have brought any vices into the desert that we have not

[76] Evagrius, *Eulogios* 16.
[77] See Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1993), 47-49.
[78] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 24.

attended to, they will not be abolished but lie hidden within us ... solitude is accustomed to even exaggerate the vices of those who have not corrected themselves."[79] If we insist on holding on to our anger, even our prayer times will be negatively affected. No matter its cause, anger towards another is never fruitful, despite the angry mind's insistence otherwise.

In *The Praktikos*, Evagrius suggests a remedy that can have an immediate effect: "A gift snuffs out the fire of resentment," he writes. "Almsgiving and meekness diminish [anger and hatred] even when [they are] present."[80]

The Thought of Acedia

The description of the demon of acedia in *The Praktikos* is one of the most vivid. Evagrius describes monks gazing from their cell windows suffering from oppressive boredom, looking for entertainment by watching the deeds of other monks and anticipating a visit: "The eye of the person afflicted with acedia stares at the doors continuously, and his intellect imagines people coming to visit. The door creaks and he jumps up; he hears a sound, and he leans out of the window and does not leave until he gets stiff from sitting there."[81] Evagrius also refers to acedia as the "noonday demon," as it commonly comes upon the monk when then the sun is at its zenith, reminding him of the many long hours of solitary prayer left in the day.

One way of understanding this thought is to consider it to mean that "the grass is always greener on the other side." It is the thought that desires novelty, always enticing those it has afflicted with the promise of something new, different, and presumably

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[79] Cassian, *The Institutes* 8:18.
[80] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 26.
[81] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 12; Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 6.14.

better. For the desert monk it commonly manifested as the desire to flee one's cell in pursuit of other experiences and opportunities, even worthy ones. For example, Evagrius warns that a monk alone in his cell afflicted with acedia is quick to take on tasks of service or to call on a sick person—but his true motivation comes from boredom rather than a spirit of altruism.[82] One's reason for action is worth exploring when considering the thought of acedia.

Resisting the temptation to flee, be it from a desert cell, a job, or a city, has a deeper purpose than simply cultivating self-discipline, although that is of great value. And it is also true that there are times when leaving a difficult situation is indeed the best thing to do. The deeper purpose of resisting acedia lies at the heart of Abba Moses's well known saying in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*: "A brother came to Scetis to visit Abba Moses and asked him for a word. The old man said to him, 'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.'"[83] That which we ultimately seek, and the resting place for all our desires, is not "on the other side of the fence," or "just around the corner." God is, in the words of St. Augustine, "more inward than my most inward part."[84] God is wherever we are. Acedia, just like avarice or gluttony, falsely promises the end of desire in the possession or experience of things other than God.

In today's secular context, a version of "gazing from our cell windows" might be our preoccupation with social media. How often do we pick up our phones and scroll through Facebook to find out what our friends are up to—and then, consequently, feel worse about ourselves? Anecdotal reports from social media users have long suggested

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[82] Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 6.6-7.
[83] *Apophthegmata Patrum* Moses 5. Evagrius gives similar advice in *The Praktikos* 28: "You must not abandon your cell in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses seemingly reasonable."
[84] Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6.11.

that this is a widespread phenomenon. And in September 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* published a set of documents detailing Facebook's own research suggesting that it is aware that Instagram, which it owns, can worsen the body images of teen girls.[85] In this way, acedia can be a gateway to sadness. When we can't have the different life or experience acedia promises us, we can become sad, and are then subject to the trials of that thought. Vainglory too can arise from acedia. Gazing from our cell windows, or scrolling through Instagram, we can easily find ourselves desirous of the praise others receive and then attempt to garner that praise for ourselves by manipulating how we present ourselves to the world.

Clergy and laity, too, can become beset by acedia by looking at the social media of other congregations, or of hearing reports about the "world class youth program" offered by the church down the street, or how wonderful their new, youthful pastor has been for Sunday worship attendance. Again, acedia obscures the truth that God is present and at work with us wherever we are. The answer to our grievances or longings are not necessarily always across the street.

Cassian suggests that work is the remedy for acedia. The work doesn't have to be meaningful on a grand scale, per se, but simply something to which one can commit one's full attention. He tells the story of a desert dweller who would gather palm fronds daily and pile them in his cave only to burn them at year's end. "Although the obligation of earning a livelihood did not demand this course of action, he did it just for the sake of

[85] See Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739?mod=article_inline.

purging his heart, firming his thoughts, persevering in his cell, and conquering and driving out acedia."[86]

The Thought of Vainglory

John Cassian advises that "we must avoid those things that could set us apart from others and that would gain us praise from human beings, as if we were the only ones who could do them."[87] Among the troubling thoughts, vainglory may be one of the most challenging for Americans to deal with. Words like "independence," "distinction," and "achievement" are used often to describe the qualities that our culture values, and it can come as a shock to some to learn that these aren't necessarily Christian values.

While praise and recognition feel good, they can also become addictive. But just like insults, accolades are illusory. Our value as children of God does not depend on how others view us, or even how we view ourselves. Rather, our value comes from the fact that God loves us beyond measure. That's the only assurance—the only justification—we will ever need.

Evagrius considers vainglory to be particularly challenging because whatever we do to "destroy it, it becomes the principle of some other vainglory."[88] The so-called humblebrag is an excellent modern-day example of the ancient human desire for recognition—a self-deprecating statement or action made with the underhanded intention of gaining praise. For example, take the comment, "Yes, it's Saturday, but I spent hours today working at the office. I've just been so busy." How often have we heard this? How often have we said it ourselves? On the surface, we want to show our dedication, our

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[86] Cassian, *The Institutes* 10.24.
[87] Cassian, *The Institutes* 11.19.
[88] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 30.

work ethic, our humility, and our servanthood—and maybe we are truly exhausted—but what we really want, if we're honest, is praise. We want to show others that our work—that *we*—are vital. Jesus famously upbraids the scribes and pharisees for their vainglory, which can be particularly problematic for those in religious professions: "They all do their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long … all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."[89]

Vainglory can play an interesting role in the clergy call process. In my experience shepherding congregations through leadership transitions, I have witnessed some congregations tend towards vainglory more than others. Congregations with significant financial resources or with a prominent footprint in civic affairs often desire a priest who will make them "look good" publicly. That is, they seek a priest who plays the part of a visible public servant or politician well. It is important to have the right clergy leadership fit in a wealthy, civically prominent congregation, but church members must be mindful of their motivation for choosing a particular priest. Will it make me look good if my congregation has a publicly savvy priest, or will it enable me to be a more effective public servant myself? The converse is also a reality. Clergy seeking new calls also must discern their motivation for seeking a post at a more socially prominent or financially well-resourced congregation.

The following excerpt from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is illustrative of just how demanding it can be to attempt to lessen the influence of vainglory in our lives:

> A brother came to see Abba Macarius the Egyptian, and said to him, 'Abba, give me a word that I may be saved.' So the old man said, 'Go to the cemetery and abuse the dead.' The brother went there, abused them and threw stones at them;

[89] Matthew 23:5,12.

> then he returned and told the old man about it. The latter said to him, 'Didn't they say anything to you?' He replied, 'No.' The old man said, 'Go back tomorrow and praise them.' So the brother went away and praised them, calling them, 'Apostles, saints and righteous men.' He returned to the old man and said to him, 'I have complimented them.' And the old man said to him, 'Did they not answer you?' The brother said no. The old man said to him, 'You know how you insulted them and they did not reply, and how you praised them and they did not speak; so you too if you wish to be saved must do the same and become a dead man. Like the dead, take no account of either the scorn of men or of their praises, and you can be saved.'[90]

As much as we would rather it not be the case, the Church is a human, social institution where the wellbeing of personal egos weighs heavily on what and how decisions are made. The challenge presented by Abba Macarius is a stark reminder of just how sensitive we are to praise and insult, whether we are a preacher standing in the receiving line after a service, or the leader of a Bible study group waiting for people to show interest and attend a meeting. The life-long challenge of vainglory is not to seek the favor of others, but only God's—which, blessedly, we already have.

The Thought of Pride

Secular society tends to consider pride to be a mark of confidence. When we take pride in our work, it means that we deem it worthy of praise. We have done a good job. We have made a valuable contribution. The Christian tradition would agree that it is important to put effort into our endeavors, but only insomuch as they glorify God rather than ourselves. Using our gifts to create something beautiful or useful is an expression of who we are as bearers of the light of Christ, and we are to honor that relationship by practicing humility and gratitude. The alternative, the thought of pride, is a willful

[90] *Apophthegmata Patrum* Macarius 23.

withdrawal or distancing from God, claiming personal credit for the fruits of our endeavors.[91]

Evagrius writes that "the thought of pride is the cause of the most damaging fall for the soul. For it induces the monk to deny that God is his helper and to consider that he himself is the cause of virtuous actions."[92] John Cassian colorfully describes it as "a most savage beast ... ravaging with its cruel bite."[93] Pride holds a special place of importance among the thoughts. It is one of the eight but also the seed from which the other seven thoughts grow.[94] While avarice, acedia, and the others obscure one's vision of God, pride is an active rejection of God's presence in one's life.

In the context of the desert ascetic, pride was most threatening when attempting to make progress in the spiritual life. Evagrius warns of a treacherous line one walks when laboring to grow closer to God. The movement one makes along the pilgrim's path is to the credit of Christ alone, yet pride attempts to convince us otherwise, often to devastating effect. In *The Lausiac History*, Palladius often makes note of the questionable feats of extreme asceticism he encountered while living in the desert. One monk named Elpidius "demonstrated such abstinence in this spiritual discipline that he put everybody in the shade. … [He] advanced so far in *apatheia* that his body was macerated to the extent that the sun shone through his bones.[95] Similarly, John Cassian offers the example of an older, accomplished monk who took his spiritual exercises too far, refusing even to come away from his cell to share a meal with the brothers on Easter. One day, tempted by

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[91] Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 8.4-5.
[92] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 14.
[93] Cassian, *The Institutes* 12.1.
[94] See Cassian, *The Institutes* 12.5. Adam and Eve's show of pride in the garden gave rise to the other vices. "…although the disgrace of pride is last in the order of battle, it is nonetheless first in terms of origin and the source of all sins and misdeeds…"
[95] Palladius, *The Lausaic History* 48.3.

the devil to prove the worthiness he had earned from his self-denial, he leapt to his death into a well "so deep that its bottom was invisible."[96]

In the context of the modern church, pride can often manifest in governance settings. When working with clergy and congregations on challenging compensation issues, or the management of financial resources, for example, I have occasionally heard the phrase, "Let's remember that the church is a business too," as if to say that there is a particular mindset one applies to Sunday worship that isn't adequate or appropriate in vestry meetings. Managing a church's temporal affairs is a difficult spiritual task where one is asked to continually balance worldly affairs with the ideals of God's kingdom. If the former dominates in church meetings, prayer before or after can often feel proforma, or merely a prelude to the more important work of evaluating budget performance. If pride gets in the way of God's continual call to generosity of spirit and resources, the church could indeed become more of a business than a church.

In *Eight Thoughts*, Evagrius draws on 1 Corinthians 4:7 as a marker of the Christian's struggle against pride: "You have nothing good which you have not received from God," he writes. "Why then do you glory in another's (good) as if it were your own? Why do you pride yourself in the grace of God as if it were your own possession?"[97] The remedy to pride, then, is to cultivate an attitude of great humility in all our endeavors—within and beyond the walls of the church.

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[96] Cassian, *The Conferences* 2.5.1.
[97] Evagrius, *Eight Thoughts* 8.12.

The Virtues

One of the most critical concepts to understand while studying and applying Evagrius' work, is the nature of the deep connection between the eight thoughts and their corresponding virtues. In *The Praktikos*, Evagrius organizes the eight thoughts into the three parts of the soul as originally defined by Plato, i.e., the rational (pride, vainglory), the irascible (acedia, anger, sadness), and the concupiscible (avarice, impurity, gluttony).[98] Each part of the soul has a corresponding set of virtues which are "birthed" as one struggles with the related troubling thoughts. For example, grappling with sadness produces courage and patience within the soul, and continence, charity, and temperance emerge when facing thoughts of gluttony. The key concept here is that the troubling thoughts and the virtues are two sides of the same coin. It takes courage to face sadness, but facing sadness is also a means to acquire courage.

[98] Evagrius, *Praktikos* 89.

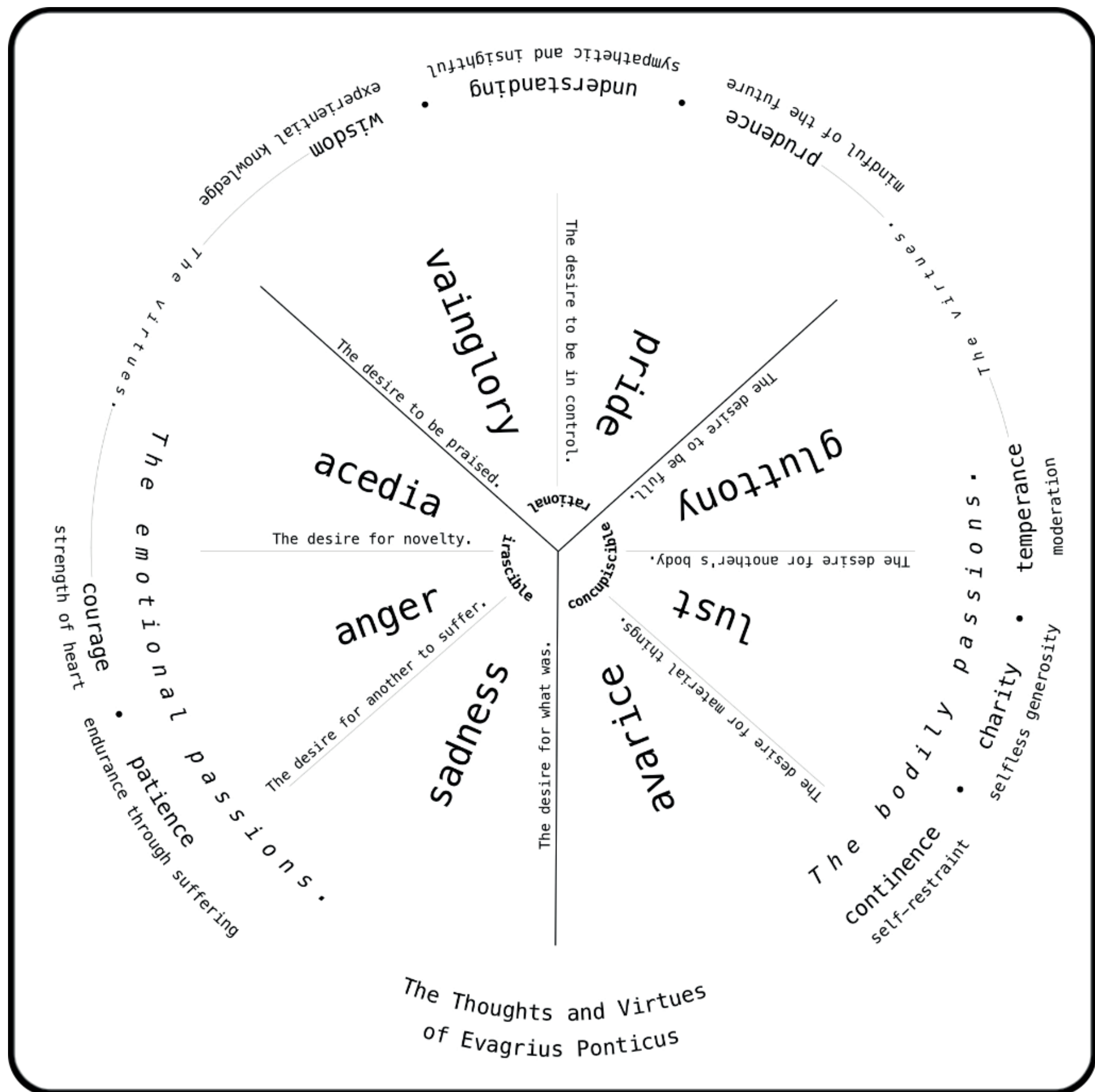

Figure 6. A map of Evagrius' eight thoughts and the corresponding virtues. The research conducted on the eight thoughts detailed in the pages above led to my development of this diagram. It serves as a quick reference to the meaning of each thought and virtue and places them within their corresponding Platonic categories.

This dovetails nicely with the advice given by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* not to avoid or wish away the challenges we encounter in our lives, but rather to "look over their shoulders, as it were, searching for something else."[99] We would

[99] As quoted by M. S. Laird in *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 126.

rather the often painful pull of inordinate desire not exist, yet since it is present nonetheless, we must "look right into it until we can look straight through it."[100] The struggle itself becomes a way we steady our gaze on God, who exists within and beyond the pain.

This concept echoes Wendy Farley's theology of desire, understanding desire as both capable of wounding and of healing. Drawing on the map of Evagrius' thoughts and virtues above (Figure 6), while pride (the desire to be in control) and vainglory (the desire to be praised) can wound deeply, enduring and reflecting upon these troubling thoughts builds prudence, understanding, and wisdom. Indeed, one cannot become wise without first facing pride. As we will see in the following chapter, this concept was a key learning for myself and project participants during the act of ministry workshops.

Robert E. Sinkewicz, a translator of Evagrius' writing, refers to Evagrius' codification of the thoughts as an "advanced tactical manual designed to assist the monk in developing his faculty of discernment."[101] Evagrius' work was a rich treasure trove of wisdom not only for the fourth and fifth-century monks of Nitria, Kellia, and Sectis, but also remains available to us today as a nuanced guide to navigating our relationship with God, self, and others, particularly during the more trying times in our lives. We turn now to stories of communities and individuals in Episcopal churches in Arkansas who are wandering through *The Neutral Zone*, the desert of transition. As was the case with the Israelites, the raised voices suggesting "paths of escape" are numerous, the troubling thoughts legion. Evagrius' "advanced tactical manual" can be an invaluable companion on the journey.

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[100] M. S. Laird, *A Sunlit Absence*, 126.
[101] Evagrius and Robert E. Sinkewicz, *Evagrius of Pontus*, 137.

Chapter 3

Congregations in Conversation with Evagrius—*The Neutral Zone 2*

The Neutral Zone is aptly named. When a car is shifted into neutral the engine can still run and be revved, the radio and the air conditioner work, too, as do the power windows. It just won't be able to go anywhere because the gear box is not engaged. Similarly, *The Neutral Zone* of transitions is a period of disengagement. Ideas are still flowing, conversations are happening, emotions are felt, but it is not a task-based or goal-oriented time. However, this does not mean that *The Neutral Zone* is unproductive. Bridges writes,

> only in the apparent aimless activity of your time alone can you do the important inner business of self-transformation. But you don't *do* it as you do ordinary things, for it is in the walking, watching, making coffee, counting the birds on the phone wire, studying the cracks in the plaster ceiling over the bed, dreaming, and waiting for God knows what to happen that you are carrying on the basic industry of the neutral zone, which is attentive inactivity…[102]

To extend the metaphor, sitting in a running car while shifted into neutral seems to defeat the purpose of a vehicle. We typically only do this when we are stuck in traffic or waiting at a stoplight. A car was created to move—to take us from one place to another. But this is where the metaphor breaks down. Humans were not created to constantly be in motion, but rather, from the Christian perspective, to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is difficult to do when we are continually on the go, unreflectively motivated by the whims of the world. In contrast, Evagrius believed that love is cultivated by the quelling of worldly desires, hence his journey into the quiet desert where he could engage in "attentive inactivity."

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[102] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 138.

Even though we may not be called to relocate to Nitria, like Evagrius, we all can benefit from some desert time in our lives. We need to wander occasionally in *The Neutral Zone* and become more aware of God's presence and influence. Regardless of whether *The Neutral Zone* is thrust upon us or if the wandering is of our own choosing, its transformative potential is the same.

For the act of ministry component of this thesis, I visited with four groups of Christians currently experiencing transition. My aim was to direct their attention to the "cracks in the plaster ceiling over the bed," so to speak, to help them gain an appreciation of the transformative power of *The Neutral Zone* they inhabited. And I wanted to know what they saw.

The basic phenomenological question I had in mind was, "what is it like to exist in a state of transition?" I wanted to know more about what human scientist Max van Manen calls the "essence (is-ness)" of transition.[103] For people to describe their lived experience, I needed to provide a common language with which they could speak about it. Evagrius' eight thoughts became that language.

Having facilitated transitions of all kinds for more than a decade in congregations, I knew well the most efficient ways to find a new rector, or end a pastoral relationship, and how to best manage disagreements or episodes of conflict. I knew what transitions were like from a third-party managerial perspective, but I wasn't entirely sure how these congregations would describe their own experience. Van Manen notes that phenomenological research makes a distinction between "appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our

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[103] Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 42.

experience…reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure….”[104] I knew what transitions *appeared* to be like for others but wanted to reveal their *essence*. My hope was that, as a form of action research, the knowledge gained through this phenomenological approach could then be fed back to the members of these four groups, reflected upon, and the wisdom gained could be utilized as periods of personal and communal transition subsequently arose in their lives.

The Desert Prayers Workshop

The workshop through which I conducted my research was designed to take place within a three-hour period on a Saturday morning. As applicable, members of the congregation's vestry and search committee were invited to attend. Interested members of the congregation were also welcome. Four general action research principles were the guiding themes for the workshop's content and structure.[105] First, the workshop was designed to be *cyclic* in two ways. Participants would learn concepts and experience practices during the workshop and then be encouraged to return to these learnings and practices on their own time. Also, as a researcher, I would learn from each workshop and adjust for the next iteration. Second, the workshop would be *participative*. While it would have teaching components, the workshop's central experience would involve verbal, written, and tactile participation. Third, it would be largely *qualitative* rather than quantitative. Vocabulary, text, poetry, and audio-visual components would comprise the workshop's content rather than facts and figures. And fourth, the workshop would ask

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[104] Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 32.
[105] See John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, Second edition (London: SCM Press, 2016), 235-236.

participants to be *reflective*, which would drive the focus of conversation in real-time during the workshop's latter components.

Desert Prayers, as I named the workshop, had four distinct but overlapping sections. The first established the gathering's basic purpose, including a definition of the work I do as a transition minister and a naming of the group's current state of transition.

> Beyond the mechanics of getting from point A to point B, I am interested in learning more about how periods of transition can encourage spiritual growth. Despite our impulse to race through change there is value in pausing to observe the landscape.[106]

An outline of the workshop followed, expressing the hope that participants would leave with insights and new tools for personal reflection and spiritual practice, and that I would have learned from the participants. I then taught two key concepts, introducing *spirituality* (connection with God and cultivation of love) and *metaphor* (a linguistic and reflective tool for more deeply understanding our relationship to God) as cornerstones of the workshop's content to come. Asking participants to describe their favorite landscape then lead to an introduction of the desert as a metaphor for the spiritual life. This included a short video and description of a bikepacking trip that I had recently made to the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah.[107]

The second section opened with a brief description of Bridges' three-fold transition model, focusing on *The Neutral Zone* as an example of the key concept of using landscape as a metaphor. I asked participants to imagine themselves as desert wanderers, like the Israelites, but within their own current, unique state of transition,

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[106] Appendix One contains slides of the Keynote presentation used during the workshop.

[107] This video is available on the Desert Prayers website, accessible at https://desertprayers.com. After creating a username and logging in, navigate to the "About" section. The music in the video is an excerpt from contemporary composer John Luther Adams' work, *Become Desert*, a minimalist auditory impression of the desert landscape.

subject to the complexities of *The Neutral Zone*. I then told Evagrius' story, the tale of another desert wanderer within the Christian tradition with which they might resonate and introduced the eight thoughts by way of a light-hearted interactive game of "Name That Thought." This began with an overview of the eight thoughts and then a presentation of a series of generic comments that might be heard from members of congregations or clergy. For example, "Let me just check Facebook one more time to see how many likes my sermon has received." Participants would then "name that thought" to be vainglory. Beyond familiarizing participants with the thoughts, the aim of the exercise was to establish a new way of looking at what many have come to understand as "shameful," "immoral," or "sinful" vices. Rather, the thoughts are common to all, and becoming aware of them can help us look beyond to see God.

The workshop's third section was an application exercise. Eight pieces of newsprint were posted throughout the meeting space, each labeled with one of the thoughts. Participants were asked to privately consider which thoughts they had witnessed most frequently within the life of the congregation, particularly during this time of transition. They may have had these thoughts personally, or they may have witnessed the actions or comments of others to be representative of the thoughts. Each person was then given eight stickers to distribute among the eight pieces of newsprint, marking the thoughts they had observed most often. They were free to distribute the stickers evenly across all eight, for example, or place several dots on one piece of newsprint to weight that particular thought. I then tallied the sticker distribution scores, after which the participants regathered to reflect on their experience of the exercise: "Why did you place your stickers where you did?" The tally results and conversation lead

into a discussion of the various traditional remedies for the thoughts as well as the thoughts' corresponding virtues.

The final section of the workshop introduced a simplified version of Evagrius' cosmology, the spiritual progression from *praktikē* (practice) to *apatheia* (passionlessness) and *agapé* (love) to *gnostikē* (knowledge), then focused on the Christian's call to *praktikē*, that is, a practice of prayer, lifestyle, and perspective that encourages awareness and readies us for transformation. I then gave a brief introduction to contemplative prayer and lead a five-minute silent meditation. The workshop concluded with an invitation for participants to visit desertprayers.com, a website I constructed for this project, to learn more about the content of the day's workshop and continue to develop a contemplative spiritual practice. The website contains a prayer journal where members of the "Desert Prayers Community" could anonymously name and record thoughts they observed recently within their daily lives.[108] They could also make free-form notes, reflecting on their practice of prayer. Those who provided their email address after logging in would also receive occasional related reflections.[109]

The following four sections in this chapter recount the workshop experiences. Background on each congregation (and each group member in the case of the fourth workshop) is included for context.[110] As a researcher conducting qualitative research, I have incorporated reflections on my role and own experience in the process.[111]

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[108] In *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 84, Martin Laird suggests that simply naming our afflictive thoughts can provide insight into the deeper illusory narratives we tell ourselves. The Desert Prayers journal keeps track of participants' most noted thoughts over time, revealing trends and patterns both for the individual and the community.
[109] These reflections are included as Appendix Two.
[110] Names, locations, and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.
[111] See John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 57 regarding the concept of reflexivity: "Reflexivity is the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher

St. Nicholas', Maumelle

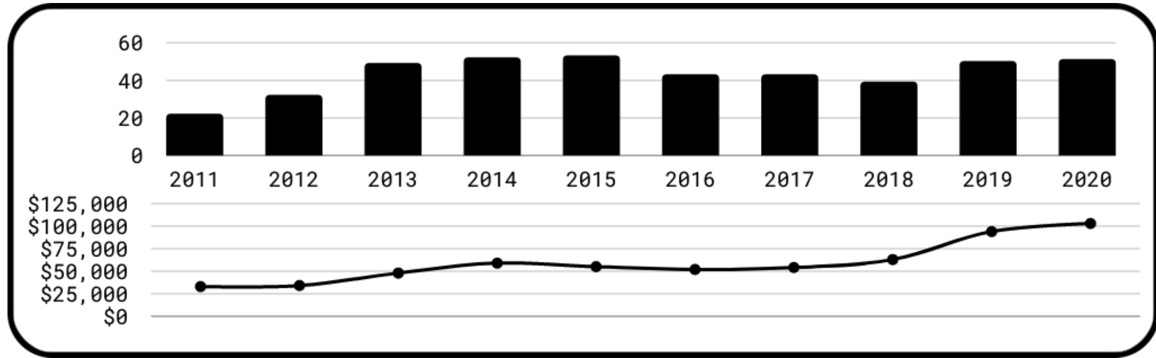

Figure 7: Average Sunday Attendance and Giving Trends from 2011 through 2020 for St. Nicholas, Maumelle. Compiled from "Parochial Report Results" (The Episcopal Church, 2022), https://www.episcopalchurch.org/research-and-statistics/.

St. Nicholas' Church is in the suburban community of Maumelle, several miles north of Little Rock. It began in 2008 when the diocesan ministry developer for youth an young adults, a lay person, and a resident of Maumelle, gained the bishop's permission to begin a church plant in the area. The vision was to "do church differently," that is, rent a meeting space in a growing part of town, worship with a projector and screen, and involve clergy for sacramental needs but otherwise rely on the laity to operate the church. Diocesan financial support was minimal, enough to cover building rental costs, materials, and clergy supply fees.

I was a curate at Trinity Cathedral in Little Rock at the time and served occasionally as St. Nicholas' Sunday supply priest during its first year. In 2009 I moved into my current role as canon to the ordinary and became more involved with St. Nicholas', working with the congregation as its principal administrative and pastoral connection to the bishop's office. Members of St. Nicholas' participated in regional

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throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings."

congregational development workshops with me and enthusiastically took part in annual diocesan convention. The congregation grew in spirit during these early years.

Despite a strong launch by the diocesan youth director, St. Nicholas' went through a period of soul searching when he moved away from Maumelle. The pressure to "do church differently," lessened and members of the congregation began asking for a salaried vicar and additional funds from the diocesan budget. The average age of members increased, and St. Nicholas' began to mirror the growing, retired demographic in the Maumelle area. Funding was provided for a part-time (2011-16), and eventually full-time priest (2016-20), but the church's average Sunday attendance did not change much. Members' financial contributions increased, however, and by 2021 St. Nicholas' was able to comfortably sustain a part-time priest without support from the diocesan budget.

Just as St. Nicholas' had stabilized financially, its members were dealt two simultaneous blows. The COVID-19 pandemic began, stifling the momentum gained by their new financial freedom, and their lease agreement fell apart. The building St. Nicholas' had occupied for more than ten years was put on the market, and with scant resources to purchase it, they had to vacate. I recall numerous Zoom meetings with the church leadership during this time to strategize about potential new worship locations. Members were grieved to lose the home they had built, and resisted encouragement to consider a storefront in a nearby shopping center. The building they were vacating was a traditional church with a nave, altar, and informal gathering space. Their new location was to be a converted mobile phone store.

In September 2021, an invitation came from St. Nicholas' priest asking for assistance to help the congregation emotionally process its location change. He reported that some members of the congregation disagreed about where they ought to put their energy. Should they continue to push for relocation back to the original building, hoping for diocesan assistance with the purchase, or should they settle into the storefront? I agreed to come on a Saturday morning from 9 to noon and present a workshop utilizing my Desert Prayers content.

I was pleased to discover that a sizable group of approximately 25 people showed up. The COVID-19 infection rate had temporarily waned at that point, and it felt good to be together after so much time apart. I began with *lectio divina,* using Matthew 4:1-11 as the passage from Scripture—Jesus's temptation in the wilderness—and then asked participants to imagine and describe their favorite place in the wilderness.[112] Both exercises seemed to be received well. I then offered a brief explanation of William Bridges' transition theory, highlighting the significance of the Neutral Zone, and described Evagrius' journey to the desert. I introduced the eight thoughts and guided the "Name That Thought" exercise. People seemed to be engaged.

To have participants apply what they had learned, I divided the eight thoughts among four small groups. Each group was asked to reflect on the two thoughts they had been given and consider how they may have manifested at St. Nicholas' in recent months.[113] I walked throughout the room during the conversation, listening and

[112] The "key concepts" segment of the workshop, during which I define spirituality and metaphor, was not a part of its first iteration. The video of my Utah bike-packing experience was also not included, as I had not yet made the trip.
[113] This was the workshop's first version of the application exercise, which ultimately evolved into the newsprint exercise used in subsequent workshops.

occasionally coaching a group's reflection. Everyone then came together as a large group and reported on the conversations, revealing pride and sadness as the two thoughts people most strongly identified with. They admitted to having thoughts of pride as they attempted to adjust to their new, nontraditional location. "A storefront is not a church," one said. "And we had cared for the grounds so well in our old location. There is nothing to care for here." The phrase "wounded pride" came up, and we discussed how Evagrius' understanding of pride goes deeper than "embarrassment" or "chagrin." Pride is a willful distancing from God, and perhaps could be recognized here as a flat-out refusal to see God's presence in this new location. We considered how the thought of sadness is closely tied to the thought of pride in this case. "The desire for what was, or what might have been" resonated with them as they remembered their original church building. They admitted that much of their identity was wrapped up in that space and how that attachment might be holding them back from seeing the possibilities that the new location provided.

I could tell there was some discomfort in this conversation. Certain individuals seemed to appreciate the idea that this was a spiritual challenge and were ready to address it as such, while others remained frustrated and grieved by the loss, not yet willing to admit that they couldn't go back. I noticed a slight conflict in what I had come to see as my dual roles of diocesan administrator and "spiritual workshop leader," having to address questions about the lack of diocesan financial support that would enable a return to the old building.

During the breaks, I participated in several interesting side conversations. One parishioner asked me which "thought" or "sin" would apply to someone who had

committed suicide. One of his friends had recently died in this way, and he was processing the loss. I was cautious during this conversation, recognizing it as needing more nuance than five minutes would allow. We named pride as a possible fit, in the sense that someone who commits suicide may no longer see the divine image in themselves. When we insist that we are not worthy of love, we are second-guessing God. This individual's use of the thoughts as a tool for reflection on his experience of loss was appropriate, but I sensed that we had wandered into a pastoral territory that this workshop was not designed to accommodate.

Then the priest pulled me aside to discuss his desire to retire soon due to changes in his personal life. I knew he was not planning on serving much longer at St. Nicholas', and I was aware of the changes he spoke of, but the timing of this conversation caught me off guard. In the middle of a presentation on desert spirituality, I was fielding significant pastoral and administrative concerns. Again, the question of inhabiting conflicting roles crossed my mind.

I concluded the workshop with a session on contemplative prayer, stemming from Evagrius' notion that *praktikē* leads to *apatheia* and ultimately to *agapé*.[114] We meditated in silence for five minutes, and reflections were few following the exercise. I had the impression that participants were tired at this point and perhaps still processing the workshop's earlier content. I handed out bookmarks with information about the Desert Prayers website and thanked the group for the opportunity to work with them.

Despite words of appreciation, I drove away from Maumelle unsure as to whether the workshop met the expectations of its priest and participants—and whether it was

[114] The segment on remedies and virtues was not a part of the workshop in its first iteration.

helpful to them. I got the sense that too much information had been thrust on them at once. I hoped the workshop had pointed them in a direction that would ultimately result in spiritual growth and healthy discernment, but I was aware that it had not solved their presenting problem. As the "diocesan problem solver," I recognized this dissonance as a growing edge for me and wondered again about the competing roles I occupied.

St. Andrew's, Mountain Home

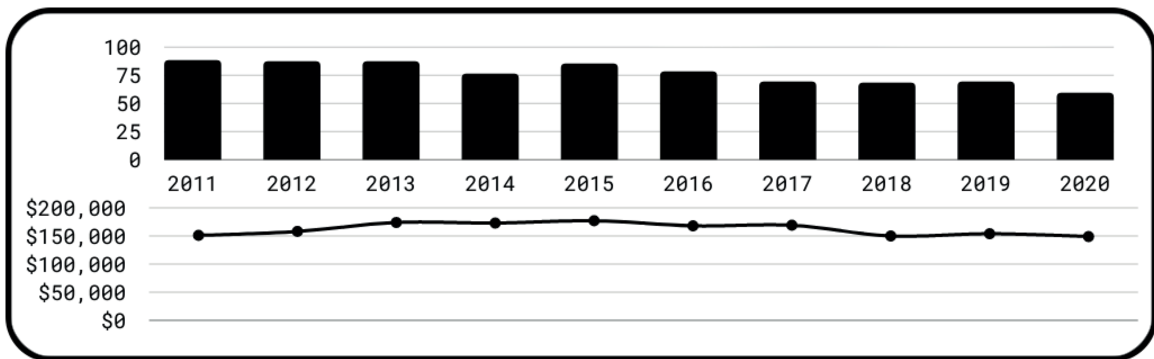

Figure 8: Average Sunday Attendance and Giving Trends from 2011 through 2020 for St. Andrew's, Mountain Home. Compiled from "Parochial Report Results" (The Episcopal Church, 2022), https://www.episcopalchurch.org/research-and-statistics/.

The impetus for my visit to St. Andrew's was to have a face-to-face meeting with its search committee and vestry regarding the congregation's search for a rector. Due to COVID-19 pandemic precautions and the three-hour drive between Mountain Home and Little Rock, our communication had been limited to Zoom calls up to this point. The search committee had completed its preliminary self-study work, and St. Andrew's was ready to receive nominations for its next rector. I suggested to the senior warden that we offer an open invitation to the parish to participate in a "mid-transition workshop" that would allow conversation about the search process and provide an opportunity to explore the spirituality of transitions more deeply.

After my workshop with St. Nicholas', I felt I needed to be clearer about what I was offering so that expectations had the best opportunity of being met. My invitation to the congregation, which ran in the St. Andrew's newsletter and worship bulletin was as follows:

> The search committee, vestry, and interested members of St. Andrew's are invited to participate in a transition workshop with Canon Jason Alexander. We will meet on Saturday, October 23 from 9:00 a.m. - noon in the parish hall to catch up on the status of the search process and to explore the challenges and opportunities transitions present. Viewing a period of transition in congregational leadership as a formative "desert experience," akin to the Israelite's wilderness journey from Egypt to their new home, can help us make the most of this time. We will explore the spirituality of the early Christian desert tradition and learn what wisdom it has for us today, including an ancient method of contemplative prayer. Learn more about desert spirituality at https://desertprayers.com or contact Jason Alexander at jalexander@episcopalarkansas.org.

I streamlined the introduction to the presentation, substituting *lectio divina* for a group exploration of the two key concepts of spirituality and metaphor. I also included the video of my week-long bikepacking trip through the southern Utah desert to introduce desert spirituality. The application portion of the workshop had also been overhauled. Rather than assigning small groups two thoughts each to reflect on, as I had done at St. Nicholas' in Maumelle, participants were introduced to the newsprint exercise. A brief section about the thoughts' corresponding virtues was also added, along with information about Evagrius' suggested remedies to the thoughts. These changes helped produce a more focused presentation. The workshop also seemed to have a lighter, more hopeful tone.

St. Andrews' in Mountain Home began as a mission congregation in 1950. Bishop Bland Mitchell wanted to take advantage of the town's growing population due to a government project to build a dam on the White River. Not only would project

employees potentially be interested in an Episcopal Church in the area, but Bull Shoals, the lake created by the dam, was expected to draw new residents.[115] Over the years, Mountain Home's scenic beauty, easy access to boating and fishing, and low cost of living drew many retirees to the area, which ultimately became St. Andrew's principal demographic. Today the congregation self-identifies as a congregation of seniors. Despite the plurality of older individuals at St. Andrew's, several younger people attended the workshop, including a married same-gender couple and a Latina. These individuals are all in leadership positions in the church, demonstrating St. Andrew's appreciation of diversity.

This was the second clergy leadership transition process I had facilitated at St. Andrew's. I also had conducted several vestry visioning and mutual ministry review workshops with them over the years, and I would characterize the congregation as healthy, self-aware, and compassionate. They have consistently had a good relationship with their priests. In the past decade, however, St. Andrew's average Sunday attendance has decreased by nearly 40%. Members credit this decline to parishioner deaths, relocations, and Mountain Home's sluggish population trend. There is anxiety about this change, particularly as it anticipates a drop in congregational giving and the implications that will have on its ability to pay a full-time priest.

As was the case in Maumelle, there was significant interest in this workshop. Approximately 20 parishioners participated, most members of either the vestry or the search committee. As advertised, I began with an update on the search process and fielded questions. One parishioner wanted to discuss the possibility of advertising a low

[115] See Margaret Simms McDonald, *White Already to Harvest: The Episcopal Church in Arkansas, 1838-1971* (Sewanee, TN: University Press of Sewanee, Tennessee, 1975), 292-3.

compensation figure for the open rector position. I was conscious of our limited time and eager to move into the next section of the workshop, so I did not give a very detailed answer. I noted, though that the question revealed an underlying financial anxiety present in the congregation.

The newsprint exercise was fruitful, and a major improvement from the version of the exercise used in Maumelle. Anger, pride, sadness, and vainglory were the top thoughts noted as drivers of the congregation's actions. The subsequent discussion about anger was particularly rich. Examples were offered of people "taking their toys and going home" when frustrated, including the leave-taking of parishioners after Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop, was elected in 2003. The congregation still carries wounds from the rift that formed in the wake of that event. We discussed how anger is closely related to sadness—if not addressed, sadness can transform into resentment.[116] I followed up with questions about sadness: What is it that members are lamenting? What are they grieving? What are their unfulfilled desires? Answers included "a decline in membership," "financial uncertainty," and "we're all old, and we need more young families." We then brainstormed about how these expressions of sadness could turn into anger. It was noted that people at St. Andrew's were not particularly good at communicating with one another about their feelings. Occasionally, they admitted, an individual or a couple simply leaves or stops pledging and no one speaks directly to them about the sudden change in their participation. Those who are frustrated, for whatever

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[116] Anger and sadness are closely connected but their relationship is not always linear. In *The Praktikos* 10 Evagrius notes that sometimes sadness "follows closely upon anger," while in *Reflections* 43 he writes that thoughts "of sadness lead and those of anger follow." Cassian is more systematic. In *The Conferences* X.2 he describes how the thoughts overlap: "In order to conquer acedia, sadness must first be overcome; in order to drive out sadness, anger must be cast out beforehand; in order to extinguish anger, avarice must be trampled on; in order to eradicate avarice fornication must be repressed; in order to overthrow fornication, the vice of gluttony must be disciplined."

reason, don't seem to be heard. When remedies and virtues were discussed later in the workshop, we noted Evagrius' suggestions for curbing anger in particular:

> Gifts extinguish resentment: let the example of Jacob convince you of this, for he beguiled Esau with gifts when he was coming out to meet him with four hundred men. But since we are poor, let us make up for our poverty by the hospitality of the table.[117]

Also of note, there was a comment by a participant that seemed to demonstrate just how deeply a person, or a group of people, can be immersed in a thought. After the lengthy discussion of sadness and its ability to obscure God's presence and creative work in the world—particularly in reference to how a group can lament the absence of young people to such an extent that the group can no longer see the gifts that *are* present in the community—an individual said, "Yes, but we're old and we must have young people to grow." I attempted to gently point out that this comment was illustrative of exactly what we had been discussing. I was reminded that the process of coming to terms with the thoughts is not necessarily a matter of logical reasoning, but rather one of practice, prayer, patience, and time.

As with the first workshop, participants seemed tired after the group processing and had a difficult time pivoting from discussing sadness and anger to learning about contemplative prayer. Discussion was brief after the five minutes of silent meditation. I gave everyone bookmarks and invited them to participate online to go deeper.

The congregation generously offered a lunch following the event, and we were able to talk informally for a time. It was good to connect and receive their hospitality. One individual spoke with me afterwards about how she had started a contemplative

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[117] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 26. See also *Monks* 15: "If your brother annoys you, invite him to your place or do not hesitate to go to him, but eat your portion with him, for in so doing you will save your soul and there will be no obstacle for you in the time of prayer."

prayer group at St. Andrew's years ago but that it had fizzled out. Participants moved away, passed away, or simply became interested in other things. Another person spoke to me about spiritual warfare and his belief in literal demonic forces, which reminded me that the subject of this workshop is wide-ranging and only scratches the surface of a rich, complicated, and controversial tradition of spirituality.

To hold interest longer and engage participants in the project more, in the days that followed I began to send brief, weekly reflections to the people who had provided their email addresses. Some responded to the reflections, and I was able to continue the discussion with them individually. The inclusion of a more intentional follow-up component of the workshop was a response to the experience I had in Maumelle of individuals desiring to explore these topics beyond the bounds of what could be offered during the workshop.

St. John's, Helena-West Helena

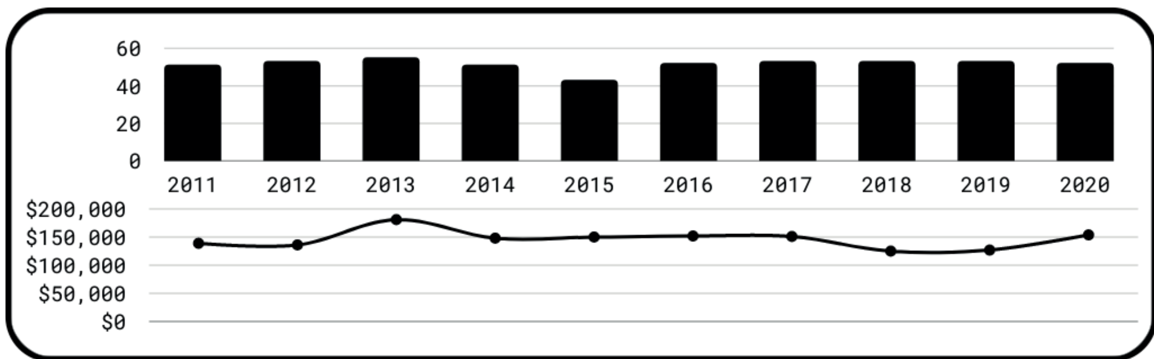

Figure 9: Average Sunday Attendance and Giving Trends from 2011 through 2020 for St. John’s, Helena-West Helena. Compiled from “Parochial Report Results” (The Episcopal Church, 2022), https://www.episcopalchurch.org/research-and-statistics/.

The third congregation I chose to work with was St. John’s in Helena-West Helena, an Arkansas Delta community two hours due east of Little Rock. Both the town

and the congregation have a storied history. The community is often termed the "blues capital of the world," as it is home to the longest running blues radio show in the country.[118] It also hosts the King Biscuit Blues Festival each year drawing attendees from around the world. Its contribution to American music and arts culture is venerable.

As is the case with many congregations and communities in Arkansas, Helena-West Helena also has complex racial history. As a Mississippi River community in the Arkansas Delta, it was a booming center of commerce in the 19th century owing much of its success to slave labor. It was also a bastion of the Confederacy during the Civil War. The poverty and population decline in the area have transformed Helena-West Helena's infrastructure into a shadow of its former self. While the community has done a commendable job publicizing its admirable qualities to attract tourism, restoring historic buildings downtown, and welcoming social service initiatives such as the KIPP Foundation and Teach for America, it continues to face an uphill climb. The past cruelties of slavery will forever define the Delta as even its celebrated cultural gifts, such as gospel and the blues, were born of adversity and inequality. Willard Gatewood, in *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox*, suggests that this area "represents in microcosm the distinctive environment, behavior, and historical experience of the South. In few other areas have the tensions characteristic of southern society been more obvious than the Arkansas Delta. These tensions have manifested themselves in various ways—between man and the physical environment, between whites and blacks, between rich and poor."[119]

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[118] Helena Advertising and Promotion Commission, "Delta Blues and Beyond," accessed May 18, 2022, https://visithelenaar.com/featured-attractions/delta-blues/.
[119] Willard B. Gatewood Jr, *Arkansas Delta.* (Fayetteville, US: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 5.

Two blocks west of Cherry Street, Helena-West Helena's main downtown thoroughfare, sits St. John's Episcopal Church. Although the church wasn't officially founded until 1853, the community was recognized as a missionary site as early as 1839 when Bishop Polk, the first missionary bishop of Arkansas, stopped in the area to preach. He recorded the following reflection in his journal: "[Helena is] the most considerable town in Arkansas on the Mississippi River. It is surrounded by exceedingly fertile country, as I was informed, not very thickly settled…[the inhabitants] seem very destitute of religious privileges."[120] Bishop Polk's successor in office founded the congregation twelve years later, and it grew to become a prominent parish in the diocese. Despite the deteriorated state of the buildings surrounding it, St. John's remains one of the most beautiful historic church structures in the state. Its Sunday attendance steadily remains around 50, and its finances are also strong due in large part to a sizable endowment.

Like the community in which it resides, however, St. John's bears the weight of a complex social history. Reportedly, it had an unfortunate role in aftermath of the tragic Elaine massacre of 1919. One dreadful night there were an estimated 230 or more black people killed as a preemptive measure to head off a rumored revolt against white members of the community. The American Legion met in the basement of St. John's after the massacre, resolving to demand the execution of twelve black men believed to have instigated the alleged revolt.[121] On December 4, 2021, just over one hundred years later, it was in this very basement that I conducted my workshop with the St. John's vestry.

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[120] Margaret Simms McDonald, *White Already to Harvest*, 10.

[121] See Leslie Newell Peacock, "To Those Known and Unknown: The Elaine Massacre Memorial," *Arkansas Times*, August 2, 2019, https://arktimes.codesaq1 m/news/cover-stories/2019/08/02/to-those-known-and-unknown. See also "Phillips County American Legion Minutes Book, 1919-1924" (Helena Museum of Phillips County, Phillips County, Arkansas), 18, https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/phillips-county-american-legion-minutes/1/.

I had been in this basement several times over the years for vestry meetings, luncheons, and celebratory receptions, as well as a mediation workshop among the vestry and a past rector whose relationship had become strained. This time, however, the vestry had kindly gathered at my request to participate in a workshop exploring the spirituality of transitions. The most recent rector had retired and it was time to search for another. As was the case during St. John's last clergy transition (which I also facilitated) the interim period was protracted. The task of finding a clergy person to move to Helena-West Helena, given the town's challenges noted above, is formidable. This set the scene nicely for a rich conversation about *The Neutral Zone*, or the challenges of the desert.

I conducted this workshop identically to the Mountain Home version, having felt that the changes made after the Maumelle workshop significantly improved the presentation. Conversation was rich as we discussed the key concepts of spirituality and metaphor, and there was strong engagement during the "Name That Thought" portion of the presentation. A particularly interesting discussion began around the thought of avarice. As part of the exercise, I give two examples of avarice in the form of statements one might hear a parishioner or priest make. The first represents the fear of not having enough money: "We just don't have enough money to pay salaries. If people don't up their pledge, we'll just have to let someone go." The second suggests that avarice can also play a role when a congregation has a lot of money: "Pledges are down. Well, at least we have an endowment." The teaching is that avarice does not always have to do with desiring more, or fears of scarcity, it also has to do with having so much that congregational giving becomes less of a priority. If having money is the purpose of stewardship, why give more when the congregation already has enough to pay the bills?

However, if giving itself is the purpose, how full the congregation's coffers are becomes less important. Money loses its power, and the true value of charity emerges.

I had to restate my meaning several times, assuring participants that I wasn't saying that St. John's endowment is "bad," per se, rather that an endowment is morally neutral. In the same sense, it is not necessarily a gift.[122] Congregations and clergy simply need to be mindful of the role money plays in its understanding of itself and how financial abundance or scarcity drives decision making. It occurred to me that this is a particularly complicated topic for a vestry, the body charged with managing a congregation's temporal affairs. More so, perhaps, for the vestry of a congregation whose money has given it the ability to survive in an economically depressed community.

As we began the application portion of the workshop, and participants placed dots on the newsprint posted around the room to mark the thoughts they considered to be the most prevalent at St. John's, it struck me as a significant occasion. Throughout its 170-year history, this church basement had hosted countless festive receptions and outreach endeavors celebrating the joys and generosity of humanity. It had also seen humanity at its most fearful and reckless. This vestry was now bearing witness, in a way, to this breadth of human experience. The walls were literally marked with the names of the ancient eight thoughts that are known to obscure the presence of God, and the vestry members courageously moved from one piece of newsprint to the next, considering the impact that avarice, anger, vainglory, and the others have had on their church community.

[122] See *The Second Conference of Abba Moses: On Discretion* in Cassian, *The Conferences.* Discretion could be viewed as balanced judgement in the spiritual life, encouraging one to recognize that objects, or practices, or ideas, have no inherent worth, however, one can make idols of them if one does not have discretion. Money can be good or bad depending on the circumstance.

When the results were tallied, sadness was overwhelmingly chosen as the most prevalent thought. Pride came in second with almost half as many votes.

The discussion that followed was a rich lament of what St. John's and Helena-West Helena have lost over the years. Parishioners long for a priest to live in the community, yet convincing clergy to move to an economically depressed eastern Arkansas town is challenging. Parishioners feel like they're getting older and do not have younger members to serve in their stead. Beloved matriarchs and patriarchs of St. John's have died in recent years as well, leaving significant sorrow in their absence. It was an honor for me to listen, and to be welcomed into the experience of grief this community bears.

As a response, we turned to the remedies and virtues that correspond with sadness and considered how parishioners may have already begun to identify the presence of courage and patience within St. John's. The vestry felt it had witnessed both virtues grow in recent years. Patience is the ability to endure and grow in faith through difficult times. Courage, or strength of heart, is the ability to make difficult decisions and motivate change rooted in love. Some of the past internal conflicts at St. John's among priests and parishioners, as well as occasional disagreements with the bishop's office, seem to have cooled, and there has been a growing appreciation of supply priests who consistently serve St. John's. I regularly experience exceptional hospitality whenever I visit. And St. John's has deepened its relationships with the local KIPP school and Teach for America, working with these groups to develop a more intentional connection with the underserved populations in the area. Faculty from these institutions often attend St. John's as well, which is a testament to the congregation's spirit of inclusion and hope.

As we concluded the meditation session and our time together ended, a member of the vestry asked if we could discuss one more thing. Ironically, after our thorough conversation about sadness and patience, this vestry member's question was sharp: "So, when are you going to find us a priest?" The tone implied that I, the transition minister, had not been as diligent in my work as I could have been. Other emotionally charged questions and comments followed. I listened and acknowledged the frustration in the room, assuring them that the search is ongoing. Intellectually, I understood that these questions were valid, as vestry members are under pressure from the congregation to find a priest. Emotionally, however, I was deflated. After a three-hour presentation about the spiritual pits of transitions and suggestions on how to climb out of them, I felt like we had all fallen right back in. The members of the vestry were sad, desiring something they did not have, and I became frustrated, my compassion beginning to fray.

This experience was another reminder that the problems the eight thoughts cause are ultimately not remedied with reasoning and logic. Although knowledge of the thoughts and of ourselves is vital as we work to avoid or remedy them, strengthening our relationship with God, through prayer, is the key. As Evagrius notes, "Do not set your will on having your affairs turn out as it seems best to you, but rather as it pleases God. Then you will be untroubled and thankful in your prayer."[123] I pray that God opened my eyes and the eyes of the vestry somewhat during our time together, and that we can come to appreciate what may have been revealed to us.

As with the previous two congregations, I distributed bookmarks and encouraged participation in the Desert Prayers website. Several individuals visited the site and one

[123] Evagrius, *Chapters on Prayer* 89.

participated in-depth throughout the season of Lent, recording meditation times and making journal entries.

Fresh Start

One of the duties I most enjoy as canon to the ordinary is serving as the facilitator for the diocesan Fresh Start group. It is a different group each year of typically four to six new priests who are embarking on their first calls as ordained persons in the church. We meet six times each year, September through May. I have been fortunate to work with over thirty priests in this capacity, not only helping them to gain footing in their calls but also building mutually beneficial relationships as we share ministry in the diocese. For the Fresh Start meeting on December 7, 2021, I chose to utilize a slightly modified version of my Desert Prayers workshop for the meeting's content, introducing four new priests to Evagrius and the eight thoughts, hoping they might find solidarity and inspiration in the midst their own current time of transition.

Allison is a Bexley Seabury graduate serving at St. Peter's, Lonoke, a pastoral size congregation east of Little Rock. While the bishop and I prefer to find an assistantship for priests in their first call, allowing them to benefit from the experience of a resident mentor priest, one is not always available, so Allison serves as a solo vicar at St. Peter's. She is also its first female priest and follows a vicar with a nearly thirty-year tenure. Most parishioners at St. Peter's do not remember the previous vicar's predecessor, and so Allison is offering them an entirely new image of what a priest looks like. Despite this, she and members of the congregation report a positive fit, and energy for creativity and spiritual growth seems to be flowing. The vestry at St. Peter's is particularly strong and compassionate which has undoubtedly contributed to the success of the call.

Rod is a graduate of Sewanee serving as an assistant at St. John's in Rogers. St. John's is one of the largest churches in the diocese, affording Rod the experience of serving as a staff member at a resource size congregation. He has responsibilities for the college ministry and adult Christian formation programs at St. John's as well as regular pastoral and sacramental duties. He, too, reports a positive ministry experience but has occasionally struggled with triangulation among some members of the congregation. Learning to remain self-differentiated during such encounters has been a growing edge, and he appears to be a conscientious and quick learner. Rod, who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, is slated to be married soon and hopes to settle in Rogers for at least several more years. The congregation is affirming of his marriage. Rod is the first openly gay priest St. John's has had.

Jane is a Virginia Theological Seminary graduate serving St. Paul's, Newport in a 3/4-time capacity. St. Paul's had been without a permanent priest for several years, and its vestry agreed to have Jane serve as priest-in-charge (a temporary designation) in order to judge the fit. Despite having to manage a few intricate pastoral situations initially, Jane feels that she has settled in well. In fact, the vestry recently decided to call her as rector, which is a tenured designation. Like St. John's, Helena, St. Paul's is also an historic Delta congregation that carries with it a complicated racial past.[124] St. Paul's has also not had many extended calls with female priests. Despite this history Jane has developed a healthy relationship with the congregation and has come to value the people dearly.

[124] See Michael J. Beary, "Chapter 5: The Newport Incident," in *Black Bishop: Edward T. Demby and the Struggle for Racial Equality in the Episcopal Church*, Studies in Anglican History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 163–99. During the 1932 diocesan convention held at St. Paul's in Newport, an Arkansas priest was elected bishop. However, the House of Bishops vetoed his election in part because of the segregated Eucharist that took place during the convention.

The fourth member of the group is Peggy, a graduate of Seminary of the Southwest. Peggy served for a year as an assistant in another Arkansas parish before receiving the call to her new position as rector of Trinity in Russellville. Of the four, Peggy is arguably facing the most complicated ministry challenge. Russellville is a retirement community, and Trinity's demographic makeup reflects that. Parishioners tend to be retired, or near retirement age, generally socially and politically conservative, and have a history of limited involvement in the wider diocese. When I became canon, Trinity was experiencing significant friction with its rector. In hindsight, anger appeared to be a prevalent thought among the parties, limiting the capacity for compassion and empathy, and the relationship ended with the rector's expedited retirement. Another rector was called about a year later, but his tenure was shorter than the parishioners desired. Trinity has some conservative and unconventional initiatives, which can be difficult for clergy leadership to manage. For example, a shooter-preparedness guild was formed whose members were tasked with patrolling the church grounds during Sunday worship. Not all members are supportive of this initiative and the issue has become a lightning rod representing the social and political differences among church members. So, when Peggy, a young, gay, married woman was called as rector in Trinity's next search, I was surprised. Today, Peggy reports joy in her call, but it is not without its challenges. Peggy has adeptly navigated some of the strong personalities at Trinity, as well as occasional insensitive actions or comments around issues of sexuality and gender.

Allison, Rod, Jane, and Peggy are each experiencing significant "firsts" in their ministry as are their respective congregations. They resonated strongly with Bridges' description of *The Neutral Zone*, and easily connected with the wandering-in-the-

wilderness metaphor. Given their opportunities to hone such skills in seminary, their theological reflection about their ministry experiences was beautiful and on point. The group's intimate setting and the facility with which they thought and spoke theologically, led to several powerful insights. We commiserated light-heartedly on the pain-relieving effects of gluttony and our shared struggles with taming that bodily desire. Anger, some of us admitted, was a persistent thorn, limiting our capacity to see God working amidst the occasional painful situations in our ministries. Interestingly, as if in step with Evagrius' description of the journey from the concupiscible, through the irascible, and into the rational part of the mind, the group ultimately narrowed its focus on the pernicious thoughts of vainglory and pride.[125] We recognized the desire in ourselves to be praised, whether it be for our pastoral care, our sermons, or our ability to run a meeting. We discussed how vainglory can be distinctly present as one transitions into a new call. The extent to which we have "won over" a congregation can be closely linked with our sense of self-worth. The pull of pride, too, can be painfully sharp. Despite our theological training and persistence in prayer, putting ourselves in God's place is an ever-present temptation. It is easy to forget during vestry meetings, strategic planning, financial management, and staff oversight that the Spirit is always at work and in control despite our best efforts to pretend that we, personally, have the power to make or break a congregation.

[125] Evagrius writes of "impassibility" or *apatheia* as a goal of the monk. See *The Praktikos* 54-58 for a description of the various signs of *apatheia*—a time when the spirit is free from distractions. In *Evagrius of Pontus*, xxxi, Robert E. Sinkewicz describes the progression towards impassibility as follows: "The first state involves the mastery of the passions of the concupiscible part of the soul, principally gluttony and fornication. Progress through the second stage advances with the gradual control of the passions through the irascible part, but perfect impassibility remains a goal that is not fully attainable in this life."

Turning our focus to the four congregations represented in the group, I invited each participant to take part in the same newsprint exercise I had conducted with St. Nicholas', St. Andrew's, and St. John's. They each had eight dots to distribute among the eight thoughts posted on the wall, representing the thoughts they had observed most often in their respective congregations. As with the three other congregations, sadness and pride arose as top thoughts, and we considered the special nature of this pairing.

Sadness often presents itself as a painful longing for "what once was," regardless of whether the recalled time or event is real or imagined. More precisely, sadness is the result of an inability to achieve a desired pleasure.[126] While the other thoughts have pleasures driving them, sadness occurs when pleasure is frustrated. For example, the thought of avarice makes one desire the comforts of money or material goods, but if money is in short supply sadness is the result. Regarding the thought of pride, control is the desired pleasure, and sadness arises when one cannot order a process to one's liking. It makes sense, then, that congregations during transition tend to commonly suffer from sadness. "Every transition begins with an ending," notes Bridges. "We have to let go of the old thing before we can pick up the new one—not just outwardly but inwardly, where we keep our connections to people and places that act as definitions of who we are."[127] Congregations that have historically associated their vitality, civic significance, or religious relevance with having more parishioners at Sunday morning worship, more children in Sunday School, or a priest with a certain gender, sexual orientation, or marital status are now having to "let go of the old thing" in order to make sense of who they are

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[126] See Evagrius *On Thoughts* 12 for a nuanced description of sadness.
[127] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 11.

today. This change is painfully out of their control and they long for the comfort of the past.

To be clear, none of the congregations represented by these four new priests are suffering from an acute spiritual crisis. Pride and sadness were simply recognized as the most commonly experienced of the eight thoughts. On the contrary, the priests noticed new life emerging. This was especially evident when we began to explore the corresponding virtues. As with St. John's in Helena-West Helena courageous efforts of outreach and hospitality within the congregations were noted, particularly at Rod's church, St. John's in Rogers. It has possibly become the most strident voice in the religious community for LGBTQ+ rights in an ultra-conservative county. And Peggy, when asked where she might have witnessed wisdom, or experiential knowledge (a corresponding virtue to pride) she said, "Well, they hired me!" This observation seemed to be a moment of inspiration for the group. Her congregation, Trinity, considered to be one of the more socially conservative congregations in the diocese, comprised mainly of retirees, was able to transcend the desire to be "in control," and wisely choose a compassionate, faithful rector despite some members' unease with her sexual orientation. Peggy said that she thinks this choice surprised even them.

Reflecting on the four workshops, I would consider this one to have been the most personally satisfying, and perhaps the most successful in the sense that my expectations and the expectations of the participants seemed to line up well. Learning and constructive reflection took place among St. Nicholas', St. Andrew's, and St. John's participants, but this group of new clergy seemed to respond to the material with more enthusiasm and creative energy than the others. As mentioned above, they were naturally more

comfortable with theological reflection, and I also think that my role with them was clearer than it was with the workshop participants in the congregations. The members of the Fresh Start group were not expecting me to "solve their problems" administratively. They didn't need me to orchestrate a diocesan loan for a building purchase, and they didn't need me to find them a priest. Rather, I think they saw me as a colleague, mentor, and confidant as they journeyed through *The Neutral Zone*. They were, perhaps, in a better position to hear and respond positively than the others, leading me to wonder whether the workshop's content was better suited for individuals rather than groups. I can imagine successfully using portions of this workshop in the future with Fresh Start groups and other groups of laity and clergy experiencing times of transition.

This qualitative research project has afforded me the opportunity not only to grow in my understanding of the workshop's content and to gain insights into the spiritual challenges members of congregations face, but also, as an exercise in personal reflexivity, to discover more clarity about my role as a priest in the diocese.[128] My primary role with congregations is that of a transition minister, conflict consultant, congregational development resource, and bridge to the bishop. Interactions with congregations are relatively brief, and the expectation is that I provide for them the appropriate information or process of resolution that would most expediently allow them to move forward in their ministry. I realize the considerable value of my role with congregations but also its apparent limitations. My role as canon among other priests in the diocese, such as those in the Fresh Start group, tends to allow for, and actively encourage, deeper pastoral interaction.

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[128] See John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 57 regarding qualitative research having an autobiographical component.

This is not to say that I, or someone in my role, cannot have meaningful, transformative, and pastorally rich relationships with congregations. My personal hope is that the wisdom gained from these workshops will better equip me to respond multidimensionally to the needs of congregations. I will continue to be available as a troubleshooter of technical challenges, but I will also aim to become a keener observer of the deeper adaptive needs of a congregation—those often-hidden hazards of *The Neutral Zone*.

Having become thoroughly immersed in the wilderness, we now turn to the final chapter of the transition journey, where the fruits of desert wandering are revealed.

Chapter 4

Vanquishing the Demons of Transition—*The New Beginning*

In his description of the third and final stage of the transition process, Bridges suggests that childbirth, our own primal beginning, is analogous to emerging from *The Neutral Zone.*[129] The birth process can be unpredictable and dramatic. Recalling Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus who is dumbfounded by the idea that someone could be "born after having grown old," *The New Beginning*, or rebirth, is indeed available to us all no matter how long, painful, or confusing our experience in *The Neutral Zone* may be.[130] The process isn't always linear.

This is the reality of *The New Beginning*. It is far more organic than it is mechanistic. Although we tend to want a switch to flip signaling the end of an arduous journey through *The Neutral Zone* and marking our arrival at *The New Beginning*, no such switch exists. In a cross-country move, a job change, or a clergy transition process, for example, this can be deceptive. Moving into a new house, a new office, or welcoming a new rector are measurable milestones, but the psychological transition does not end there—our wandering in *The Neutral Zone* often continues for some time afterwards. Signs alerting us to *The New Beginning* on the horizon tend to be subtle and internal rather than obvious and external. "The most important of these signals begins as a faint intimation of something different, a new theme in the music, a strange fragrance on the breeze."[131]

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[129] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 162.
[130] John 3:4b.
[131] William Bridges, *Transitions*, 164.

Bridges notes that a new theme can come in the form of a comment, for example, when a friend makes an observation that gives you pause about the path you are on. Or even after waking from a particularly moving dream, when a new idea or experience comes to life revealing a path not previously considered. And when this occurs it is time to stop getting ready and act—to make a commitment toward transforming the hint of *The New Beginning* into a reality. It is entirely possible that after committing we may be thrust back into *The Neutral Zone* for additional wandering, and yet at some point wandering must give way to focused forward movement. To revisit a metaphor, the car must be shifted out of neutral and eased into first gear, even if it is sometimes tricky to get the timing right. Once we are confidently in first, we then need to patiently work our way into higher gears, thus the journey into *The New Beginning* starts in earnest.

In addition to having provided an experience that I hope enabled connections, sparked imagination, and increased resilience in the face of transition, the act of ministry component of this project thesis revealed important data. As a phenomenological study of transitions, using the language of Evagrius as a guide, the key themes of sadness, pride, and anger emerged. All four groups that participated in the project noted these troubling thoughts as the most frequent within their respective congregations. Ethnographically speaking, the troubling thoughts experienced by individuals during an experience of transition influenced the broader culture of these congregations, and, in turn, the broader culture has made an emotional impact on the individuals. Thus, just as an individual can experience sadness, pride, or anger, a congregational culture may be driven by these

thoughts on a systemic scale.[132] This result proposes a direction for further study that may lead to *The New Beginning* for these individuals, groups and, perhaps, for the larger Church.

Recalling Evagrius' saying, "Take away the temptations and no-one will be saved," it is precisely through the eight thoughts that one must journey in order to discover the corresponding virtues on the other side.[133] In the case of sadness and anger, the virtues of courage and patience await, two qualities that members of the Church's next generation must possess. A struggle with pride cultivates prudence, understanding, and wisdom, essential characteristics for generating creative thoughts and casting hopeful visions.

As a step toward *The New Beginning*, this final chapter examines more deeply these three thoughts through the lens of a modern theologian. In *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes,* Belden Lane writes about how practicing a spirituality of brokenness can open our hearts to recognize God in the most unlikely—and even the most "grotesque" of places. He offers three ways of approaching this difficult concept. First, we must learn to see grace as a "harsh and dreadful thing," recognizing that it often breaks into our lives in unexpected and initially shocking ways. Second, we must work on a "redefinition of humanity," not valuing one another as the world does—by one's ability to be productive or successful—but as God does. The "lost" by this world's standards are perhaps truer measures of humanity than those who excel in this world. And third, we must "rediscover

[132] See Max Van Manen's definition of ethnography in, *Researching Lived Experience*, 177-8: "Ethnography is the task of describing a particular culture (ethos)…. Ethnographers are interested in taxonomizing or categorizing the cultural perceptions in the ethnographic account."
[133] *Apophthegmata Patrum* Evagrius 5.

a broken God," learning to recognize the wholeness of God within the most broken parts of this world.

I chose Belden Lane's writing as a resource for this chapter about *The New Beginning* phase of the transition process because of his stunning facility with metaphor involving the transformative power of the natural world, particularly desert landscapes. He writes,

> Perhaps one flees to landscapes of abandonment in times of loss, like a person half conscious of his sickness drawn unexplainable to homeopathic cures. In the practice of homeopathy, a physician prescribes miniscule doses of an improbable medicine in order to produce symptoms closely resembling those of the disease being treated. If one applies the same logic to landscape, then sheer cliffs and alkali flats may keenly suggest themselves to those for whom deprivation or loss have become harsh realities. Emptiness often answers of its own. Deep speaks to deep.[134]

At the heart of sadness and anger lies loss and isolation, and at the heart of pride lies the lack of control in being found. Just as Evagrius retreated into the barren *wadis* of Lower Egypt to discover what truths may lie hidden in emptiness, the Church's journey through the desert landscape may ultimately be its salvation. I propose that Lane's insights suggest a creatively courageous way for congregations experiencing the thoughts of sadness, pride, and anger to understand their plight more fully, and open a more faithful way for me, as a canon, colleague, and fellow Christian, to minster to them.

In *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, Lane's chapter "Grace and the Grotesque" sets the scene for a rich exploration of apophatic spirituality, that is, coming to know, love, and be transformed by God through God's absence rather than God's presence. The counterintuitive nature of this form of spirituality can make it difficult to grasp. Answers

[134] Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

are not found in grand church buildings or moving hymns, nor are they in thriving outreach programs or well-honed sermons. The *via negativa* reveals its transformative power, rather, when the dictates of this world, its expectations, demands, and definitions, are cast aside. Like Moses' passage into "the thick darkness where God was" atop Mount Sinai, it is a paradoxical journey into obscurity instead of clarity.[135] "Apophatic spirituality has to start at the point where every other possibility ends," writes Lane. "Whether we arrive there by means of a moment of stark extremity in our lives, or (metaphorically) by way of entry into a high desert landscape, the sense of naked inadequacy remains the same."[136]

As explored in previous chapters, the experience of transition can unceremoniously thrust us into the desert, a harsh and unforgiving landscape that flat out refuses to care for us. It does not praise us when we crest a steep climb, nor does it insult us when we stumble. No matter what we do, the desert doesn't owe us safe passage or a comforting turn of events. There can be no expectation of a quid pro quo among the rocks, shrubs, and cacti of the desert. Wanderers in this stark landscape are left to struggle with the many internal voices, passions, thoughts, or demons vying for attention. And it is precisely in contending with this uncomfortable cacophony—this "thick darkness"—that God is revealed.

Grace in a Broken Lease Agreement

Lane suggests that navigating the *via negativa* requires of us three extraordinary difficult acts, the first of which is learning a different dimension of grace. We tend to

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[135] Exodus 20:21b.
[136] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 36.

characterize grace as having a “sweet sound,” per the famous hymn, and yet grace, according to Flannery O’Conner “comes sometimes like a kick in the teeth, leaving us broken, wholly unable to deny our need.”[137] Grace may first appear as repulsive in the graceless way of life we have normalized. For example, grace may come in the form of a corrective comment from another that raises our defenses. We can choose to reject that comment or reflect on why it sparked such a reaction in us. What might we need to hear from another that we don’t really want to? Grace is prophetic in this sense, calling us into a new relationship with God, self, and neighbor.

St. Nicholas’ in Maumelle’s struggle to relocate from its beloved building to a storefront comes to mind. Recalling the workshop I conducted with its parishioners, the thoughts of sadness, and pride were identified as prominent drivers of the congregation’s emotions and actions in the wake of their move. They longed to return to their original home of more than ten years. The building looked like a “real church,” with a nave, parish hall, and steeple. They found comfort and stability there, yet their desire to return was frustrated and sadness the result. Pride presented itself as the thought that ministry was simply not possible in the storefront—that God’s work was best (and perhaps only) done within the right structure. Consequently, these troubling thoughts obscured their vision of the work God might be doing with them during this relocation. The storefront had its benefits—a glass front providing a sense of transparency and openness, encouraging deeper connection between those inside the building and the neighborhood beyond. It shared a wall with another storefront church, a new neighbor with which to partner in ministry. St. Nicholas’ was also able to repurpose an altar, pulpit, and reredos

[137] As quoted by Belden Lane in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 32.

from another congregation in the diocese that had recently closed, giving new life to historical appointments and a sense of continuity with those who passed them on.

Beyond the opportunities this new location offered, the transition also pointed out a deeper challenge the congregation had not yet faced in its lifetime. It had reached a point of stability in its original location, a success from one point of view, but this place of comfort also had enabled the congregation's sense of mission and ministry in the neighborhood to plateau and stagnate. The relocation forced St. Nicholas' to reflect on this vital aspect being a Christian community, and it was uncomfortable. "Grace rarely comes as a gentle invitation to change," writes Lane.[138] As difficult as it may be for members of St. Nicholas' to admit, grace can indeed be found in a broken lease agreement. If members of the congregation can realize that God has been with them in this surprising way, and will journey with them into the future, perhaps sadness will transform into courage for the new ministry ahead, perhaps wisdom will emerge from pride, equipping them with experiential knowledge for more faithful decisions in the future.

Reflecting on my workshop experience with St. Nicholas', grace appeared as a "harsh and dreadful thing" to me as well. As St. Nicholas' was the first congregation I conducted this workshop with, the participants heard not only from me that day, but also from the troubling thoughts that accompanied me. This was the first time I had publicly discussed the topic of Evagrius and the eight thoughts, exposing a passion that had grown in me—and I had grown protective of—for quite some time. I had no idea how desert spirituality would be received by a congregation. Would they feel judged by talk of the

[138] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 32.

“deadly sins?” Were the desert mothers and fathers too extreme to be lauded as examples for modern Christians? I recognized within me a powerful streak of vainglory, hungry for reassurance and praise. Pride, vainglory’s constant companion, had also made a strong showing. Downplaying the importance of God’s role within my interaction with participants, I felt that it was up to me to bring transformation to the group. I was in control, and the weight of this endeavor was on my shoulders alone, leading me to doubt my ability to carry it all.

Despite these lurking demons, the people of St. Nicholas’ were generous with me, willing to follow my lead down this unfamiliar spiritual path. When I stumbled, they gave me the benefit of the doubt and continued to show trust, but they also subtly let me know about those areas in the presentation that needed improvement. There were times that I seemed to lose their attention and there were exercises that had uneven results. Like the people of St. Nicholas’ and the experience of their broken lease agreement, grace did not come in the form of a quick “feel good” fix, giving me what I immediately desired. Grace never satisfies the demons on their terms. I did not receive a standing ovation for my presentation, and insights seemed to happen despite my frequent stumbles. My desires for praise and control were frustrated. Sadness was the result, and it was painful. Grace, though, picked me up and encouraged me to learn from what I had experienced, to adjust, and then continue to move forward in faith. One of the virtues that corresponds with vainglory and pride is understanding, or sympathy and insight—precisely what I would need to prepare for my next presentation—sympathy for my own failings and insight into the deeper divine power at work. Grace is the gift that exposes the demons and shows us what is on the other side.

Redefining Humanity, Redefining Church

The second act of difficulty along the *via negativa* is to entirely reimagine what it means to be human. We live in a society that values the winners and casts away the losers in whatever race it is we think we are running. The world tends to define the value of a human by how useful or productive they are—their contributions to "progress" mark their worth. By this standard, there is little room for the "freaks" among us, the poor, the deformed, the lost, the disabled, the social outcasts, and the lonely.[139] And yet, just as a circus of curiosities draws crowds from all over, we have a strange compulsion to stop and stare at those whom society rejects. Lane suggests that it is "the very image of God, disguised perhaps by nervous laughter, [who] stares back at us in silence. … Our culture substitutes the glamorous for the grotesque, denying this awkward vision of the *imago Dei*. Our definitions of the human rule out bizarre and broken forms."[140]

Lane exemplifies Jean Vanier, the founder of the world-renowned l'Arche communities, as someone who has fought not only to alter this societal attitude but, in fact, to entirely flip it on its head.[141] Vanier argues that the disabled and marginalized are perhaps a "truer measure of humanity" than those society tends to value. The "despised possess an undiminished capacity for touching others."[142] Reminiscent of Jesus' series of parables in which he champions the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, the least and the lost among us are to be celebrated as God's favored.[143] Kathryn Green-

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[139] See also John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 31-3 for an additional perspective on the relationship between productivity and worth.
[140] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 33.
[141] Following an investigation after his death in 2019, it was reported that Jean Vanier is believed to have sexually abused six women. See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51596516. The organization Vanier founded has expressed its condemnation of Vanier's actions. It continues to operate worldwide.
[142] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 33.
[143] Luke 15:3-32.

McCreight, author of a book on Christianity and mental illness, sums up this sentiment nicely: “in God’s eyes we are not defined by how we feel, what we think, or even by what we do,” rather we are defined by what God does with us. God loves us and saves us.[144]

Beyond the individual, one might also apply this concept to community. Members of St. John’s in Helena-West Helena noted the thought of sadness as a principal motivator of actions and emotions, particularly during the congregation’s extended period of leadership transition. Might its collective understanding of what it means to be “whole” or “normal” be wrapped up in its deep longing for what once was? St. John’s, with its beautiful physical plant and rich history as one of the diocese’s founding congregations, longs to have a full-time priest to complement those legacy qualities. The seemingly insurmountable challenge, however, is finding a priest willing to live in Helena-West Helena—a town ravaged by the plagues of poverty and racism. During the past year, St. John’s has been faithfully served by a member of the clergy who is also employed as a full-time educator in a nearby community. Sunday worship has continued, and pastoral needs are met. Despite this arrangement, which has sustained St. John’s through this long transition, the insistence on searching for a full-time priest continues. It does not seem to have occurred to them that there may be another way to be a “whole” church—one that has a part-time priest but is still able to fully live into its mission and ministry in Helena-West Helena. The spiritual challenge for St. John’s is learning to see this change not as a loss or deficiency, but rather a whole-hearted embrace of the true *imago Dei* within. In employing a priest part-time, the world may no longer judge them to be a “normal”

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[144] Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 85.

congregation, but as they pray weekly for God's kingdom to be "on earth as it is in heaven," it is precisely the world's definitions that need to be discarded.

During my time with St. John's as the researcher in this project, I have become more familiar with my own need to embrace a redefinition of humanity, or community, in this case. St. John's is one of many congregations in the Delta region of Arkansas that I have worked with over the years, and each has stretched—often to the point of discomfort—my own understanding of what it means to be part of the Church. Delta communities tend to bear the marks of extreme social and racial inequality, much of them a result of past injustices, but also of harmful institutions and attitudes that continue today. The members of the Episcopal churches in these communities often represent the wealthiest social class, and racial diversity among the members is minimal. As is the case with St. John's, the church buildings in these communities are in much better repair than the other buildings in the neighborhoods they share. This is a visible sign that material wealth is limited to only a portion of the community. When visiting these churches, I have had to remain mindful of my own biases and judgements about what these communities should be doing to reconcile these inconsistencies. I clearly recognize the thought of pride at the center of this struggle. My desire to control a congregation's journey toward becoming more self-aware gnaws at me whenever I drive westward into the Delta. Yet, years of getting to know individuals, and the deeper work on this project with the people of St. John's, has helped me to deeply love these communities despite the challenges they face. That is a step in the right direction, but the spiritual work that lies ahead is to learn to love these communities *because* of the challenges they face, to see them as nexuses of God's transformative work. To better know them, then, is to better

know God. I pray that they, in turn, may grow to love me, recognizing God's grace in my ministry despite the many missteps I have made as a priest and diocesan leader.

God Among the Dead

Lane describes the third act of difficulty along the *via negativa* as the rediscovery of an image of God among the broken. As with our understanding of grace and our definitions of humanity and community, how we picture God also needs to be upturned. As Christians, our inclination is to see God as pastoral, triumphant, and all-powerful, a gentle shepherd caring for a wayward flock, or a resurrected Christ broken free from the earthy tomb. While God is these things, God is not *only* these things. It is understandable that we would naturally turn our gaze away from more painfully grotesque depictions of God, and yet upon the cross, within the body of a ravaged leper, and as a vulnerable infant clothed in rags is also where and how we can discover God. Lane writes,

> I know why Francis of Assisi had to kiss the leper, why Mother Teresa reached out to those dying on the streets of Calcutta, why Jean Vanier gives himself without restraint to the handicapped. It has nothing to do with charity. It is a concern to touch—and to be touched by—the hidden Christ, the one found nowhere else so clearly. It's a longing to reach out to the grotesque, stroking the bloodied head of a slain lamb as its image gradually changes into the fierce and kindly face of a Lion whose name is love.[145]

An embrace of this paradoxical concept pulls us into a deeper understanding of what it means to call ourselves Christians. As followers of Christ, we are invited to see the hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, in the profane, in the very hearts of those whom society rejects. And in so doing, God's presence in our own brokenness is revealed. Even within our most troubling thoughts—sadness, avarice, lust, and the others—exists the deepest, most transformative love. We are invited into our own brokenness and into the

[145] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 35.

brokenness of the world to see it. "The paradox of the grotesque is that it summons those who are whole to be broken and longs for those who are broken to be made whole."[146]

Recalling my conversation with Alastair So-Schoos, data scientist for the Church Pension Group, a glance at the numerical trends in The Episcopal Church can be discouraging, particularly for those of us who have considered it our job (perhaps spurred by the troubling thought of pride) to reverse the trend of decline. This frustration of the desire to be in control leads to the thought of sadness, and consequently to an avoidance of the pain's source. A common, and not unhealthy, response to the data is to turn our faces into the famously creative winds of the Holy Spirit and look for those places where it is doing a new thing. To look to those churches that have been able to follow the Spirit's lead and cultivate new life, new ministries, and new members despite the prevailing forces of decline. While Scripture encourages us to be aware of the Spirit's work and to anticipate the "new thing," I wonder, too, if the *via negativa* has something to teach us.

Might the Church be encouraged to look not only at what is being built but also what is being deconstructed, to honestly explore the wounds the Church bears as well as those it has inflicted? The recent efforts by dioceses, congregations, and seminaries to address past and current racial discrimination and to encourage leadership by historically marginalized groups is certainly an example of looking for God in the most broken places. Commendable work is being done here. I wonder also about the small, mostly rural congregations in Arkansas, where closure in the relative near-term is an inevitability. Might the *via negativa* also lead us to pay more attention to these ailing

[146] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 35.

communities? Recalling Jesus' poignant conversation with Peter, might the God we seek—might love—be in the very places we don't wish to go?[147]

In the spring of 2017, it became my responsibility to help St. Andrew's in Cherokee Village close. I worked with the congregation's few remaining members to make this transition logistically and emotionally. The church's appointments were given to a new congregation in another part of the state, and St. Andrew's contribution to the mission and ministry of The Episcopal Church in Arkansas was recognized at our annual diocesan convention. The building was also listed to be sold. There remained one final piece of business, however, that neither the members of the congregation, nor I, wanted to address. Decades earlier, a columbarium had been built on the St. Andrew's campus, which now served as the resting place for many past members. Part of the sale of the building involved determining what ought to be done with the columbarium, including the possibility of unearthing the contents of its mortared, natural stone niches and re-interring them at a local cemetery. The complexities of such a project seemed enormous. Contact would need to be made with existing relatives (records were incomplete), and the actual physical work would need to be done. Due to the sluggish real-estate market in northern Arkansas, the church building was not sold until recently. The columbarium had sat untouched for over five years, and it was now time for me to do the work I had been avoiding.

As a priest originally tasked with the work of congregational development, a ministry typically involving the living, every part of me has balked at the prospect of having to dig up and rebury the dead. I have wrestled with thoughts of anger toward those

[147] See John 21:18.

final members of St. Andrew's for not having tended to their own columbarium, and I have recognized the thought of vainglory among my feelings of dread about dealing with an issue that I considered to be entirely unrelated to the work of growing the Church. It wasn't until I received a voicemail from the grandson of one of the individuals interred in the columbarium that my thoughts about the project began to change. He had travelled across the country on his motorcycle to visit his grandmother's grave and had found the "sold" sign on the property, prompting the call. I hesitated to return his call, anticipating angry accusations about the diocese's neglect in informing him of the sale, as I had received several of those already. During our conversation, however, the powerful love he felt for his grandmother shone through. He was gracious with me, offering the benefit of the doubt, and I noticed my thoughts of anger and vainglory begin to dissolve. In a surprising turn, I told this man that it would be an honor to care for his grandmother's remains during the relocation process, feeling a newfound respect for my own ministry welling up inside. As Evagrius wisely counsels, "gifts extinguish resentment."[148] This man gifted me with a story of love, and I, with God's grace, was able to receive it as such. The temporary blindness caused by my anger lifted, and a path ahead was revealed.

"Divine love is incessantly restless until it turns all woundedness into health, all deformity into beauty, all embarrassment into laughter," writes Lane. "In biblical faith, brokenness is never celebrated as an end in itself…but an expression of love on its way to completion."[149] God's great desire is to pull us to God's self. Just as God has pulled me into a cemetery, a stark representation of the grotesque amidst the world of the living, I also sense that God is pulling me into a deeper relationship with the broken, lost, and

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[148] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 26.
[149] Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 35.

grieving communities of faith within the Church, for it is among these very people, within the "thick darkness," that God is most clearly revealed.

The Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, perhaps to avoid detection by his more skeptical colleagues, or perhaps because the answers he sought could only be revealed in darkness. Much like wind, which blows where it chooses, the Spirit's animating *The New Beginning* reveals itself most often where we least expect to find it.[150]

[150] See John 3.

Conclusion

One of Evagrius' lesser-known writings is his Letter to Melania. A desert mother, Melania managed a monastery in Jerusalem and is credited with inspiring Evagrius to embrace a monastic life in the Egyptian desert. In this eloquent and tender letter, Evagrius expounds on his more mystical, or gnostic insights, recalling in awe the wonder of God's creation. He had come to understand creation itself as a love letter, chronicling God's desire for us. "Just as those who teach the alphabet to children trace the letters on tablets, so, too, Christ, in order to teach his wisdom to the rational beings, has inscribed it into corporeal nature." [151]

As a supplement to this project's act of ministry component, and to mark the beginning of the Lenten season, I led a group from a local congregation into the Richland Creek Wilderness area to read, mark, and inwardly digest God's love letter. We made camp for the weekend at the Sandstone Castle, a natural rock shelf cut into the Ozark mountains, speckled with caves and hidden grottos. The Castle was reportedly a popular hideout for outlaws and Civil War deserters. Like Evagrius and the early Christian desert dwellers, we claimed these caves as our cells, within which we slept, ate, gathered to pray in the evenings, and celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday morning. A short, but steep, hike south led us to Twin Devil Falls, a breathtaking pair of waterfalls at the confluence of two streams emerging from the deep wilderness. Here we enjoyed Saturday afternoon in silence. Some of us spent the time tracing animal trails, clambering over streams and

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[151] As quoted in William Harmless, "Mystic as Desert Calligrapher: Evagrius Ponticus," in *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 154.

across fallen logs. Others found caves in which to rest and mediate. Some sat and read by the falls.

That evening we gathered around a fire at the mouth of our communal cave to reflect on the experience. I had provided each hiker with abbreviated descriptions of Evagrius' eight thoughts to read and consider during the day's wanderings. We talked about acedia, sadness, pride and the rest, sharing our encounters of their frequent "comings and goings" throughout the day, and the challenges they presented in our quest to more clearly see God in each other and in our surroundings: the pangs of hunger, or the discomfort of our aching legs (gluttony), the occasional pining for those we left behind to come on this journey (sadness), and the temptations of the "noonday demon" to find a better cave in which to meditate (acedia). We all seemed to recognize, though, that the backdrop to these fleeting thoughts was God's ever-present love. We encountered the love letter in the trout lilies on the trail and the hoot of the owls in the night. Love was inscribed in the intricate natural architecture of ancient shale and wind-carved sandstone. The sprinkle of cool rain on our faces and the gentle eddies in the twists and turns of the streams were God's poetry. We grew closer together that evening through the sharing of our reflections and, as the temperature dropped, our ever-tightening huddle around the fire. God was surely with us in the wilderness.

The comments of one hiker in particular captured my imagination and leave an impression on me to this day. This hiker was a novice, never having spent the night in the woods nor hefted an unwieldy backpack through rugged Ozark terrain. The gear she brought was equally unrefined and inefficient—kitchen pots and pans rather than camping cookware, and blankets and long johns rather than a down sleeping bag. She

knew she lacked the outdoor experience that many of us had, and yet she felt deeply called to participate in this experience. After an uncomfortable sleep on the first night and sore legs from the journey, she chose to stay at the Sandstone Castle rather than hike down to Twin Devil Falls with the rest of us. Unbeknownst to her, she chose the more ancient and monastic path that day, opting to remain in her cave: "A brother visited Abba Moses at Scete, asking him for a saying. The elder said to him, 'Go and stay in a cell; your cell will teach you everything.'"[152]

As the fire popped and crackled, its light dancing on our faces and the cave walls, we listed with rapt attention to her tale. She told us that her day alone in the cave was both excruciating and wonderful. She was homesick at times, longing for the companionship of her pug. She was hungry as well, unable to light her stove. She was cold, the inactivity of the day producing little body heat. Despite these frustrations, she described warmth of a different sort that began to revive her spirit as the day wore on. Hours spent gazing out of her cell into the woods brought familiarity with the sights and sounds. Rustlings in the leaves became less jarring once she spotted chipmunks as their source. The deepest, darkest parts of her cave became a comfort once she decided to spend time exploring its depths, shining a flashlight into its darkest corners. She noticed trees and fallen logs that stood out from the rest, and they became her steady companions in this alien environment. Time and observation drove away her fear. She came to feel that she wasn't alone—that she never had been.

Cloaked in the timespan of only two days, this hiker had experienced the fullness of a transition. Her decision to leave the comforts of home and journey into the unknown

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[152] *Apophthegmata Patrum* Moses 6.

wilderness marked *The Ending*. During her time spent alone in the cave observing her thoughts and her environment, she inhabited *The Neutral Zone*. And her time with us, back among community reflecting around the fire, sparked *The New Beginning*. Only time would tell what larger impact this experience might have in her life. One might expect, though, that her love for God, self, and neighbor deepened that day. It certainly did for me—her presence among us having much to do with it.

Like our journey to the Richland Creek Wilderness area that weekend, the aim of this project thesis has been to pause and reflect with congregations and individuals in transition to help them become more aware of the hidden influence of the eight troubling thoughts and to alert them to the persistent, desirous pull of God's love. Belden Lane terms this practice *lectio terrestris*. Just as one can meditate upon the Scriptures through the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, meditating upon the landscape can also be a means of discovering God. "*Lectio terrestris* is an exercise that demands all our senses. Moving through a field, into a forest, even across our own backyard, we come with the expectation of finding a teacher."[153] The very act of observantly navigating the landscape of *The Neutral Zone* is a method of spiritual development. In the midst of the struggle of transition lies a means to respond to God's love and grow in virtue.

Through four action research-based workshops involving teaching, reflection, and contemplative practice, I journeyed with parishioners and priests into the metaphorical desert wilderness, a place where they were able to hear the activity of the thoughts more clearly, and then, echoing Jesus, boldly say, "Away with you!"[154] As Swinton and Mowat

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[153] Belden C. Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 212.
[154] Matthew 4:10.

write, “The action researcher does not simply seek to observe and understand the world (although she certainly does this), she also seeks to change it.”[155] Three questions often surface while practicing action research: What should we *stop* doing? What should we *continue* doing? What should we *start* doing? Put succinctly, we should *stop* basing judgements about ourselves, others, and our congregations on the troubling thoughts that arise during periods of transition. We should *continue*, as stated in our baptismal vows, “in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.”[156] We should *continue* to faithfully walk alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ through the unsettling storm of *The Neutral Zone*. We should *start* intentionally seeking the divine in those places we think it is least likely to be found and prepare our hearts to find love.

Following the three-fold organization development model of transitions proposed by William Bridges as a method, I structured this thesis around *The Ending, The Neutral Zone, and The New Beginning*, a common emotional path that transitions take, situating the work I did with these groups within *The Neutral Zone*. This period of desert wandering bridges a break from the past with the emergence of a promising future. *The Neutral Zone* seemed an optimal place to observe the phenomenon of transition itself and to notice the influence of the eight thoughts.

I hold a sense of deep gratitude for the approximately sixty individuals who participated. They chose to trust me as I coaxed them far deeper into *The Neutral Zone* than they likely anticipated going. The virtues of courage, patience, prudence, understanding, and wisdom they demonstrated were certainly as strong as the thoughts of

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[155] John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 261.
[156] Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common,* 304.

sadness, anger, and pride with which they admitted struggling. I pray that their awareness of God's presence and their knowledge of *agapé* was heightened through the experience and that they feel some measure of fortification against the pain that change brings. They have certainly gifted me with a renewed awareness of what it means to be a diocesan leader during this time of broader transition in the Church. Reflecting on Max Van Manen's assertion that the fundamental purpose of phenomenological research has to do with increasing one's "thoughtfulness and resourcefulness, or tact," I sense an explicit need for a compassionate approach from diocesan leaders when guiding individuals and congregations in the midst of transition. Empathy rather than judgment ought to be the leading posture while interacting. To use the language of Evagrius, a diocesan leader would do well to deeply explore their own thoughts, "taking care to recognize the different types of demons and take note of the circumstances of their coming."[157] This thoughtfulness in prayer and daily life will lead to an increased capacity for *agapé,* and, with God's grace, a more tactful approach to resourcing challenging congregational dynamics.

Looking forward to *The New Beginning*, I feel compelled to turn my gaze, and the gaze of the bishop's office, to those places that church leaders don't want to go. The *via negativa* leads toward conflicted and dying congregations, as well as those that simply cannot find priestly leadership. There is, however, solace to be discovered in the wilderness. *The Neutral Zone* calls to us.

As this project draws to a close, the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas has eight open full-time rector positions, more than I have seen at any one time during my tenure as

[157] Evagrius, *The Praktikos* 43.

canon to the ordinary. Applications are few, leaving parishioners to wonder about the future of their respective congregations and the future of the Church as a whole. The time to cultivate spiritual resilience, both among laity and clergy, is now, and the tools to do so are at our disposal within our religious tradition. Evagrius and his companion desert dwellers found God hidden in the very temptations and fears that troubled them. The *via negativa*, if followed faithfully, can reveal the divine most clearly in our midst. Once we learn to look through the demons and recognize God in the desert, in the stark wildernesses of this world, we find the divine everywhere we look.

Hanging on my wall is a print of the desert father, Abba Anthony, the subject of Athanasius' famous work and Evagrius' inspiration. The accompanying inscription of a nearly two-thousand-year-old aphorism could not be more relevant today: "Always have God before your eyes wherever you go."[158]

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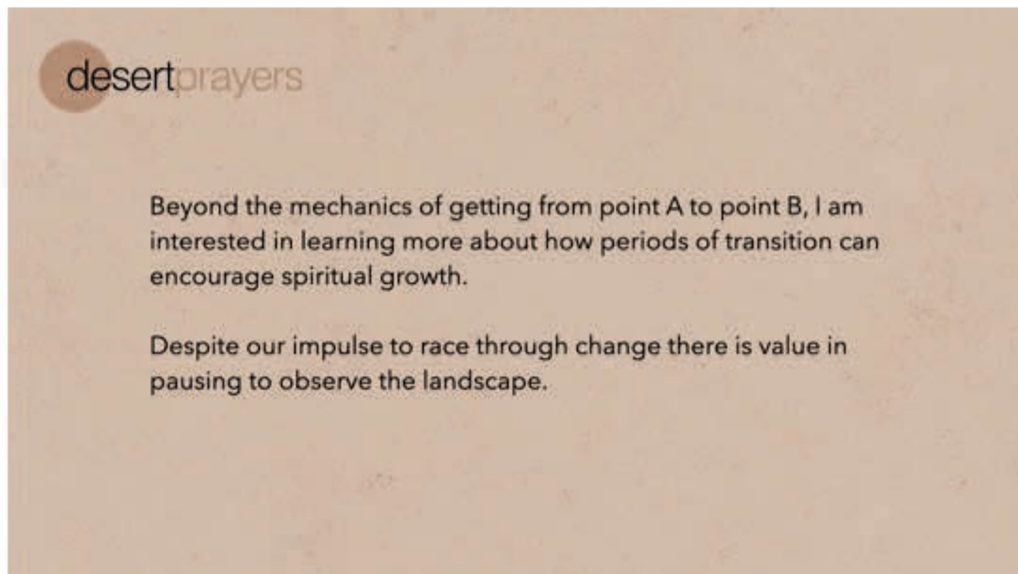
[158] *Apophthegmata Patrum* Anthony the Great 3.

Appendix 1

Workshop Slides



desertprayers
Workshop Outline

Today we will explore **TRANSITION THEORY**,
a pivotal period in **CHRISTIAN HISTORY**,
and the wisdom of a monk named **EVAGRIUS**.

Then we will **APPLY WHAT WE'VE LEARNED**.

My hope is that you will leave with **NEW INSIGHTS**,
and the tools to try a new **SPIRITUAL PRACTICE**.

And I will have **LEARNED FROM YOU**.

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Key Concepts

What is spirituality?

Spirituality has to do with our **RELATIONSHIP** to the divine.

Spirituality deals with questions like …
- How do we come to know God?
- What does a relationship with God look like?
- How does this relationship affect our lives?

Spirituality deals with the "unseen" and the "eternal."

Spirituality has to do with **LOVE**.

desertprayers
Key Concepts

MORE LOVE, I CAN HEAR OUR HEARTS CRYIN'
MORE LOVE, I KNOW THAT'S ALL WE NEED
MORE LOVE, TO FLOW IN BETWEEN US
TO TAKE US AND HOLD US AND LIFT US ABOVE
IF THERE'S EVER AN ANSWER
IT'S MORE LOVE

– THE DIXIE CHICKS

desertprayers
Key Concepts

What is your favorite landscape? Why?

Landscapes are always about more than their physical characteristics.

Landscape can be a **METAPHOR** for the spiritual life.

Five minutes in pairs.
Report to the group.

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The Desert

LANDSCAPE IS NOT ALL EXTERNAL,

SOME HAS CREPT INSIDE THE SOUL.

HUMAN PRESENCE IS INFUSED WITH LANDSCAPE.

– John O'Donohue

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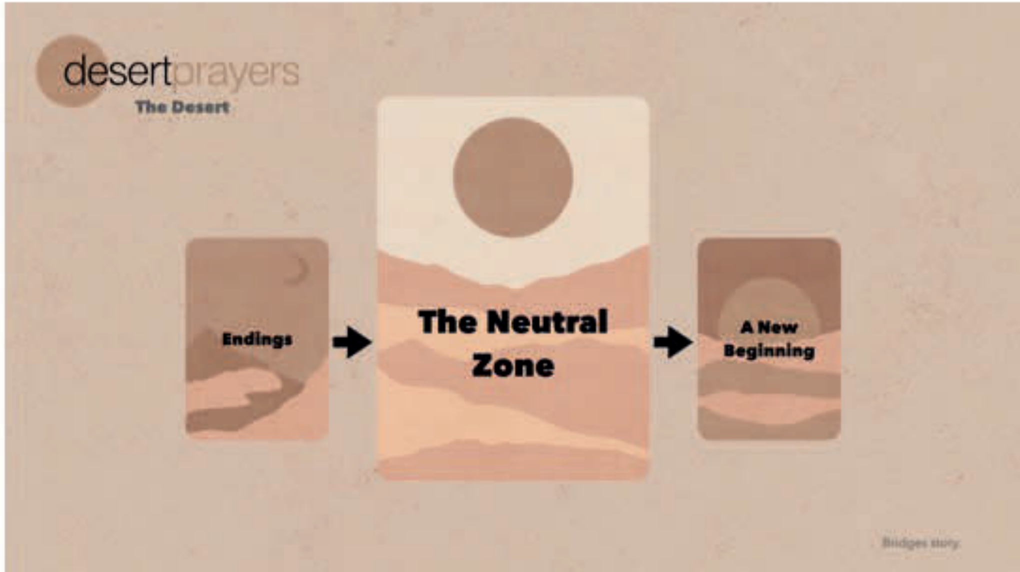
The Desert

desertprayers
The Desert
Every pilgrimage to the desert
is a pilgrimage to the self.
There is no place to hide, and so
we are found.
– Terry Tempest Williams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The Desert
Endings
The Neutral Zone
A New Beginning
Bridges story

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The Eight Thoughts

"Let me just check Facebook ... one more time ... to see how many likes my sermon has received."

Gluttony
The desire for enduring, pain-free health.

Impurity
The desire for another's body.

Avarice
The desire for material things.

Sadness
The desire for what was, or could have been.

Anger
The desire for another to suffer.

Acedia
The desire for novelty, or to be somewhere else.

✓
Vainglory
The desire to be praised.

Pride
The desire to be in control.

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The Eight Thoughts

Which “thoughts” do you recognize most in this congregation?

When have the “thoughts” driven this congregations actions?

Group post it exercise and reflection

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Contemplative Prayer

praktikē **practice** → apatheia & agape **passionlessness & love** → gnostikē **knowledge**

desertprayers
Contemplative Prayer

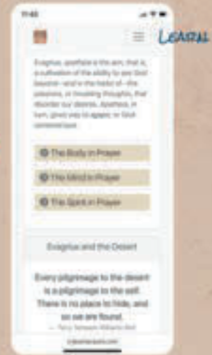
praktikē
practice

SET A TIMER. AIM FOR 5 MINUTES TO START. WORK UP TO 20 MINUTES OR MORE.
WHETHER YOU ARE SEATED ON A CUSHION, PRAYER BENCH, OR CHAIR, KEEP YOUR BACK STRAIGHT.
REST YOUR HANDS ON YOUR THIGHS, OR GENTLY FOLD THEM IN YOUR LAP.
CLOSE YOUR EYES.
TAKE SEVERAL SLOW, DEEP BREATHS.

Prayer workshop.

desertprayers
The Desert Prayers Project

https://desertprayers.com/



Appendix 2

Desert Prayers Reflections

The following seven reflections are part of the blog section of the Desert Prayers website. They were emailed to workshop participants, one approximately each week, for a period following the workshops as an effort to encourage continued engagement with the subject matter.

Against the "Seven Deadlies"

One of the most bingeable shows of the past several years is the Netflix series, Sense8. It was created by the immensely talented Wachowskis (of *The Matrix* fame) and tells the story of eight very different individuals who realize they share an intimate psychic bond. Their dissimilarity becomes their strength, and they achieve, together, much more than they could separately. I rewatched the first episode over Christmas and fell in love with the characters all over again. But I was caught up short by one scene in particular.

One of the principal characters, Nomi, is a trans woman with a heart for social justice. She struggled through years of psychological abuse from a bigoted parent to become the beautiful and proud woman she is. In one scene she is heard recording a podcast promoting the upcoming LGBTQ+ Pride event in San Francisco. It's a deeply moving speech in which she recounts the way her mother, a reader of St. Thomas Aquinas, considered pride to be the worst of the "seven deadlies," and yet pride (she means self-assuredness, I think) is the very "sin" that Nomi craved. "We march with pride," she says to her podcast audience. "So go (explicit) yourself, Aquinas!"

On the one hand, I wanted to shout, “YES!” along with Nomi’s listeners. The “seven deadly sins” do have an undeniable history of weaving guilt and shame into the psychology of modern Christians. The way Nomi’s mother leveraged the moral philosophy of Thomas Aquinas to make her child feel less-than is truly appalling. That’s the real sin in this story. On the other hand, I recalled Evagrius’ eight thoughts, the origin of the “seven deadlies,” and felt grief for the corruption and loss of a valuable spiritual tradition. Pastorally, I would never contradict Nomi. She has every right to her rage, and it is important to reveal the complicity the Christian tradition has had in various abuses. However, if I were to rethink pride and the “sins” through the lens of the desert mystics rather than through the twisted wisdom of Nomi’s mother, here’s how it might go …

First, “thoughts” rather than “sins” is a more helpful way to understand pride, gluttony, vainglory, and the others. The word “sin” in this context carries a great deal of moral weight, whereas “thought” is more neutral. We all have thoughts that muddy our relationship with God. They are unavoidable. However, through practice, and with God’s help, we can learn how to see them for the illusions that they are. Second, we have a semantics problem. Understanding pride to mean self-assuredness, as Nomi does, is a fine use of the word, but this is not the way Evagrius would have used it when talking about the “eight thoughts.” Pride is a spiritual affliction that occurs when one devalues God and elevates oneself. In this sense, when we hate or judge others (or ourselves) for being different, that is pride.

As Christians, we inhabit a complicated space in today’s culture. How do we bring the best of our tradition forward while understanding that it carries baggage? How do we own up to that baggage and support those who have been weighed down by it? I

like Nomi. She's brave, strong, and loves deeply. I hope she'd like me, too. What could I learn from Nomi? What could she learn from me?

Practicing Paradise

My wife, Kate, and I have spoken several times this past week about what it is that people want to hear this year in a Christmas homily. She has even asked a few members of her congregation the question directly, and the answer has been consistent. People long to hear a message of hope. What is the Good News that we can cling to during the continuous flow of bad news blaring from our various media sources? She and I agreed that the preachers, too, would benefit from hearing a hopeful message this Christmas.

The Christian hope, as outlined in the Book of Common Prayer, "is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world." The communal telling of the Christmas story each year is a testament to this confidence. The coming of Emmanuel, "God with us," is assurance that the gloomy clouds of night will disperse, and death's dark shadow will be put to flight. Of course, all this is easily said (or sung), but feeling hopeful, particularly in an unsettling time, is another matter entirely.

The desert tradition offers wisdom for this challenge. Like us today, the desert dwellers of the fourth and fifth centuries hoped for paradise. They prayed that God's will would be done on earth just as it is in heaven. They also believed that God's will was being done in the here and now–paradise was currently in full bloom, even if it was hard to see. And so, their work, guided by God, was to sharpen their mystical vision. They labored to learn to see beyond the brokenness of the world, beyond its violence,

suffering, and death into the heavenly kingdom that exists not apart from the world but in its very midst. The monks knew that this was a lifelong task. Hope takes practice. Author Douglas Christie calls this work "practicing paradise." That is, "learning to see and cherish the world, even in its degraded condition, as whole."

The contemplative practice you and I commit to as members of the Desert Prayers community is essentially this. Every moment we spend in silence with God we are learning to see the world anew. And, with our new eyes, we will surely discover God in the most unlikely of places, like, say, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger, because there was no room in the inn.

More Love

It's common in the bishop's office during the season of Advent to notice a measurable uptick in the number of phone calls, visits, and emails from distressed clergy and lay leaders. Stewardship season is naturally a challenging time for congregations. Combine that with planning for Christmas worship services, attending holiday parties, and negotiating the sensitive details of family gatherings, and it's understandable that the Christmas cheer we are "supposed" to be feeling can be hard to come by.

Evagrius' eight thoughts–the demons–are in rare form this time of year and navigating around them can be a little like walking through a house of mirrors. Everywhere we look we see distorted visions of ourselves and others. The wavy mirrors reflect an illusory reality, one where our self-image is out of whack and we're surrounded by twisted representations of our companions. And when we turn around, desperate to find our way out, we realize we're stuck in a maze. In the words of the beleaguered souls seeking refuge and hope from John in the wilderness, "What then should we do?"

As we heard in the Gospel reading this past Sunday, John the Baptist offers a simple, yet profound response to the anxiety of the season. He says, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." In other words, love one another in a tangible way. When a friend is tired and stressed, reach out in compassion. When we're down on ourselves, find healthy ways to take care of our body. When we feel like lashing out, show affection instead.

The desert tradition is all about cultivating love, or, to use the Greek term, *agapé*. *Agapé* is God-centered love, and our capacity to show *agapé* comes not from us but from God. In this sense, the reservoir for love in our lives is deep and wide, regardless of how drained we might feel. Anger, pride, and the other thoughts can distort this truth, yet there is always room for more love.

If Advent is dragging on a bit too long for you this year, make love your practice. You've got it in you. In the immortal words of the Dixie Chicks, "More Love / I can hear our hearts cryin' / More love / I know that's all we need / More love / To flow in between us / To take us and hold us / And lift us above / If there's ever an answer it's more love."

Virtues in Disguise

Reviewing your day and prayer experience to identify interruptions by the various "troubling thoughts" is not easy work. We can understand, on an intellectual level, the desert wisdom that thoughts are illusory and transient–that they don't define us. However, sometimes it can be difficult to "feel" that truth after a long day at work or a destabilizing life event. Of course, prayer can and will help. If not silence, then direct petition to God for comfort and strength can often move us into a more objective mental space.

It is also important to keep in mind that time spent wrestling with the demons of our day is never wasted time. Evagrius taught that each troubling thought has its corresponding virtue, and those virtues are cultivated in proportion to our wrestling. Addressing thoughts of avarice grows charity in our hearts. Facing down sadness and anger increases our courage and fortitude. Reckoning with vainglorious impulses leads to wisdom and knowledge. Addressing the demons are, in fact, a necessary part of our growth as Christians. Evagrius says in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, “Take away temptations and no one will be saved.”

In many ways, how we approach the “troubling thoughts” is akin to how Christians approach the cross. On one hand, the cross is an instrument of torture. In the first century, it struck fear into the hearts of those who witnessed the brutal practice of crucifixion–a means to assert Roman dominance. On the other hand, because of Jesus’s death on the cross and subsequent resurrection, the cross can be seen as a doorway to new life. The beauty of Easter is always visible through the pain of Good Friday. Similarly, we can learn to understand the “troubling thoughts,” or demons to grow closer to God. Christ makes all things new: Acedia transforms into patience. Gluttony becomes temperance. Pride is revealed as understanding.

With God’s help, we can become adept at wrestling with the demons and, maybe someday, no longer see them as demons at all, but come to know them for what they truly are … virtues in disguise.

"How can a person keep away from the plots of the demons?"

In the early Christian collection of desert sayings, “Concerning Thoughts,” a novice monk asks an elder, “How can a person keep away from the plots of the demons?”

The elder replies, “A fish cannot stop a fisherman from casting his hook into the sea, but if the fish is aware of the hook’s evil, he can avoid it and be saved, leaving the fisherman empty-handed. It’s the same for a person.”

The term “demon” has some baggage. I suspect that for most of us it conjures up images of horror movies, nightmares, and Tom Hanks running through the streets of Rome in pursuit of the Illuminati. When it comes to the spiritual life, the word can seem a bit arcane. We don’t hear many sermons on spiritual warfare these days, yet the traditional Biblical moniker for personified evil might still be of some benefit to us. Humans find meaning through metaphor and analogy. Sometimes a complicated concept needs a face to better understand it.

The early Christian solitaries considered the desert to be the demons’ natural abode. Surrounded by nothing but wind and rock, the desert fathers and mothers were left exposed to the trials of the demons. Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11) served as an example for them. During each of the three trials, Jesus instantly recognizes the devil in its various forms (gluttony, pride, and avarice) and turns to Scripture and prayer for strength. Jesus’s ability to know his troubling desires for what they were helped him to remain centered during mental and physical difficulty.

Although we may not physically live in the desert, we continually encounter desert-like moments: “A fish cannot stop a fisherman from casting his hook into the sea.” Periods of transition, loss, or uncertainly in our lives can leave us exposed. When we’re convinced that fleeing a job or a relationship because we feel we could be happier somewhere else or with someone else (acedia), or we think our pain will vanish once we buy everything on our Amazon wish list (avarice), or we pine for the “glory days” of our

past (sadness), we can know these thoughts for the demons they are–mere distractions from the very real presence of God in our midst today. And, echoing the words of Jesus, we say "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

Virtue is Found in the Middle

"It is an old saying that extremes meet," writes John Cassian in The Conferences. Cassian was a disciple of Evagrius and is credited with introducing the West to the wisdom of the desert. This maxim refers to the Aristotelian idea that virtue is found in the middle; existing at either end of a spectrum can ultimately become harmful. As followers of the "via media," Episcopalians ought to be familiar with this notion.

In this passage, Cassian is concerned with the extremes to which some monks take their habits of fasting. He offers two examples. There was once a monk whose refusal of food became so severe that he didn't even eat on Easter Day, a mandatory feast in the Christian tradition. His fellow monks became concerned and tried to intervene, but the poor, emaciated monk stubbornly continued to refuse his daily portion and tragically starved to death. At the other end of the spectrum, another monk, who could not bear limiting his diet to the meager portion of two biscuits a day, would fast for a day or two, hiding his biscuits until he had a meal of several biscuits, he could eat all at once to feel the momentary satisfaction of fullness. This monk eventually left the desert behind and returned to the city–also a tragic loss within a community that had learned to recognize the emptiness of worldly pleasures.

Cassian's point is that a monk's focus ought not be on achieving "greatness" at the practice of fasting (or meditating, or silence, or exercise, etc.). It also ought not be on

finding ways to cheat oneself out of enjoying the long-term fruits of a spiritual commitment. Rather, Cassian encourages cultivating what he calls “discretion,” or spiritual common sense. Fast when it’s time to fast, feast when it’s time to feast, and cut yourself some slack when you get those two mixed up from time to time. Virtue is found in the middle.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, I hope you will feast. Two biscuits won’t nearly be enough! When it comes to your prayer life, keep at it. Missing a day or two (or more) doesn’t mean it’s time to quit the journey. A healthy sense of discretion reminds us that God is always available to us, ready to meet us where we are.

Go See Something

This week, anger has replaced pride has the most often reported “troubling thought” within the community. It is helpful to note that these thoughts commonly shift in frequency and type in our daily lives and prayers. When one particular thought occupies our minds, it can be tempting to think that we “are” that thought, e.g., “I’m an angry person,” or “I’m a sad person.” Recognizing the shifts in thoughts helps us to remember that anger, sadness, pride, and the others are transitory. None of them determine our worth or our identity, rather, we are, and will always be, reflections of the divine image.

Regarding anger, the early Christian desert dwellers knew this thought as the “blinding passion,” in that it obscures one’s vision of reality, and of God’s presence. In the *Praktikos*, Evagrius considers anger to be a natural gift, and helpful in one sense–that it motivates us against the troubling thoughts as they manifest in our personal lives and communities. However, anger can very easily get the better of us, and John Cassian,

Evagrius' disciple, suggests that God is only capable of wielding the emotion to positive ends. So, when we find ourselves feeling angry, we need to tread carefully.

Personally, when struggling with anger, I have found it helpful to play with the "blindness" metaphor. There is a mountain biking loop at Boyle Park in central Little Rock that takes me about half an hour to complete. It weaves back and forth in maze-like fashion through a thick forest, leading me in and out of gullies and around quick, banked corners. At the right time of day, the sun shines through the trees at an almost magical angle, the light filtering through the foliage into soft beams bringing a crystal clarity to the woods, making details pop. Given perspective by this newfound sight, whatever anger I had been carrying with me tends to dissolve. My blindness is cured, at least for a while, and decision-making becomes easier.

If anger is blinding you, go "see" something. Whether it's the natural beauty of a forest or paintings in an art museum, sight in one area of our lives can lead to sight where we might need it most. With practice, and with God's help, we can learn to see deeper into ourselves and our relationships, ultimately melting anger into compassion.

Meeting Crisis with Calm Rather than Chaos

The most often reported thought this week is pride. This is not necessarily surprising, as pride is traditionally considered to be the root of the eight thoughts. On the surface, pride is associated with self-confidence, self-reliance, self-control, self-assuredness–a lot of "self" related qualities. These are admirable traits but pride becomes a stumbling block when "self" becomes "self-ish," and we forget that real strength comes not from us but from God.

I am reminded of the passage in Matthew when Jesus stills the storm. The disciples and Jesus were in a boat when a windstorm arose. The disciples, fearing being swamped, were panicked. They had no capacity to save themselves, as the raging winds and rising waters were far beyond their power to control. Their impulse was to imagine the worst. Jesus, who had been sleeping as the storm grew, awoke to find his disciples at their wit's end. "Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm." And the disciples were amazed.

As the disciples learned, pride will only get us so far. There will inevitably be times when we find our capacity to save ourselves or others lacking, and it's easy to panic. When our default coping strategy of self-reliance fails us, where do we turn? Like the disciples did that day at sea, we often forget that Jesus, our true strength, is always with us. Over-reliance on ourselves can lead to patterns of worry and anxiety in our lives. The more we learn to recognize the presence of God, and God's amazing and limitless capacity to handle those things that we can't, we will begin to meet crises with calm rather than chaos.

The desert father, Evagrius, notes that confronting pride leads to the cultivation of prudence, understanding, and wisdom in the soul. Coming to terms with our personal limits helps us to make better decisions and to be a clearer source of Christ's calm for others.

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