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How Can They Hear Without a Preacher?
The Possibilities of Morally Imaginative Preaching
in the Small Membership Church

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Abstract

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The small membership church, defined as less than 100 in average morning worship attendance, is a growing segment across the North American religious landscape. By nature, this size congregation is resistant to intervention and tends toward conserving self-preservation. Any innovation must be fulsome and, from the beginning, mutually engage pastor and people in the change process. Identifying the pastor's preaching role as foundational, and utilizing moral imagination to shape the preaching task, this project asserts that morally imaginative preaching in a small membership church creates a significant opportunity to transform a congregation's mindset from inward to outward. To measure mindset change (individually and corporately), this project engages selected listeners via a survey instrument administered four times, which provides data throughout the duration of the six-week sermon series. This data identifies at which stage of change, in the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), listeners find themselves. The preacher considers this data as he or she prepares the weekly sermon, strategizing homiletical interventions to deeper levels of change. This project offers a four-part preaching preparation process to structure the preacher's exegetical, hermeneutical, homiletical and transformational goals. At the end of the six-week sermon series, the preacher gathers the selected listeners to review their individual data and the congregation's corporate data as a means to understand the change process. The participants, having experienced change and analyzed real-life contextual patterns of transformation, become equipped as leaders to help the congregation take its next faithful steps toward missional effectiveness.

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the Small Membership Church

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
2021

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Introduction: The Small Membership Church

The small membership church is inescapably present across the North American

landscape. The "little white countryside church" is a prevalent historical reality; however, in

recent years these congregations – and, in particular, a subgroup termed "very small churches,"

with average morning worship attendance under 50 – have received increased attention because

the frequency of this size congregation continues to grow, especially in the formerly "mainline"

denominations.[1] As United Methodist leadership expert Lovett Weems points out,

> Churches were established close together in a country that was seventy-five percent rural
> with limited travel ranges in the early twentieth century. Most of these churches continue
> to serve their communities, even as the population is almost eighty percent non-rural
> today. It hardly needs to be said that smaller churches face many challenges.[2]

United Methodist consultants Kotan and Schroeder say, "when we refer to small churches, we

are typically speaking of churches that haver fewer than one hundred people in worship

attendance."[3] By nature

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[1] The "seven sisters" of North American Mainline Protestant Christianity include: the American Baptist Convention, the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Church, and the United Methodist Church, as detailed in Jason Lantzer, Mainline Christianity (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

[2] Lovett Weems in Kay Kotan and Phil Schroeder, *Small-Church Checkup: Assessing Your Church's Health and Creating a Treatment Plan* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2017), location 65/1657.

[3] Katan and Schroder, location 127/1657. See also Barna Group's research, showing the average Protestant church size in America at 89 adults. 60% of Protestant churches have less than 100 adults in attendance. Only 2% have over 1,000 adults attending, in Carey Nieuwhof, "8 Reasons Most Churches Never Break the 200 Attendance Mark," https://careynieuwhof.com/8-reasons-most-churches-never-break-the-200-attendance-mark/. Accessed 1/10/20.

> Small churches are tenacious. Some would call them tough. They do not give up when faced with impossible problems. Neither do they experience rapid shifts of membership. Over the years, some may grow and others decline. *But they are particularly resistant to programmed intervention from outside sources*.[4]

Small church expert Carl S. Dudley describes the uniqueness of this size congregation.

> In the face of … changes, the small church is not only tenacious and ubiquitous, but also out of step. It does not utilize the organization model for management efficiency. It does not conform to the program expectations of 'something for everyone.' It does not provide expanding resources for professional compensation. It is not 'a success.'[5]

One challenge of small membership churches is to how to measure missional effectiveness.[6] For many churches of this size, "success" is the ability to pay denominational assessments, maintain its building and property and pay its pastor (usually in this order), having enough money in the bank at year-end to start the process over for yet another twelve months. But is mere survival sufficient reason for the small membership church to exist, and if not, what constitutes a thriving church of this size? Further, is it possible by means of an intentional innovation to shift a small church's mindset from an inward preoccupation (conserving and self-protective), toward an outward orientation (expanding and self-giving)?[7] Is it possible through a strategic innovation for *the pastoral leader* to help her or his congregation realize the transformational power of Jesus' words in Matthew 16:25-26?

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[4] Carl S. Dudley, *Effective Small Churches for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 28. Emphasis mine.

[5] Dudley, 28.

[6] Kotan and Schroeder offer a tri-part descriptive schema to assist small membership churches choose their "next faithful step": Not Yet Big Churches (on an upward trend, growing in several areas), Stable Small Churches (consistent presence with a niche ministry, a vital part of their community), Smaller Churches (steadily growing smaller in number, and without intervention continual decline to death).

[7] For a helpful discussion of the difference between the moral worldviews of classical conservatism ("Strict Parent Morality") and classical liberalism ("Nurturant Parent Morality"), see Frank A. Thomas, *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 44-51.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?[8]

Against prevailing notions of self-preserving preoccupation, Jesus' invitation to disciples is to find liberation through immersing ourselves in his way of life, a pathway of discovery focused not inwardly on our survival, but outwardly so that all may live more abundantly. This project utilizes a unique preaching form and process to invite parishioners to live into such a journey.

Contextual Description

Boonsboro United Methodist Church (BUMC) is one such very small membership congregation, whose physical location is bisected by the property lines of the City of Lynchburg and the County of Bedford in Central Virginia. The 2010 census reports Lynchburg's population at 75,568, estimated to have risen to 82,168 as of 2019. It lies at the center of a wider metropolitan area with a population of 260,320.[9] A majority of the congregation's members reside in the rural areas of Lynchburg City and Bedford County, with a 2000 census reported population of 60,371, estimated to have grown to 78,747 as of 2018. Within a few miles of the church's physical location are the Jefferson National Forest, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Appalachian Trail; there are several private colleges nearby, including University of Lynchburg (historic Disciples of Christ affiliation), Randolph College (historic United Methodist connection), Liberty University (founded by Rev. Jerry Falwell, Sr., which claims to be the world's largest "Christian" college), and University of Virginia Lynchburg (a small Historically

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[8] New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
[9] https://data.census.gov/cedsci/all?q=lynchburg,%20va. Accessed 4/19/21.

Black College). Central Virginia Community College is one of the Commonwealth's 23 community colleges, providing two-year degrees and specialty training certificates.

BUMC is geographically within "Appalachia," but because of its relative size, Lynchburg is described as "Metrolachia," while Bedford County is identified as part of "Agrilachia."[10] In the midst of rich natural resources and diverse educational opportunities, Lynchburg is blighted with a poverty rate of 22.3%, a number which has seen slight improvement within the past two years.[11] This poverty rate is the umbrella for numerous sociological challenges: the legacy of historic real estate "redlining" and segregation with its associated instantiated racism, the ever-increasing opiate addiction numbers, and lack of employment with sustainable wages for those who have, at most, a high school education.

When considering an innovation initiative, in addition to geographic and socioeconomic considerations, the pastoral ethnographer needs also to be cognizant of contextual political realities. The City of Lynchburg and Bedford County are traditionally conservative locales. Until the most recent presidential election (2020), Lynchburg has voted reliably Republican since 1952.[12] In a typical election year, Lynchburg voters align with Republicans 50-55% of the time, and with Democrats 45-50% of time. The division in Bedford County is even more stark:

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[10] "Understanding the 7 Distinct 'Nations' of Appalachia," *Appalachian Magazine* (January 30, 2017). Accessed December 7, 2020. http://appalachianmagazine.com/2017/01/30/understanding-the-7-distinct-nations-of-appalachia/ "Metrolachia" are "[i]slands of liberalism dotting a staunchly Evangelical map … localities that generally serve as the primary city for the surrounding communities." "Agrilachia" stretches from northeastern Alabama to Pennsylvania, a "landscape … unchanged for over 600 miles: cow pastures, cornfields, silos, red barns, … All the while, breathtakingly gorgeous blue-walled mountains line either side of this massive valley."

[11] https://www.welfareinfo.org/poverty-rate/virginia/lynchburg

[12] Seren Morris, "Trump First Republican to Lose Virginia City Where Liberty University is Located since 1948," *Newsweek*, November 5, 2020. https://www.newsweek.com/trump-loses-lynchburg-city-liberty-university-virginia-1545118. Accessed 1/10/20.

Republican candidates typically receive 72% of the vote, compared with Democrats at around 28%.[13] Political awareness – especially in times of current heightened political sensitivities – matter to a pastor, when every word and phrase articulated from the pulpit is being analyzed by listeners for congruence or divergence from expected local social mores. This task becomes ever more daunting when the pastoral leader finds him- or herself in a geographical and political setting where it is difficult to find commonality with those in the congregation.

BUMC was birthed by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in the late 1800s as part of a four-point Charge served by one full-time ordained pastor. During the post-World War II population boom, BUMC (like most other churches of its era) grew by welcoming young families, and by the mid-1970s was able to afford its own full-time pastor. By the early 1980s membership peaked at 375, with average weekly worship attendance around 175. Membership and attendance have gradually eroded over the past four decades: at this time BUMC's membership stands at 110 with a (pre-pandemic) average worship attendance of 44. The congregation is historically white and has a healthy demographic age distribution (with equally balanced numbers of senior citizens, middle-aged empty-nesters and families with young children). Most of the members have completed high school, several have two-year college degrees (or its training equivalent) and perhaps three individuals have four-year degrees. Other than the pastor and his spouse, no one has achieved graduate or postgraduate education.

BUMC has a well-developed system of congregational care (in which members provide regular connection with one another), while the pastor's engagement is reserved for critical situations (hospitalizations and emergencies), sacramental/ritual observances (Holy Communion, baptisms, weddings, funerals, confirmation) and regular connection with the elderly ("shut-in"

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[13] https://www.bestplaces.net/voting/county/virginia/bedford. Accessed 1/17/20.

friends and members). With only three very part-time staff members (pianist, custodian and treasurer), there is little staff leadership required. Other administrative tasks are handled by elected laity within the committee structures. This congregation's Staff-Pastor Parish Relations Committee is clear that a pastoral priority is "good teaching and good preaching."

BUMC has engaged historically in direct local mission opportunities (for example, serving a meal annually at a local feeding center, providing cash gifts to families encountering challenges), as well as supporting a missionary project in Honduras. These efforts provide immediate solutions to real needs; however, they are transactional in nature and are not viewed as relationship-building opportunities. In addition, the congregation's bent toward self-preservation has not permitted opportunities for them to consider broader, systemic issues which create the identified needs to begin with. Broaching the identified contextual realities of poverty, classism and racism merely from a sociological or political viewpoint will likely provoke and divide with little substantive effect.

In spite of the statistical decline, this resilient congregation consistently pays its annual conference apportionments and continues, as a point of pride, to afford a full-time pastor at more than minimum salary with full benefits, including a housing allowance. This stability is laudable; however, an identified concern is the reality that the congregation's private mission (maintaining viability) outweighs its public mission ("to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world").[14] This project seeks to build on one of the congregation's self-identified

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[14] Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Lanham, MD: Alban, 2019), 7, defines *public mission* as "what the institution says that it does," contrasted with *private mission*, "operative goals … hidden from public view but [which] override the public mission."

strengths, joyous generosity, by engaging them to explore more deeply six hallmark scripture

texts which invite the faithful to discover personal and corporate spiritual transformation.

The Innovation

At the forefront of any project involving innovation ("change"), the small membership

church is not a likely candidate for an immediate, short-term "fix." Any intervention into the

existing, tightly woven network must be more fundamental, involving a shift in perspective that

may show results only at some later time. Because the small membership church is so grittily

resilient and seemingly impervious to change efforts, the pastoral leader needs to identify as a

leverage point her or his most significant congregationally recognized role. *If* pastor-initiated

change is possible in this size congregation, it will find success because the pastor has identified

this strategic opening. Ron Crandall suggests there are two intertwined leverage points: worship

(undergirded with an optimistic, expressive life of prayer) and relational connections (the

incarnated love of God between and among pastor and congregation).

> [N]othing is more at the heart of ongoing spiritual refreshment than what happens Sunday
> after Sunday during worship. Other ingredients may contribute to rekindling the flame in
> a small church … [b]ut a pastor who loves to praise God and joyfully preach the good
> news, who expectantly prays for the Spirit to come and heal the broken and reclaim the
> lost, and who unashamedly loves God and the sheep of God's pasture will be an
> instrument the Lord will use to restore a vital hope and a bright future to almost any local
> church.[15]

The pastoral question in this context is *whether* a contented, healthy small-membership

congregation can be motivated to move toward a relational, others-centered approach,

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[15] Ron Crandall, *Turnaround and Beyond: A Hopeful Future for Small Membership Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 51-52.

discovering in the process deep personal and corporate transformation. This elicits a subsequent question: *what kind of intervention* might be most effective to create this opportunity?

Preaching is significant in the small membership congregation, but *what kind of preaching innovation could be fruitful?* As in most small membership settings in the United Methodist tradition, BUMC has experienced regular pastoral transitions (average length of appointment in the past two decades is four years), so worshipers have heard multiple communication techniques from many preachers holding diverse theological viewpoints. For an effective intervention to take place, therefore, simple experimentation with a new worship technique (adding audiovisual elements to the sermon, for example) or a new homiletical form (as in the classic Eugene Lowry's *Homiletical Plot*, for example) would be insufficient. After all, the members of this congregation have seen and heard the best that preachers over the years have had to offer. Something substantially deeper, at a structural level, offers the best possibility to sow deeply the necessary seeds which blossom into fruitful abundance for this congregation: a spiritual transition from withering self-preservation to bountiful openhandedness.

Deep within human awareness is a thirst for that which is right and just, what the philosophical discipline of Ethics calls "morality." The human community, especially in times of existential angst, yearns for even a glimpse of such a reality, buffeted as it is by what Christian theology calls sin. Sin has both personal and corporate dimensions, although the corporate nature of sin is often unrecognized by those who most benefit from it. At the root of both personal and corporate sinfulness is self-preservation, the antidote for which is an intentional embrace of a more inclusive moral vision. The immortal words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., ring as true in the early twenty-first century as they did in the middle of the last: "The arc of the moral

universe is long, but it bends toward justice."[16] While this moral vision may lie dormant within a congregation's life, its seeds can be germinated with Spirit-inspired, intentional preaching.

Preaching with moral imagination moves the small membership congregation to see beyond itself, in order to more fully live into a God-formed moral vision. Considering the contextual reality of this congregation, with its high regard for preaching coupled with recent academic insight about preaching as co-creative communicative activity, this project investigates the connection between morally imaginative preaching and spiritual transformation. **It is my thesis that morally imaginative preaching in a small membership church creates a significant opportunity to transform a congregation's mindset from inward to outward.**

This project offers a six-week sermon series undergirded by the principles of morally imaginative preaching. Twenty identified listeners will respond with a series of four surveys (administered before the series begins, during the series and immediately following the series) to assess individual and corporate shifts in mindset ("transformation"), as defined by the "Transtheoretical Model (TTM)."[17] A unique feature of this project engages the preacher in contemporaneous self-reflection and homiletical revision by analyzing the progressively aggregating data, survey by survey, in order to encourage more individual and congregational openness to spiritual transformation. At the conclusion of the sermon series the pastor gathers the twenty listeners to review aggregate individual and corporate data, with the two-fold goal of enhanced awareness of change occurring in their midst and establishing next-steps toward continuing transformation.

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[16] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," (speech, National Cathedral, Washington, DC, March 31, 1968).

[17] Also called the "Stages of Change Model," TTM was developed in the late 1970s by social science researchers Prohaska and DiClemente, as a result of smoker-cessation studies.

In order for a congregation to be moved from an inward focus to an outward vision, individuals must personally experience transformation, as well as see how such transformation shifts a congregational system. There are at least three anticipated outcomes as a result of this project:

(1) Participants will experience shifts in awareness (moving in time from an inward toward an outward focus) as a result of the preaching series;

(2) Participants will learn how change occurs in the congregational setting as the preacher guides them to analyze and interpret the project-end data;

(3) Participants will be empowered to envision next steps for a journey of continuing personal and congregational transformation, broadening its outreach, deepening its relationships and growing in its local and global moral vision.

Critical Discourse

This project explores the intersection of three vital questions for the small membership church: (1) What pastoral priority provides maximum leadership leverage? (2) What is the role of preaching generally, and of morally imaginative preaching specifically? (3) What constitutes "transformation"?

The Pastoral Priority

The most significant decision any pastor makes is how, within her ministry setting, to exercise maximum leadership leverage. This strategic conclusion is reached by carefully balancing personal gifts and graces with congregational expectations, as well as spiritual discernment of a congregation's next faithful step. Expectations for pastoral leadership in small membership churches typically revolve around three areas: pastoral care, preaching and

administration (often in that priority order). Of the many specific, culturally conditioned roles

pastors of any size congregation must engage, preaching remains universally significant. Even in

larger congregations, with multiple staff roles and responsibilities, the senior pastor is considered

"the preacher." Proclamation is held in such high overall regard that the consistent preaching

task is never (ultimately) delegated to "staff."

The Universality of Preaching

The public proclamation of the ancient wisdom contained in the Holy Scriptures is a

hallmark across denominational families in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The dynamic power of

public speech reverberates throughout the Old and New Testaments.

By the second sentence of Genesis, God's creative activity is initiated via word-encoded

speech. "Let there be light!" echoes across the cavernous darkness, eliciting a luminous response

and foreshadowing the continual power of God-inspired utterance. Throughout the Hebrew

Scriptures God communicates with humanity through designated spokespersons, who are often

reluctant (Moses is the best example of such recalcitrance) to take upon themselves such an

authoritative human role. Generations later, God's people are only too well acquainted with these

loquacious orators, whose collective title is "the Prophets." Hebrew scholar Walter

Brueggemann's most important academic work makes the connection between prophets of old

and preachers of today. "It is not difficult to see what the prophets of the Old Testament are

doing, and we have ample interpretive analyses of that work. But the transposition from that

ancient clarity to contemporary social, ecclesial reality is not easy or obvious."[18] Brueggemann's

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[18] Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, Fortress Press, 2012), 1. This work was presaged by his seminal *The Prophetic Imagination* in 1978, in which he is one of the first

conclusion is that what prophets past and prophets present share in common is imagination, seeing through faith what is not yet reality.

Proclamation, rooted as it is in the Hebrew Scriptures, reaches climactic fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. In claiming his messianic role in the hometown synagogue, Jesus stands and receives the Isaiah scroll, and unrolling it, hearkens back to a familiar prophetic emanation:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
>   Because he has anointed me
>   To bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
>
>   And recovery of sight to the blind,
>   To let the oppressed go free,
> To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.[19]

Rolling up the scroll and returning to his seat, Luke summarizes Jesus' decisive interpretation: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."[20] Remarkably, it is not his prophetic self-acclamation that garners the listeners' attention ("All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth," v 22). It is only when Jesus announces the expansive, boundary-breaking, inclusive nature of Jesus' mission by citing Elijah's and Elisha's healing actions among Gentiles (thus extending by association his own intention to move beyond hometown familiarity and ethnic exclusivity), that his hearers are "filled with rage" (v 28). Driving him out of town and attempting to "hurl him off the cliff" (v 29), he passes through the gathered crowd in order to embrace fully his God-ordained mission.

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scholars to broach the concept of imagination as foundational to a lively, relevant hermeneutic. While Brueggemann is one of the first, he is by no means the last. See, for example, Richard W. Voelz, *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), "The Radical Imagination in Christian Preaching," 40-50.

[19] Luke 4:18-1 (NRSV).
[20] Luke 4:22 (NRSV).

This expectation-shattering mission is continuously expressed through Jesus' remaining three years of preaching and teaching. Authentic Christian preaching since that time is at its most faithful when it continues to shatter individual and corporate spiritual myopia, breaking forth with the possibility of deepened moral imagination, the essence of God's perennial vision for humanity.

For Christians, Jesus is Lord, and his preaching as captured in the four gospels is foundational to faith.[21] With such exalted regard, it is noteworthy that proclamation in the Christian movement does not cease with its founder. Proclamation is, in fact, the very means by which his first followers give present, lively voice to God's Word. The Apostle Paul offers a rhetorically elegant apologetic for preaching in Romans 10:14-15:

> But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Two millennia later, the Christian movement continues to rely foundationally upon pastor as preacher. William H. Willimon contends: "Here's how God suggested I provocatively open this book: *Preaching is the most important task of an ordained leader.*"[22] In a second work, also penned in 2020, Willimon convincingly extrapolates Barthian theology to assert that preaching is, in fact, God's Word, contemporaneously, continually revealing.

> Our contemporary context makes outrageous the Barthian assertion upon which faithful preaching is based: *Deus dixit*. God has spoken (Scripture), God will have the last word (eschaton), and – surprise – God speaks *hic et nunc*, here and now. *Deus dixit*. How? Primarily through preachers.[23]

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[21] See, for example, Paul's formula for salvation in Romans 10:9

[22] William H. Willimon, *Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 2. Italics original.

[23] William H. Willimon, *Preachers Dare: Speaking for God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 3.

Lewis A. Parks echoes what other church experts universally note: "Most small membership churches continue to hold the preaching act in high esteem."[24] From the ancient origins of Judeo-Christian history, preaching continues to be foundational in Christian congregations. Lori Carrell, in her 2000 study of 581 North American preachers from all denominational backgrounds, contends that preaching, as a series of communicative acts of co-creation between preacher and listeners, is significant.[25] "The power of human communication is a potential, waiting to be used. We don't need more talk or more action; we're already communicating every time we're in the presence of another human being. It's the quality of our communication, not the quantity, which we need to consider."[26]

The Promise of Morally Imaginative Preaching

Morally imaginative preaching finds its source in Transformation Ethics, an ethical approach which posits metaphor as fundamental to human moral understanding.[27]

> The moral imagination sits at the center of the transformation process. In short, transformation presupposes the existence of a vision that will guide it. When we speak of the imagination, we refer to the ability of the human mind to create mental pictures of various types such as ideas, impressions, or descriptive and colorful visions. The imagination can combine previous experiences and anticipate the possibility of new ones. It can draw from memory and invent alternative ways of perceiving the future. It can take

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[24] Lewis A. Parks, *Preaching in the Small Membership Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), x.

[25] Carrell is a professor of Communications, so she her focus is on the communicative process of preaching. She goes to great lengths to distinguish homiletical approaches to preaching from communication theory, in which preacher and listener "co-create" meaning together.

[26] Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000), 60. Carrell reports that in her study, the most impactful "component of the church service" is "Sermon" (35%), followed by "Communion" (20%) and "Prayer" (18%), 95.

[27] Because of its pinpoint focus, the project upon which this thesis is based does not investigate the origins and implications of "moral imagination" as a theory; suffice it to say, the literature is deep and broad on the subject.

old ideas or impressions, break them down into smaller parts, and reassemble them into new patterns that have never before existed.[28]

John Paul Lederach, a well-known academic and practitioner of moral imagination, identifies four "capacities" which characterize moral imagination.

> The kind of imagination to which I refer is mobilized when four disciplines and capacities are held together and practiced …. Stated simply, the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape …." [29]

Although moral imagination involves thoughtful consideration, it is not merely an intellectual experiment. It offers an expansive vision that finds practical expression, leading toward transformation, personal and corporate. The concept of moral imagination fueled the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and sees contemporary modeling in, among others, the Rev. Dr. William Barber, ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), who has popularized "Moral Mondays."[30] Stemming back to the time of slavery, and then during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, through the Civil Rights Era, until today the African-American church and its clergy have provided consistent moral leadership in the US.

Although positive moral change has occurred in the past fifty years, Robert Michael Franklin makes the case that a continuing lack of moral leadership allows, among other

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[28] Thomas R. McFaul, *Transformation Ethics: Developing the Christian Moral Imagination* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), x.

[29] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

[30] See William J. Barber II, with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the Rise of a New Justice Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).

identified concerns, rising levels of white nationalism and "Christian" identity movements in the

past decade, after which he asserts:

> I believe that we need preachers and pastors to become more intentional as local leaders who think in public, who think and communicate from the pulpit, particularly in light of two trends: (1) high rates of biblical illiteracy in the culture, and (2) a growing culture of anti-intellectualism and mistrust of science, reason, and data.[31]

The roots of moral imagination are deep and have produced over the centuries a resplendent

family tree with multiple, ever-blossoming branches. A rhetorical twig emerging from one of

these larger theological branches is "morally imaginative preaching."

Morally imaginative preaching is championed by Frank A. Thomas in his recent *How to*

Preach a Dangerous Sermon, and further detailed in his 2020 sequel, *How to Survive a*

Dangerous Sermon. Thomas reminds the reader that moral imagination in the North American

context finds (though not exclusively) a rich history in the African American church experience.

Thomas incisively argues that "whiteness" extends beyond skin pigmentation, demonstrating that

in our current context the need for liberation and equality extends beyond traditional racial

division stereotypes.[32] His proffered approach, therefore, is intended for preachers in all social

locations. "Dangerous sermons" need to be preached regularly from all pulpits. "If at least some

of my sermons are not dangerous, I lose a piece of my integrity."[33]

He masterfully makes the case that North American USA culture cries out for moral

reclamation, that moral imagination provides the means for such transformation, and that

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[31] Robert Michael Franklin, *Moral Leadership: Integrity, Courage, Imagination* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020), 65-66.

[32] For more on "whiteness" as a social construct, see Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

[33] Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), xxi.

pastoral leaders whose preaching is so informed create the impetus for significant social change, beginning at the grassroots level. Notably, the small membership church is at heart a grass roots gathering of God's people. "Moral imagination is the ability of the preacher, intuitive or otherwise, in the midst of the chaotic experiences of human life and existence, to grasp and share God's abiding wisdom and ethical truth in order to benefit the individual and common humanity."[34]

Thomas defines a "dangerous sermon" as one "based in the preacher's moral imagination that upends and challenges the dominant moral hierarchy that operates in the church and/or cultural context of the preaching event."[35] The ultimate goal of morally inspired preaching is preachers who are "aware of different moral orders and working gospels [who] ha[ve] the ability to develop messages that invite people beyond accidental and unintentional divisive rhetoric and polarizing by speaking to the heart of the inclusive faith tradition that brings people together by inspiring wonder, mystery, and hope."[36]

To be clear, morally imaginative preaching is not merely a homiletical technique; it is, rather, an enhanced hermeneutic, one which can be used to augment any preaching regimen.[37] Its appeal for the busy preacher is that this does not require radically rethinking one's familiar sermon preparation process. Morally imaginative preaching is, rather, an enhancement of a

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[34] Frank A. Thomas, *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), xxiii-xxiv.

[35] Ibid., xvii.

[36] Ibid., 57-58.

[37] Note that Thomas emphasizes that the "four qualities of the moral imagination … must be located in the preacher before they can be translated into homiletical expression for the pew" (16). The focus of this project is on the homiletical output and assumes the presence of such pastoral integrity.

preacher's existing technique, not a homiletical remediation project.[38] Thomas holds that "dangerous preaching" is founded on **four essential qualities**[39]:

First, the preacher must "envision equality and represent that by one's physical presence."[40] Authentic preaching in this mode is grounded in a reality that pulsates with inclusion, eschewing hierarchy and dominance (recognized or unrecognized).

Second, the preacher acts empathetically to create bridges toward new life patterns. Empathy is more than feeling remorse for historic or generational wrongs; it become a catalyst to move forward, "to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice."[41]

Third, the preacher sources his or her sermonic work in "wisdom and truth in ancient texts, the wisdom of the ages."[42] For Christian preachers like Thomas, this is no surprise, as the Holy Scriptures are the primary source for morally imaginative preaching.

Fourth, the preacher forms the sermon in poetic, artful language that "lifts and elevates the human spirit by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery."[43] While the preacher begins with the technical tools of exegesis and hermeneutics, the nuances of thoughtful language provide spiritual "lift" for the weighty matters explored by morally imaginative preaching.

Thomas is concerned that too few Christians have taken time (or have been provided the resources to even recognize they may need) to carefully consider their unconscious values,

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[38] It is worth noting, however, that preachers who choose to redefine their process may benefit from Thomas' *Preaching as Celebration: Digital Lecture Series and Workbook*, 2nd edition, 2018.

[39] Note that Thomas' approach is similar to, but distinct from, Lederach cited above.

[40] Thomas, *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon,* xxi.

[41] Ibid., xii.

[42] Ibid., xii.

[43] Ibid., xix.

especially as it concerns moral order and hierarchy. He is especially concerned that "preachers attempt to be neutral and say nothing based upon potential negative consequences, and by their conspicuous silence they allow the status quo dominance hierarchy to continue aided and unchallenged."[44] Thomas seeks two outcomes: that preachers' homiletical fruit guide the listener to "carefully discern their moral hierarchy and the moral hierarchy of others," and that laypeople find empowerment to "push, prod, encourage, and support preachers to preach in such a way [emboldened discernment of moral hierarchy, their own and other's].[45]

Before the preacher embarks upon the dangerous-preaching journey, however, she must **prepare inwardly in three ways**. Thomas, basing his ideas in cognitive theory research, offers three guidelines:

First, preachers must identify their own moral worldview and recognize how this worldview shapes their theology of preaching. Before one can authentically preach with moral imagination, one needs acute personal awareness. Second, once the preacher understands his own world view and recognizes that others may have dissimilar world views, it frees the preacher to rhetorically fashion a better-heard message. Third, the preacher thus awakened recognizes there are multiple moral orders afoot and is now in position to help the listener understand the moral views of others. This creates at atmosphere in which productive dialogue can occur, especially with those "they might not agree with or be familiar with or normally would not associate with and even demonize."[46] Thomas is optimistic about the opportunities for preachers who prepare themselves in this way.

> [T]he preacher who is aware of different moral orders and Christianity has the ability to develop messages that invite people beyond accidental and unintentional divisive rhetoric

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44 Ibid., xix.
45 Ibid., xix-xx.
46 Ibid., 57.

and polarizations. The preacher has the moral dexterity and rhetorical agility to go well beyond glib religious and cultural usage of labels, stereotypes, tribal tropes, prejudices, divisive language, and especially demonization to speak to the heart of the faith tradition that brings people together by inspiring wonder, mystery, and hope rather than division and polarization.[47]

An effective dangerous sermon "educates, challenges, and inspires, whether the audience is progressive, moderate, or conservative" because "the theological and rhetorical arguments" are "placed within the worldview of the audience."[48]

The preceding paragraphs describe the philosophical nature of the "morally imaginative sermon," including specific ways the preacher internally orients himself to embark upon an enhanced homiletical journey. Now the preacher is ready to shift from the philosophical to the pragmatic. Every preacher has a preferred method for bringing an ancient text to life in his or her particular *Sitz im Leben*. Journeying with a biblical text through the exegetical and homiletical processes is a weekly pastoral adventure, which over time becomes personally stylized. The beauty of Thomas' innovative morally imaginative preaching is that the preacher retains the familiar while supplementing an additional set of five questions to the preparation process:

1. Where in this text do we find **equality envisioned** and represented by physical presence?
2. Where in this text do we notice **empathy as a catalyst** or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice?
3. Where do we find **wisdom and truth** in this ancient text, the wisdom of the ages?
4. Where is the **language of poetry and art** that lifts and elevates by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery?
5. To what **contemporary moral concern** would you apply your responses in these four questions?[49]

The Nexus of Transformation

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[47] Ibid.*,* 57-58.
[48] Thomas, *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon*, 58.
[49] Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 86.

Transformation most simply defined is "change." The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures continually invite, direct, and admonish God's people to seek change. "I am about to do a new thing" God promises Isaiah (43:9). In his nocturnal exchange with Nicodemus Jesus declares, "You must be born from above" (John 3:7). Paul's preaching is well summarized in his Corinthian declaration: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Transformation, it seems, is a foundational expectation of and for people of Christian faith.

For congregations preoccupied with survival (their "life"), the paradox is this: in order to "save their life," they must "lose their life for [Jesus'] sake … [to] find it" (Matthew 16:25-26). Embracing open-hearted liberality, and transitioning away from penurious conservation, Jesus reveals, is the heart of personal and corporate transformation. If this is true for the Christian movement widely, it is even more so for believers in the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley's expansive declaration "the world is my parish" was buttressed with two core convictional pillars: personal holiness and social holiness, both of which are evidence of and motivation for spiritual transformation.[50]

BUMC's geographical context and congregational theological stance encourage openness concerning personal spiritual transformation. In the not-too-distant past revival services were a regular part of the people's annual church calendar and most can testify with ease concerning their individual spiritual experiences of conversion and continuing growth. Discovering and growing in personal holiness is a deep value at BUMC. A growing edge for the congregation is a fruitful lifestyle (individual and corporate) characterized by the transformative possibilities of

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[50] See, for example, Randy L. Maddox's *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), for details a thesis of this length does not permit.

Wesleyan social holiness. Although there is scholarly disagreement as to what Wesley originally

meant by "social holiness," the United Methodist Church understands

> [f]or Wesley, there is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness. The communal forms of faith in the Wesleyan tradition not only promote personal growth; they also equip and mobilize us for mission and service to the world.[51]

Since the intent of this project is to identify evidence of transformation, one of the

challenges is how to measure mindset change. The design of this project utilizes qualitative

analysis to measure individual and corporate response to preaching inspired by moral

imagination. Those who research human capacity for change readily acknowledge how difficult

it is to create openings for change, especially leading to sustained change which results in

personal and institutional transformation.[52]

For this project's purpose, the Transtheoretical Model (TTM), also known as the "Stages

of Change Model," will be utilized. TTM was developed in the late 1970s by social science

researchers Prochaska and DiClemente, as a result of smoker-cessation studies.[53] At least one

mainline church consultant utilizes addiction as an apt metaphor to describe churches stubbornly

resistant to change, so perhaps utilizing a stages of change model is more relevant to

transformation in the church context than is at first readily apparent.[54] Because this is a model,

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[51] *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (2006), 54.

[52] See, for example, Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey's *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2009), or, among numerous texts written for pastoral leaders on the subject, Gilbert Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Alban Institute, 1998).

[53] J. O. Prochaska and C. C. DiClemente, "Stages and Processes of Self-Change of Smoking, Toward an Integrative Model of Change," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (1983:51), 390-395.

[54] See Thomas G. Bandy, *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

and not a theory, it is possible to integrate its insights into diverse modalities while maintaining the integrity of its assertions. This model assumes continuous, dynamic behavior throughout a cyclical process. This is a fluid, not a static, process. The change process is depicted visually below[55]:
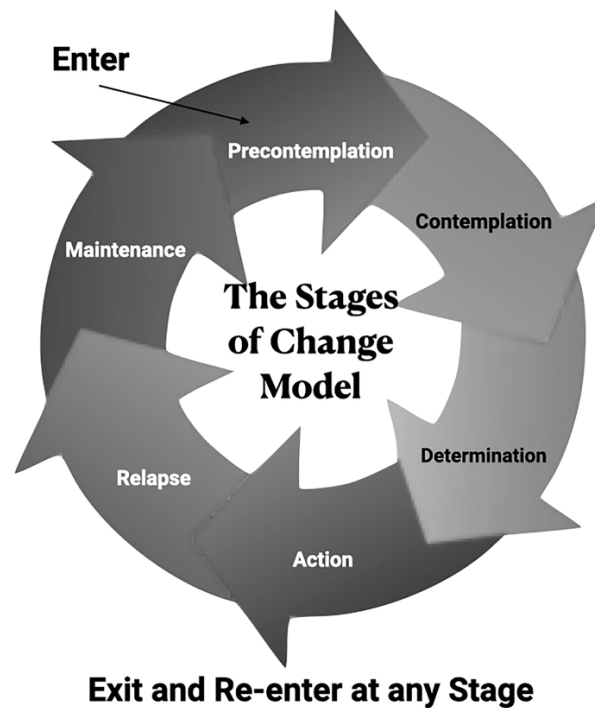
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[55] "Behavioral Change Models: The Transtheoretical Model (Stages of Change)," https://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/mph-modules/sb/behavioralchangetheories/BehavioralChangeTheories6.html

This change model identifies six stages in the process, moving from

- **precontemplation** (no awareness and consequently no intention of taking any action), to

- **contemplation** (dawning awareness with an intended action at some point in the near future), to

- **determination** or preparation (readiness to take action within the immediate future), to

- **action** (change behavior is enacted, with intention to maintain the change).

The TTM recognizes how difficult it is to sustain change ("maintenance"), and it allows for **relapse** to occur, with the opportunity to **re-enter** again at any place in the continuum. Proponents of the stages of change model view "success" as sustained behavior change after a period of six months with no relapse. To make the change model stages more accessible to members of the congregation, these first-person descriptions are offered:

- *Precontemplation*: "I don't (yet) have any reason to wonder"

- *Contemplation*: "I wonder because I have a reason to do so"

- *Determination*: "I've wondered long enough; it's time for an action plan"

- *Action*: "I'm acting in response to my wondering process"

- *Relapse*: "I'm not sure I can go along with this"

- *Re-enter*: "I'm ready to try this again"

In summary, this project explores how, through morally imaginative preaching, mindset change is revealed in the biblical witness (culminating in Jesus Christ), informed by Wesleyan social holiness and measured by the TTM.

Project Design

Because this project focuses on a limited six-week time period, it is necessary to focus on only the first three TTM stages: precontemplation, contemplation and determination. Sermon one is designed to move the listener *into precontemplation*; that is, the listener will recognize there is something specific she or he needs to consider (in this case, the moral imagination, broadly considered). Sermons two, three and four incent the listener *to consider specific actions* in response to biblical proclamation. Sermons five and six invite the listener to *determine (prepare) how she or he will take action*.

For purposes of this project, "success" will be evidenced in data synthesized from individual surveys which show progress or digress in stages of change, as well as in data aggregated from the individual surveys to indicate group progress or digress in stages of change. If this "success" is not realized through the acquired data, there remains the opportunity for learning of many kinds including, but not limited to:

- Reassessment of the role of morally imaginative preaching in the small membership congregation

- Analysis and identification of possible growth-inhibiting dynamics

- Closer consideration of the role, in addition to morally imaginative preaching, that deepened relational connection plays between the preacher's activity and the listener's response

- Efficacy of "moral imagination" (largely the historical provenance of the Black Church) in a rural, mostly white, small membership congregation

This project's innovation explores change leading to transformation in the small membership church as the result of a six-week sermon series inspired by the principles of moral imagination. For a detailed, logical, step-by-step process in worksheet form, see Appendix 2, "Preaching a

Dangerous Sermon Worksheet." To see an example of a six-week sermon series based on the philosophy and process described above, see Appendix 3, "The Moral Imagination: A Six-Week Sermon Series." This innovation process is accomplished through the following seven discrete steps.

Step 1: Design the six-week sermon series inspired by moral imagination. The sermon series utilizing Frank Thomas' moral imagination model is preached on six consecutive Sunday mornings during in-person and (simul-broadcast) Facebook Live worship. The planned series balances the poles of hermeneutical integrity (the stationery) and homiletical flexibility (the dynamic), maximizing the energy created from this interaction. For purposes of hermeneutical integrity, the scripture texts, sermon titles, sermon focus statement and sermon function statement remain unchanged throughout the series.[56] A unique feature of this project relies upon the preacher's ability to incorporate deftly the on-going survey results to inform the homiletic structure of successive sermons in the series. The hermeneutical content remains unchanged (see Appendix 3), while the homiletical process will be shaped contemporaneously week by week, based on the survey data and the preacher's observations (see Appendix 2, which details the complete process).

The series seeks to provide well-rounded Scriptural coverage, including three Hebrew Scripture texts, one Gospel text, and two Christian Scripture texts. An unconscious desire is for the listeners to finish the six-week series understanding that a creative, transformative God has spoken and continues to speak into human lives and the structures they create. As indicated in the week-by-week descriptions, each sermon will be keyed to one of the TTM change process

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[56] "Focus statement" and "function statement" find their origins in Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 127.

stages in an attempt to move the listener progressively through the first three stages (pre-contemplation, contemplation and determination).

Step Two: Identify and recruit twenty regular worship attenders who commit to listening to all six sermons in the series. Since worship attendance is very steady and worship attenders are very consistent week by week, the biggest variable will be demographic composition of the group. BUMC is fortunate to have a healthy age spectrum and is about equally divided between genders. In this small membership congregation where each person's presence is valued, there will be an initial verbal announcement in the worship service, inviting any interested in participating to talk directly with the pastor. This verbal announcement ensures no one feels "excluded" (inclusion is an important value in a healthy small membership congregation) in the selection process. Within two weeks of the verbal invitation, personal letters of invitation will be sent to twenty selected individuals (being mindful of representative demographic diversity), asking for these commitments:

- attend in-person worship and listen carefully to each of the sermons in the six-week series,

- complete within the requested time frame four separate, confidential surveys, and

- participate in a final group discussion and decision-making session following the sermon series.

Step Three: Establish a readiness-to-change baseline. In order to document change as perceived by the listener over the course of six weeks, an initial baseline must be established. Survey #1 ("Moral Imagination Sermon Series Selected Member Response") is administered immediately following sermon one in order to provide baseline data, establishing from the listener's responses the TTM stage where he or she is located. Additionally, Survey #1 gathers

data to establish at what TTM stage the listener perceives the congregation is located. These initial data establish a baseline for each individual, with the aggregate data providing a baseline for the congregation as a whole.

Step Four: Preach the sermon series, engaging homiletical fluidity to reflect collected data and observation. Survey data compiled contemporaneously throughout the sermon series is analyzed week by week. The individual and aggregate data locate the TTM stage of change, informing the preacher's homiletical criteria for successive sermons. While the scripture texts, sermon titles, foci and functions do not change, homiletical fluidity allows the preacher to adapt his content so listeners may engage more meaningfully in the continuing change process. For example, once the data show the preacher that listeners have moved from *pre-contemplation* to *contemplation*, he knows it is time to design homiletically a structure with content designed to move the listener toward *action*, the next TTM transformation stage.

In addition to survey hard data, the preacher observes attentively, noting ways in which she modifies her sermon to reflect both means of feedback. This internal process models equality (the first characteristic of moral imagination) between the preacher and the listener, fostering a tacit communication process which is alert to nuances of co-occurring transformation among preacher, individual listener, and a small group of listeners. While many preachers make homiletical judgments (consciously or not) intuitively, this project design requires intentionality, providing data to empower the preacher's role in deepening the listener's moral imagination.

Step Five (ongoing): Continue to survey participants an additional three times during the six-week sermon series. All of the four surveys (including Survey #1 detailed above) are a uniform set of questions measuring the individual's self-perception, as well as a set of questions measuring the individual's perception of the congregation as a whole. Survey #2 is

administered immediately following week two worship service. Survey #3 is administered immediately following week three worship service. Survey #4 is administered immediately following week four worship service. See Appendix for the survey questions, each of which informs the readiness-to-change location within the TTM. By compiling data survey by survey, an emerging "change pathway" is identified, assisting the preacher along the way to construct a sermon for the next week which will help listeners transition from the early stages of change toward deeper levels of change (as detailed in "The Nexus of Transformation," above).

Step Six: Complete the sermon series and gather to share data points with the twenty designated listeners. Within a week of the final survey (administered immediately following worship week six), gather the listeners for a 90-minute discussion. During this time, listeners are thanked for their participation, and the change model is explained. Participants are provided with a record of their confidentially recorded information, showing their unique pattern in the identified change process, helping them to see their individual change pathway. The group also receives aggregate data, presented graphically to help them visualize how they have perceived the congregation as a whole responding to this change initiative. This is an opportunity for the listeners to understand how change occurs on both individual and corporate levels, that individuals shape corporate change as much as a corporate body shapes the individual. This session concludes with an invitation for group members to provide observations, based on the data they have received, as well as to solicit suggestions as to how the process could be refined.

Step Seven: Evaluate project data and learnings from the group gathering. Following the participant feedback session, the researcher summarizes learnings, with special attention to the question: Does morally imaginative preaching in a small membership church create a significant opportunity to transform a congregation's mindset from inward to outward?

Once data is analyzed and synthesized, the researcher creates a summary of learnings, challenges, results.

Morally Imaginative Preaching as Transformative: A Work in Progress

While this project utilizes a recognized homiletical model (Frank Thomas' morally imaginative preaching) for its six-week duration, its uniqueness is in utilizing contemporaneous change data based on the TTM. Appendix 2 ("Preparation Worksheet") provides a four-step preparation process, building on a preacher's established routine (with enhancements to pique the moral imagination). The initial steps are logical in orientation and deductive, with one question following another. The first step, the exegetical step, will be familiar to any preacher. Steps two invites the preacher to consider "bridges" between herself and her listener, giving attention to feedback (informal and formal, via the survey instrument) received. Step three incorporates Thomas' questions, guiding the preacher to envision how the five traits of morally imaginative preaching will appear in the weekly sermon.

The final step, however, presents an opportunity for inductive creativity. It is at this point in the preparation process that the preacher reviews the current survey data to decide how to focus the upcoming week's sermon for maximum change potential. By analyzing the survey data to determine at what change stage each respondent finds him- or herself, the preacher makes strategic rhetorical and content decisions to encourage continuing change. If, for example, survey results show that most respondents are tracking with what the preacher has been communicating, she knows she can intentionally craft the upcoming sermon to move from a pre-contemplation stage ("I was not aware of that") to a contemplation stage ("I now know that I need to think about this"). If, on the other hand, results show confusion or strong disagreement, the preacher

knows he needs to be less assertive and create within the next sermon opportunities to move listeners to a more change-friendly stance. If survey results reveal listeners have "exited" the change process, this will require the preacher to be strategic in recapturing attention. Morally imaginative preaching is a dynamic work in progress, effervescently alive through thoughtful preparation and deliberate intentionality, a result of pastor and parishioners growing together through a mutual change process.

Anticipated Outcomes

        Although worldwide pandemic precautions precluded the implementation of this project, one could anticipate several important outcomes.

1. **Enhanced awareness of the change process**. Through data gleaned from four successive surveys, participants will observe how their responses accord with the TTM change model. In addition, participants will see from the aggregated data the ways in which their perception about the congregation as a whole indicate change trends.

2. **Heightened homiletical acuity**. As the preacher sees the connection between sermon preparation (informed by survey data) and change reported by listeners, she or he discovers the significance of innovative, morally imaginative preaching in the small membership congregation.

3. **Continued cultivation of the moral imagination**. This project is not simply about *preaching* in the small membership congregation; it tests the efficacy of a particular model of preaching which purports to cultivate deepened moral awareness on the part of the preacher and the listener. This researcher hypothesizes that deeper moral awareness is the key to

motivate a conserving, self-protecting congregation toward a more expansive sense of purpose.

4. **Sustained reinvigoration of the small membership congregation**. With nearly half of the congregation actively participating in this change process innovation, it is likely that a critical mass of change-agents will emerge. As a result of engagement in this project, listeners have the opportunity to consider what it means to "lose" their lives in Christ's vision, in order to "gain" the abundant life that comes with an others-centered, outwardly focused spiritual disposition. Having experienced and analyzed the six-week experience, participants who have experienced transformation will be better equipped to help move the congregation toward its next faithful transforming actions. This project builds on the spiritual conviction that those who experience such life change are then the best evangelists for moving the congregation forward. This project's limited scope is to examine mindset change throughout a six-week sermon series; however, this process lays the foundation for the congregation to subsequently identify their next faithful steps (and to name the next necessary mindset changes), fortified from their personal transformation experiences.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that the 2020 pandemic interrupted the implementation of this carefully designed Doctor of Ministry project, which seeks to determine whether morally imaginative preaching in a small membership church creates a significant opportunity to transform a congregation's mindset from inward to outward. Without sufficient time to implement the project, it is disappointing to have no data with which to test the thesis. However, there are at least three important learnings to be derived from the research portion of this project.

1. Authentic spiritual transformation for pastor and congregation is a dynamic process, a journey of mutuality experienced through God's living Word. While this project catalyzes the role of pastor as preacher amongst God's gathered people, the liberating gift of change emerges through intentional listening: the preacher who listens for God's word to preach, the congregant who hears God speak through his pastor, the pastor who listens to what her people have heard, the people who hear from one another throughout the process. It is important to note that this is not a linear process; it is, rather, a looping, multi-layered engagement amongst the Divine, the pastor and the congregation (individually and corporately). Transformation, especially in the small membership church, does not simply "happen." Learning to see beyond oneself and living into God's expansive vision ("losing one's life" in order to "save" it) is born in time through persistent, intentional, careful listening to oneself, one another and to God.

2. While this experience is not, in itself, unique (after all, God's Word has been preached for centuries in every possible venue, week after week, with spiritual fruit), this project develops the moral imagination for penetrating impact. In an existential cultural moment characterized by political and ideological divisions between the perceived "elite" and the perceived "grassroots," it is conceivable that morally imaginative preaching in the small membership congregation could be the catalyst to reshape the thinking of its members. One can only imagine how grassroots America could find moral reformation – and with it a renewed public civility, among other enhanced character qualities – as a result of courageous, "dangerous" preaching.

3. For this pastor, who has been preaching at least weekly for over thirty years, the research and project design impart to me a renewed truth. In churches of all sizes, but especially in

the small membership congregation, the role of pastor as preacher remains foundational, and preaching with moral imagination "rekindle[s] the gift of God that is within."[57] This recognition offers renewed hope and countless possibilities for long-term pastors who may struggle with the pedantry of congregational life and the aridity of self-preservation. Preaching with moral imagination beckons the preacher to reclaim his or her prophetic role within the individual congregation and broader community alike.

If moral imagination is "the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist,"[58] then the small membership congregation is a fecund womb anticipating the new life that morally imaginative preaching instills. With a prime location (the small congregation) and an exciting innovation (morally imaginative preaching), there remains a final, decisive actor: the pastor as preacher. As the Apostle Paul queries in Romans 10, "How can they hear without a preacher?"[59] How indeed!

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[57] 2 Timothy 1:6 (NRSV).

[58] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29, in Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxiv).

[59] Romans 10:14, Common English Bible

Appendix 1
Moral Imagination Sermon Series Selected Member Response Survey

Response Sheet #_____   Respondent #_____

Please answer the following questions by circling the number most closely reflecting your experience *at this moment in time*.

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1A	I can tell you what "moral imagination" is.	5	4	3	2	1
1B	Most members of BUMC can tell you what "moral imagination" is.	5	4	3	2	1
2A	Today's Scripture text and Sermon motivated me to think more deeply about what is right and wrong in the world today.	5	4	3	2	1
2B	Today's Scripture text and Sermon motivated BUMC members to think more deeply about what is right and wrong in the world today.	5	4	3	2	1
3A	I am thinking about how **I** could make a difference in my world.	5	4	3	2	1
3B	BUMC members are thinking about how they could make a difference in the world.	5	4	3	2	1
4A	I really agree with what the Pastor's sermon said today.	5	4	3	2	1
4B	Most BUMC members really agree with what the Pastor's sermon said today.	5	4	3	2	1
5A	I'm not sure I agree with what the Pastor preached today.	5	4	3	2	1

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5B	Most BUMC members aren't sure they agree with the Pastor preached today.	5	4	3	2	1
6A	The subject of the Pastor's sermon matters to me.	5	4	3	2	1
6B	The subject of the Pastor's sermon matters to most members of BUMC.	5	4	3	2	1
7A	The subject of the Pastor's sermon is important but doesn't really apply to me.	5	4	3	2	1
7B	The subject of the Pastor's sermon is important but doesn't really apply to this congregation.	5	4	3	2	1
8A	I'm thinking of at least one concrete action I could take as a result of the Pastor's sermon today.	5	4	3	2	1
8B	Most of the BUMC members are thinking of at least one concrete action they could take as a result of the Pastor's sermon today.	5	4	3	2	1
9A	The subject of today's sermon pushes be to believe even more strongly what I already hold as true. I'm not interested in changing like that.	5	4	3	2	1
9B	The subject of today's sermon pushes BUMC members to believe even more strongly what they already hold as true. They're not interested in changing like that.	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix 2
"Preaching a Dangerous Sermon" Preparation Worksheet

Step One: Preliminary Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work
(Preacher's existing process, which results in the following)"

Scripture Text: Sermon Title:

Sermon Focus Statement:

Sermon Function Statement:

Step Two: "Bridge Work"[60]
(Preacher identifies "bridges" between his/her worldview and the hearers' worldview)

(1) Thinking of the Scripture and sermon in question, what are my unconscious moral commitments?
(2) Thinking of the Scripture and sermon in question, what are my hearers' unconscious moral commitments?
(3) Where do we share moral commitments? Where do our moral commitments diverge?
(4) [*Project specific*]: Based on survey feedback and observation, how do I need to shape this sermon differently to better bridge our worlds?
(5) Where are the bridges to connect differing moral commitments? Where is the commonality?

Step Three: Moral Imagination Work[61]
(Preacher considers the following questions)

(1) Where in this text do we find **equality** envisioned and represented by physical presence?
(2) Where in this text do we notice **empathy as a catalyst** or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice?
(3) Where do we find **wisdom and truth** in this ancient text, the wisdom of the ages?
(4) Where is the **language or poetry and art** that lifts and elevates by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery?
(5) To what **contemporary moral concerns** would you apply your responses in these four questions?

Step Four: Sermon Construction Work
(Incorporating survey data into the decision-making process, the preacher uses his or her personal practice to prepare sermon to be preached. The result may include: full manuscript, detailed notes, minimal notes, no notes).

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[60] See Frank A. Thomas, *How to Survive a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 59-64.
[61] See Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 86.

Appendix 3
The Moral Imagination: A Six-Week Sermon Series

Week One
> *Scripture text*: Isaiah 43:14-21   *Sermon Title*: "A New Thing"
> *Focus*: God is always doing something new
> *Function*: Shift listener's awareness from precontemplation to contemplation.
> *Change Process stage addressed*: Precontemplation

Survey 1 (immediately follows week one worship service)

Week Two
> *Scripture text:* Genesis 12:1-3   *Sermon Title:* "An Old Promise"
> *Focus:* God promises Abraham that he will the father of nations
> *Function:* Invite listener to contemplate the breadth and depth of God's promise.
> *Change Process stage addressed:* Contemplation

Survey 2 (immediately follows week two worship service)

Week Three
> *Scripture text:* Isaiah 6:1-8   *Sermon Title:* "Always Calling"
> *Focus:* God is always calling.
> *Function:* Challenge listeners to recognize God's voice in their lives.
> *Change Process stage addressed:* Contemplation

Week Four
> *Scripture text:* Luke 4:14-30   *Sermon Title:* "God's Renewed Mission"
> *Focus:* Jesus becomes God's renewed mission enfleshed
> *Function:* Invite listener to contemplate a new mission.
> *Change Process stage addressed:* Contemplation

Survey 3 (immediately follows week four worship service)

Week Five
> *Scripture text:* Ephesians 6:10-17   *Sermon Title:* "What Lies Below"
> *Focus:* God strengthens us to confront barriers to (other's) liberation
> *Function:* Provide listeners a tool to understand systemic hierarchies.
> *Change Process stage addressed:* Determination

Week Six
> *Scripture text:* Acts 1:1-10   *Sermon Title:* "Receiving Power"
> *Focus:* God's mission is accomplished through humans filled with the Holy Spirit
> *Function:* Ask listeners to determine their personal plan for witness.
> *Change Process stage addressed:* Determination

Survey 4 (immediately follows week six worship service)

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