

## CHAPTER 7

# PICTURES OF THE PROMISED LAND

Past, present, and future: no one lives in the wilderness without engaging all three time frames. Sitting at the campfire in the evening, we rehearse the past as we talk about what it was like back in Egypt, how far we have already come, and what the travel was like in the heat of the past day. Sitting at the campfire in the evening, we measure the present—how tired we are, what aches and pains we feel, what enjoyment is found in the company as quiet, rest, and food are shared. But the conversation also turns to the future—what it will be like, what can be expected not just for tomorrow's travel but when the promised land is reached.

It would not be fair in this book to rehearse the past lessons learned and the present challenges faced without reference to what can be seen ahead. Here we come to the futurist's dilemma. People want to know the future, but how can one tell?

A number of years ago I was invited to Rhode Island to work with a national group of Lutheran executives. The invitation was to share presentation time with a professional futurist. Not knowing what to expect, I was intrigued. The futurist and I met to prepare for our time with the executives, and I was instructed in futuring. I learned that the future cannot be forecast or foretold. One can measure and describe only what is and what has been happening and extrapolate from both to describe what might be, if all trends continue uninterrupted. Any conclusions about the future are necessarily suspect because they are subject to unknown and uncontrollable conditions and variables. Conclusions are not the stuff of futuring, but projections (extrapolated trends) can be. Based on what we have experienced, based on what we see at the moment, it is possible to project what might happen—as long as we are willing to be wrong! It is all right to look through a glass darkly in the present moment as long as we are willing to see clearly later when things are different than we expected.

Of the many things that we could discuss for future projections of our wandering in our particular wilderness I would limit this conversation to four interrelated themes: the large church, the small church, the denominational connection with clergy and

congregations, and denominational size and structure. Each of these four areas offers a lens into the way in which denominations and congregations are shifting as we learn to live into the new mission field. While conclusions must be held very lightly, we can say some things.

*Large churches, very large churches, and megachurches will continue to carry denominations in terms of members, dollars, and access to the culture.*

Large churches (average attendance more than five hundred at worship), very large churches (average attendance more than eight hundred), and megachurches (average attendance more than two thousand) will continue to be our most comfortable forms of congregations in the present culture and speak most easily to a large and growing percentage of the North American population. The great explosion of the number of large churches began in the 1970s and has continued through the first decade of the twenty-first century. As noted in chapter 2, the 2003 statistical report of The United Methodist Church indicated that the largest two hundred churches (by membership) represented only 0.5 percent of all United Methodist churches but held 9.5 percent of the national membership of the denomination. A very few very large churches hold a disproportionate number of people who are members and participants in denominations. This pattern is well established across denominations. These largest congregations are also the sources of a disproportionate amount of money that is directed to the regional and national levels of the denomination.

One projection for these large and very large churches is related to the expansion of the number of such congregations and their locations. Two strategic variables are attached to the future development of new numbers of these largest congregations: one is generational and the other is geographical. In our look at the mission field in chapter 4 we used the work of Rex Miller and the perspective of his four communication paradigms. The fourth paradigm of digital communication is heavily driven by generational values. Younger generations of people who were born into a highly technological world have learned to manage their experience and form communities in small formats, which Miller calls microcommunities. Earlier generations, particularly the late boomers, were the inheritors of the broadcast age when information and entertainment were shared in very broad and large brushstrokes through TV, concerts, news broadcasts, and standardized education. These earlier generations learned to participate in very large settings. They learned to be comfortable in very large institutions in which they would form smaller subgroups. It is not surprising that the large church not only engaged large numbers of people but also led the way to understand the multicelled congregation in which the whole was made up of the aggregate of multiple small replications. In the very large organization or institution the participant is able to be a part of something very large, rich, and diverse, but at the same time hold personal control over how deep to venture into the organization and how involved to be in the activities. Such large organizations were both a product of and built for the baby-boomer generation.

Younger generations of leaders and participants of the digital paradigm, however, seem to be seeking smaller microcommunities from the start. While the evi-

dence that I have is anecdotal, a growing number of persons entering ordained ministry are less interested in leading large and very large congregations as a professional or personal goal for their ministry. Inheriting someone else's congregation and making it grow are not attractive for many new leaders entering ministry and for many new generations of participants. At a time when so many mainline denominations are becoming increasingly aware of the large glut of clergy retirees looming on the horizon in the next five to seven years as the first wave of baby-boomer clergy move into retirement, the diminished interest in large congregations by entering clergy is a concern. Middle judicatory executives in a number of denominations are becoming increasingly intentional to identify young clergy in their early years of preparation for ministry who have the potential to develop both the interest in and the tools for leading large congregations. Because of the distinct skill set needed to lead such churches, the leaders of these large and largest congregations cannot be fully prepared through usual channels. Because of the small number of these large and largest congregations and the proportionally small group of clergy needed for future leadership in these congregations, developing formal paths of preparation for clergy is a challenge. The small stream of people intentionally preparing for these churches presents an economic challenge to institutions (seminaries, denominational or middle judicatory units, or parachurch organizations) where preparation could take place. Because of generational values and preferences, it is reasonable to project that while the current very large churches and megachurches will continue with vitality, it is less likely that we will continue to see explosive growth in the number of these congregations.

Location is the other variable that will offer constraints on the addition of numbers of new large, very large, and megacongregations. As conversant as these congregations are with the culture, and as effective as they are in addressing the changed mission field, the largest congregations can live easily only in an ecology large enough to sustain them. A number of years ago my wife and I, along with our oldest son and his wife, took our grandchildren on a field trip to the Tennessee Aquarium in downtown Chattanooga, which, unique for many aquariums, has a very large display of freshwater fish. I used to do quite a bit of fishing in my high school years and thought that I was pretty familiar with freshwater fish. Another way of talking about my familiarity with fish is that the length of the fish I used to catch could easily be described using my hands without stretching my arms. Once a fish could be described in pounds, it was clearly a *big* fish for me in those years. I was not prepared to see displays in the aquarium of freshwater fish five, six, and seven feet long! The signs in the aquarium noted that fish of such size could be found only in rivers of commensurate size, like the Amazon. It takes a river of such immense size to sustain fish of such immense size. There is a direct relationship between the size of any organism and the size of its environment, organizations included. For this reason the largest of our Christian congregations, denominational and independent, are found in the southern half of the United States, particularly in the south central region and in Southern California where booming populations and open space can accommodate such institutions.

In a 2007 Brookings Institution publication, Robert Lang and Jennifer Lefurgy take a close look at *boomburbs*, which they call “accidental cities.”<sup>1</sup> Boomburbs are overgrown suburbs outside older metropolitan centers. These large and rapidly growing incorporated communities of more than one hundred thousand residents, though incorporated municipalities, do not have downtown centers despite having the full range of housing, employment, and services of formal cities. Curiously these boomburbs are growing to such size that while not recognized as traditional cities, they are larger than many older cities. For example, the boomburb of Mesa, Arizona, is larger than more traditionally recognized big cities such as Minneapolis and Miami. These boomburbs are environments that hold most of our largest churches and megachurches. Recognizing the natural connection between size of environment and size of congregation, we should note that the current and future strength of our denominations as defined by participants and resources will continue to be in the South. The Northeast, Midwest, and Northwest are older and more developed, with fewer large concentrations of people and no space for expansive growth. Yet in understanding trends for the future, we also should note the conclusions of the Brookings Institution research, which can project the limit on both time and size of the continued expansion of boomburbs and the kinds of environments that support the largest congregations. The end of the continued expansion of boomburbs can be calculated by measuring the limits of space and resources available to them, which suggests that the continual increase in the number of the largest congregations also has a limit. While our large, larger, and largest congregations are a dominant presence on our current congregational landscape, simply “getting good” at planting, growing, and leading the largest congregations is not a denominational long-term strategy for engaging the mission field with the good news of the gospel. The largest congregations will continue to be a vital presence. However, more and more of a good thing is not the way of a changing wilderness. We will necessarily find ourselves trying to accommodate newer generations and the shifting demography of the North American population with a broader choice of congregational forms than we currently have.

In the meantime there is a good bit of work for denominations to do, learning how to hold our largest congregations in the denominational connection. Our largest congregations provide the larger portion of resources to denominations but are highly underrepresented in missional and organizational decision making since the large congregation of fifteen hundred members often has the same number of votes as the small congregation of fifty members in most denominational polities. Similarly, the largest congregations and their clergy often live somewhat on the boundaries of the denomination as the clergy and leaders of denominations experience discomfort with the leaders of the largest churches. Highly relational clergy of smaller congregations often find the more purposeful manner of the clergy of large congregations somewhat off-putting and can be jealous of the resources available to clergy in very large congregations. A fear of the tail wagging the dog makes it uncomfortable for regional denominational systems to invite the leaders of the largest congregations into meaningful participation. A common example was the senior pastor of a very large Presbyterian church whose membership represented 20 percent of all of the Presbyterians in the presbytery to which this church belonged

and whose missional support represented 18 percent of the total presbytery budget. The senior pastor was nationally known for his leadership, but he was offered no positions of leadership in his presbytery despite his interest in serving.

Our national denominational policies and our regional practices were designed in the time of small congregations, and we have not learned to accommodate our congregations of largest size. Learning to live with and include our largest congregations is a challenge for the present moment and for the future as our denominations will also quickly need to learn how to live with and include new forms of small congregations. Indeed, the real challenge will be for our denominations to learn how to include multiple sizes and forms of congregations and their leaders. We will turn our attention to the shifting future of the small congregation next. But let us note that our inherited denominational (and our most regulatory) practices are based on conformity in which clergy, laity, and congregations are assumed to accommodate the needs of the denomination rather than the denomination developing a wider practice of relationships to accommodate the growing differences in congregations.

*The small church as we know it will diminish and be reduced in numbers while a new form of small church will emerge and seek a different relationship to other congregations and denominations.*

Several times in reviewing what we have learned in our present wilderness, I have noted the dominance of the number of small congregations in North America. Earlier I reported Mark Chaves's study of American congregations in which the average attendance over all congregations in the United States is seventy-five people. In my United Methodist denomination about a third of our more than thirty-five thousand congregations have average attendance at worship of fewer than thirty-five people. The number of small congregations in our denominations and associations drives our history as well as our current experience of congregations.

There are essentially three threats to the population of the smallest churches: location, economics, and a generation gap. Location is a product of history. The location of mainline churches historically followed the places where people gathered and lived. As people settled into villages and towns, congregations followed. Shifting demographics and migrating populations now mean that we have congregations in places where populations that once supported the congregation have diminished or changed. Many of the oldest and smallest of the mainline congregations are unable to replenish themselves as people move out of regions en masse, which happened in the Northeast when the manufacturing industry moved in both southern and global directions and in the Midwest as the farming and automobile industries struggled under the weight of global competition. Small towns in the West and Southwest have withered from population shifts in which younger generations of people left for education, military service, and employment and did not return home, as had previous generations. The depletion of populations capable of sustaining the once active and viable small congregations is widespread and can be encountered in urban, suburban, and rural geographies. In many cases the absence of a population able to sustain a congregation may not be defined simply by the aggregate number of people in the community but

by issues of diversity as well. In some communities where small congregations are not thriving, the issue is not the number of people in the community but the turnover of population. The people whom the congregation best knew how to serve and include in its ministry left the area to be replaced by a people sufficiently different in race, ethnicity, religious background, or socioeconomic identity so that the congregation no longer has the capacity to connect to its new neighbors.

The threat of economics to these smallest congregations is related to the way these faith communities are wedded to their definition of *church*, which requires located, residential clergy (preferably full time) and dedicated facilities. The picture of the New England white clapboard church located on the village green with the pastor's residence next door is still a dominant image of what it means to be church, even when the image needs to be adapted to fit brick buildings among row houses in urban centers or adobe buildings at country crossroads in the Southwest. The idea of a congregation needing, by definition, *our* pastor and *our* building is strong in North American congregations shaped on the values of earlier generations. It is a definition of church that can no longer be supported by an increasing number of communities. The presumed need for a church to have its own located clergy and the escalation of clergy compensation packages, often driven by pension and health-care benefit provisions, can easily shift the purpose of a small congregation from fulfilling mission to supporting the pastor. The care and maintenance of facilities that were built to serve earlier generations, including the accumulation of deferred maintenance costs, can push the expense of congregational life beyond the capacity of the now small and dwindling numbers of supporting members and participants in small congregations.

Perhaps the greatest threat, however, is the gap of generational differences that exists in many—not all—of these smallest congregations. Longevity of life now allows five generations to live side by side in the same family; an infant child can be born into a family where parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and even great-great grandparents still live. Many people alive today easily remember an earlier time when only three generations lived side by side with commonly shared values and similar lifestyles. In a now highly mobile and highly technological culture of individualism the current five generations do not so easily live together, may not share the same values, and certainly have differences in lifestyles. The most vibrant congregations are able to engage the wider swath of these five generations where differences create a dissonance that keeps the practice of the faith always questioned and therefore always growing. The generational threat to small congregations is the frequency with which so many of them now hold only the oldest two of the five generations in their fold, thereby losing their ability to speak to or include the youngest generations that might carry the congregation into the future. When the gap between generations becomes so great that there are multiple missing younger generations in the congregation, the congregation has likely slipped beneath the threshold of change. While this generational gap can be found and is equally devastating in larger congregations, it is most commonly found in congregations with average worship attendance below one hundred persons.

Size is neither a determinant of nor a deterrent to mission. Our smallest congregations can be highly effective and faithful in mission, often excellent at nurture and

care, and frequently sensitive to and focused on mission to others. But the effect of the multiple threats of location, economics, and the generation gap suggests that a noticeable percentage of these congregations will close over the next two decades, leaving denominations significantly smaller in number of congregations and less visible with less impact in many communities.

Much denominational work needs to be done to manage this shrinking segment of congregations. But the needed work will be challenged by current practices. In denominations where there is an oversupply of clergy or where there are agreements that "require" the denomination to locate active (nonretired) clergy in a congregation, a percentage of these struggling congregations is kept on "life support" not because of the viability of ministry but because clergypersons who must be placed by the denomination need congregational homes. Rather than congregations that use clergy to support ministry, these become congregations whose purpose is to support clergy. When denominations extend extra measures to subsidize such settings with extra dollars, time, or attention from denominational resources in order to meet the minimal requirements of clergy support, then the resources are, in fact, directed to the weakest part of the denominational system, not the places of greatest potential or productivity to accomplish what the denomination claims as its mission.

The smallest congregations will also present denominations with one of their greatest challenges in the next decades as newer generations of leaders and participants form new congregations. As noted above, small institutions and organizations are attractive to many of our youngest adults as they think about faith communities. The closing of so many current small congregations is not a prelude to the disappearance of all small congregations. There is within younger adult populations a great interest in forming congregations that are microcommunities, using Rex Miller's description from chapter 4. At issue is the fact that these new small congregations, usually forming under the flag of "emergent" or "missional" congregations, are greatly different from the congregations with which our denominations are familiar. These new congregations often form less as products of denominational new church starts than as emergent new communities with leaders in place. The role of leader in these new forms of congregations does not conform to old models of clergy either in terms of preparation, certification, or prominence in the congregation. Seminary training, ordination, denominational certification beyond baptism, and a sense of call are not necessarily seen as criteria for leadership in these congregations. Separately owned facilities are not necessarily required or desired; regular Sunday corporate worship may or may not be a major component of the congregation's life. Because they are still new on the horizon, it is difficult to tell how much of a pattern these new forms of congregation represent and how interested they will be in denominational connection. What is sure is that they are of a different breed from the congregations built by the generations that preceded this newer movement, and denominations will need to adapt their practices significantly to allow these new congregations to replace the ones that will disappear. Consider the differences that can be drawn using the following descriptors:

Denominational Congregations	Emerging/Missional Congregations <sup>2</sup>
Internal focus	External focus
Inherited denomination	Independent network
Monocultural	Multicultural
Theologically conservative	Theologically liberal
Attractional	Missional
High-profile celebrity leader	Low-profile situational leader
Negative toward popular culture	Engaging popular culture

Like the large and very large congregations, the forms of the newly developing congregations are sufficiently different that denominations will be challenged to relate to them. Learning how to relate to and include the new large congregations and the new small congregations will be difficult work requiring redefinition of the relationship. This is the next issue that we consider in describing our future.

*The relationship between denominations and their clergy and congregations will be reformed.*

Earlier in this book I described denominations and their middle judicatory offices as regulatory agencies. Using the historical overview of denominations by Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Beumler, we saw that the regulatory stage was an economic response to an increasingly differentiating ecology of clergy, congregations, and religious service providers. For the denomination to meet the explosion of different preferences for goods, services, and theological perspectives, and the growing array of social justice movements was both too difficult and too costly. The more efficient response was regulation—the expectation that all clergy and congregations in the denominational covenant or connection behave according to polity and established practice. Those congregations and clergy who obeyed and fulfilled the expectations of the covenant/connection were identified as “good congregations,” while those who veered from the regulations were “bad congregations.” Such sanctions that encouraged congregations and their leaders to denominational conformity remained effective during the period when the generational values of belonging and membership remained strong in the leaders and congregations. As those values shifted from group to individual, from belonging to participating, the effectiveness of regulations and sanction slipped. It is no longer a badge of honor to be a “good” denominational church or pastor. In my tradition the language of connection has shifted. In the generation of United Methodist clergy that immediately preceded me, conversation about making congregations “United Methodist” was strong. In the cohorts of United Methodist leaders that followed me, it is now more common for me to hear people talk about having their congregations connected to their Wesleyan heritage—a theological perspective able to be practiced in multiple forms and not held exclusively by the United Methodist denomination.

A denominational practice based on regulations produces a system of conformity that is a value increasingly difficult to sustain in a diverse, multicultural, multivalued, and global environment. We are now in a position where denominations routinely want more of a connection with congregations and clergy than congregations and clergy want with their denomination. Such a situation suggests that in our denominational futures, we will need to face into at least three issues: a reframed purpose and identity of our denominations, a new claim on entrepreneurial leadership, and an ability to engage discomfort and inequality in relationships.

The first issue, the reframing of purpose and identity, has been a major theme of this book in a postestablishment era for mainline denominations and congregations. As earlier described, the previous connections that once lived at the center of denominations were the strong bonds of history, theology, race or ethnicity, and geographic location. These bonds have more recently been replaced by much more institutional and therefore much less powerful connections, such as clergy deployment practices, pensions, health insurance, and denominational polity. Hammering out a new identity in a diverse environment is difficult work because the goals cannot include conformity and the agreement of all involved. Instead the center needs to be a story sufficiently strong to make others want to tell it, a purpose sufficiently important and difficult to make others want to pursue it, and an identity clear enough to make others want to live it.

A new and clear connection between the denomination and its congregations and clergy that rests on purpose and identity will make a new demand on leaders at all levels of the denomination, from the congregational to the national level. If uniformity cannot be the goal, if conformity cannot be the expectation, then leaders will necessarily need to negotiate their differences and willingly break old norms of compliance, equality, and egalitarianism to live together in connection. How else, for example, could a leader responsible for certification of ordained leaders in a denomination require seminary training for the clergy of established congregations, accept other paths of preparation for leaders of ethnic congregations, and also make room for new generational forms of congregations, which may or may not depend on ordained leadership? Leaders will need to enter into more difficult conversations in which certification becomes a process of more than signing off on the legislated experiences and content of preparation and focus equally on character formation and the needs of the specific congregation. If we are about to enter a time when the mainline church has the clear opportunity to hold multiple forms of congregations connected by a clear identity and purpose, then different forms of congregations will require different paths of leadership preparation, different expectations of missional performance, and different levels of accountability to the norms and practices of denominations. The wilderness is about to become even messier.

Emerging from a time of regulations and conformity, the new leaders in the wilderness will need to continue and extend the practice of breaking old rules. Finding new paths is not congruent with following old rules since old rules restrict movement and options. Increasingly I am aware of watching a small but growing cohort of denominational and congregational leaders push the boundaries of old practices. For example, some denominational leaders responsible for clergy deployment no longer give

priority to clergy tenure or the clergy career ladder in assigning clergy. Some clergy are breaking old rules of representational nominations and elections of church officers in order to get to smaller groups of gifted leaders who can make missional decisions. Some laity are insisting on accountability for their congregation's use and direction of resources to assure that the resources are aligned with missional outcomes. In fact, conformity is now more routinely questioned when purpose is at risk.

The new mode of leadership that is emerging and will continue to swell is a form of entrepreneurialism, the second of the issues necessary to the reforming of denominational connections. We do not yet have a clear name for this new leadership. *Entrepreneurialism*, while accurate, is not sufficient since this term has a changing history and a wide variety of interpretations. Where entrepreneurialism once spoke more of the independent maverick leader who risked going his or her own way for gain, the new entrepreneurialism has a different and more mature character. These leaders actively look for opportunity that goes beyond standard practice of their organization. They willingly risk as all entrepreneurial leaders do, but they accept having to live in the tension between purposeful risk and obedience to the history and the heritage that belong to their institution. Rather than find their own path as rugged individualists, these new leaders seek to join a movement with others who are also looking for new paths in the wilderness. These are rule breakers and practice benders still faithful and wanting to live within their institutions. These new leaders now make up a growing cadre of people. In order for the mainline church to thrive in the wilderness their number will have to continue to grow.

We are then brought to the third issue that faces the newly formed connection between the mainline denomination and its congregations and clergy. The wilderness is messy. As described above, our more entrepreneurial leaders will necessarily lead us into a growing inequality among people and congregations that are connected at the center through a denominational identity but widely different in their specific practice of ministry. As congregations get better at proclaiming Christ in clear and understandable ways to their specific corner of the highly fluid and diverse mission field, the congregations may be connected together denominationally but confuse and offend one another individually with their practice. The urban congregation that is surrounded by a community with a concentration of gay, lesbian, and transsexual adults will relate as carriers of the good news of faith to these people and include them into the faith community with full access to the sacraments and practices of the faith, including the ritual of marriage. This will deeply offend sister congregations that live in suburban or rural sections of God's kingdom where the absence of homosexual communities allows them to be comfortably distant from such difficult questions. The young upstart congregation that seeks to own no building, nominates and elects no leaders, and replaces Sunday morning worship of Word and Sacrament with a Sunday morning activity of community service as a missional form of worship will baffle and offend the neighboring established congregations that follow normative practices of worship. However, each of these connected but highly different congregations may be vibrant and vital, connected in authentic ways to the specific mission field of groups or individuals to which it has been called to serve. Each can be equally faithful and effective at doing what the denomination asks of its congregations, yet still be

sufficiently different from other congregations to create a deep dissonance and discomfort.

Our mainline denominations have started down a path where conformity among leaders and congregations is being replaced by shared purpose and identity. Further movement down this path will be rocky since a connection through purpose and identity does not require conformity. Some in our mainline denominations want to resolve their discomfort among congregations and leaders with censure of or schism from those who are too different from themselves. But the multiple mission fields facing our denominations call for a bolder response. In part the response will require a theological wrestling with the change that is being prompted by the deeply different mission fields. The work of our theologians and our historians will become increasingly important as we seek to build a base from which our leaders and congregations can work faithfully but also effectively and appropriately among very different people. The work of our growing cohort of entrepreneurial leaders will become increasingly important as these will be the people most willing to risk changes in order to live into this next part of the journey.

*Denominations will reduce in size and structure.*

What does one take along for a prolonged journey? It seems as if one lesson of a sustained time in the wilderness is that too much baggage can be both burdensome and draining. Mainline denominational and congregational structures grew in line with other North American institutions in a period of organizational expansion dominated by management that included multiple layers of decision making and middle management to follow directives that came from the top. Such organizations provided consistency and orderliness while also creating overhead and rigidity that eventually became costly for the wilderness. A shrinking membership base, a growing competition for people's discretionary and charitable spending, an inflationary economy, and a need for agility over orderliness have combined to increasingly strain large and rigid organizations, including denominational and congregational structures.

We are now in a sustained pattern of questioning the structure and organization of our institutions—a pattern that will continue in a search for a more simplified and less expensive structure for doing mission and ministry. At its least thoughtful expression this search for simplicity and reduced costs is a response to budget constraints.

At its best, however, the downsizing that is being prompted by the wilderness has been an opportunity for a growing number of leaders to ask more missional questions of purpose. The inability to sustain the cost of our congregational and denominational systems and the cumbersomeness of the systems have prompted leaders to ask, what actually needs to be accomplished? What is to be different because of these systems? A growing cohort of leaders is learning how to shape their systems and align their resources to try to make the differences they have identified as necessary.

In all of this we have been observing a downsizing of control structures in our congregations and denominational offices. Smaller decision-making groups that are actually authorized (or that are willing to claim authority) to make decisions are more

prevalent. There is less of a programmatic emphasis trying to meet the needs of “all” members, the “whole” community, or “all” congregations. Instead leaders are searching for the most productive leverage points and investing their prayers, attention, staff, and dollars where the differences need to be made. There is also an increasingly creative use of technology to connect people, communicate information, and manage data. For example, one very creative experiment to watch comes from a middle judicatory office of a denomination that has gone *virtual*—no office, no residential staff, no common meeting place, no physical resource center, and no file cabinets except for a few in a rented storage unit to house historic documents. Technology is being used creatively, new roles for staff and leaders are being developed, and a new understanding of the purpose of a middle judicatory is being invented in the process.

*Experiment* is a good and appropriate term to describe this virtual effort. It is also an appropriate way to think of a large and growing number of other initiatives now dotting the landscape as leaders seek new ways in the changed cultural wilderness. Experiments are appropriate to the wilderness as people try to find new ways to live in a changed environment. Much of the trend within the experiments now being observed includes a search for a simplification of staff, structure, and decision making at the center of our institutions and organizations.

## Epilogue

So many years in our particular wilderness, so much gained, so much learned. The biblical lesson is that people are changed in the wilderness. The same can be said of faith communities. When living in the wilderness, people discover that old ways don't always work, old rules don't always help. People have to find new ways to form community and be faithful. How will we now be with one another and with God? The response in the original Exodus to that question was the Ten Commandments, which defined the relationship with God, and a new communal hierarchy of leaders that defined the way in which the Israelites would live with one another and be governed. The response to that question in the Exile was the Holiness Code, which provided answers to the same question appropriate to the people in that moment. The response to that question in our particular wilderness is still being formed. There is more to do.

I began this book with reflections on my first appointment as pastor to a church in Philadelphia in 1972. It was a healthy, eager congregation that had suffered some recent bumps before I arrived but was rebounding strongly and wanting to move ahead. As time went on, however, it became clearer that people wanted most to move on with life as usual. Like so many congregations at that time, it was living with questions of ministry much too small to sustain it through the wilderness changes that were on the horizon. While Philadelphia was struggling with a racist city administration and while generational changes were swirling all about it, that first congregation kept measuring its faithfulness by the participation of its already active members and their worry about any who might become inactive. It evaluated its performance by its conformity to denominational standards and community practices. It demonstrated hospitality by including others who were most like its members, and it shied away from people too different to “fit in.”

This is not an indictment of that congregation. I remember it with love as a formative place where my early ministry was shaped, where my children were born, and where our family was nurtured. I also remember those years as some of the most frustrating times I had as a pastor. Was this what I had felt called to—managing an organization, satisfying members, and following denominational rules?

The years since that first appointment were immeasurably more confusing and messy as I and many others were constantly challenged to know what was right to do and what was worth doing. Living in the wilderness requires developing an acquaintance with insecurity. But the wilderness is full of energy. It prompts new thinking, new behavior, and new trials to accomplish old ends of faithfulness. Learning to live in the wilderness provides, above all else, a new introduction to hope.

One of the joys of the wilderness is to be reacquainted with hope that is connected to God but to realize that it is a different form of hope. Over the years I have learned that hope is an active, not a passive, verb. In common conversation we often make statements such as, “I hope you have a good day,” or, “I hope you have a nice trip.” These are essentially passive thoughts that we share with others. Quite honestly it is probably OK with me if your day is not so good or your trip not so nice. And quite frankly I don't usually see myself getting involved too deeply in assuring you a good day or nice trip. In common parlance hope can be very passive. It is a wish without risk or responsibility.

In the wilderness, hope is an active verb. Saint Augustine said that hope had two beautiful daughters—anger and courage. Hope depended on anger over what could be but is not, and on courage to make it different. The North American mainline churches, including my United Methodist denomination, are filling with hope. Anger and frustration have grown over what could be but is not, and a growing cohort of denominational and congregational leaders with courage is seeking ways to make it otherwise. Part of the next stage of our work is to help this growing cohort of courageous leaders identify one another and talk with one another. We are trying to learn what no one can teach us, and it takes conversation with one another and awareness of the multiple experiments that are being mounted for us to find our way ahead together. There is no guarantee that what we see and do next will be enough, especially as the mission field around us continues to be reshaped kaleidoscopically by technology, globalization, and generational differences. We have, however, learned enough so far in the wilderness to see new things to do. And since God is in them, they are worthy of our next steps.