

# MINISTRY

## IN A CHURCH DISMANTLED

*To Tear Down  
or Build Up?*



CONRAD L. KANAGY

MINISTRY IN A CHURCH DISMANTLED

*To Tear Down or Build Up?*

by Conrad L. Kanagy

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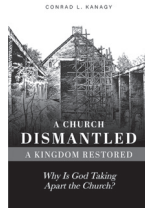
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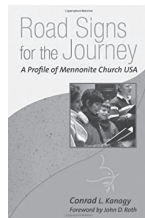
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CONRAD L. KANAGY

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*A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored: Why Is God Taking Apart the Church?* Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 2021.

*Winds of the Spirit: A Profile of Anabaptist Churches in the Global South.* (with Richard Showalter and Tilahun Beyene), Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012.



*Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile for Mennonite Church USA.* Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2007.

*The Riddles of Human Society* (with Donald Kraybill), California: Pine Forge Press, 1999.



TO JACOB AND SARAH

You have listened often to my “ministry stories”  
and sermon “highlight reels,” always offering  
insightful feedback, support and encouragement—  
how grateful to God I am for you both!

**“All will be whole and powerful again . . .  
A race of loyal herders and tall plowmen.”**

—*Reynolds Price, “All Will Be Whole” (after Rilke)*

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## FOREWORD

In this second book in the series—“A Church Dismantled”—Conrad Kanagy looks objectively at our society and church communities, both as a sociologist of religion as well as a Mennonite pastor who is faithfully leading a vibrant congregation while experiencing the challenges and heartaches of authentic ministry. Conrad’s ability to blend those two vocations is evident in this book.

A sociologist is often considered prophetic because they see what others overlook and even deny. A pastor often experiences his or her congregation and community at a level of reality that is not apparent to others in the church. Conrad melds both of these realities together and somehow discovers a real element of hope that “just may lead us” through the entanglements and challenges that 2020 and beyond have created for the Church. Conrad points to a hope that is found in a kingdom birthed by Christ and restored through the work of the Holy Spirit.

He documents pastors and church leaders who are now confronted by realities that refuse to allow them and their congregations to simply “return to normal” or to re-engage what was “before.” These realities demand that Christ followers are led by the Spirit into the kingdom that Jesus spoke of so often and longed for us to experience. Leaders are struggling to address multiple challenges and pastors are attempting to shepherd divided congregants, even while addressing the varied needs of their communities. As I meet with pastors, they consistently express the desire that they not be guilty of leading simply an enterprise, but truly a movement of God.

Conrad offers insights as a pastor and a sociologist into how we might see a church forever changed and embrace a kingdom restored, a kingdom that is an answer to the prayer of Jesus that the Father's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Unsettling at times, this book is filled with hope as we face these new realities.

—Rev. Eldon Fry, D.Min.  
Founder of Open Hands Ministries

## INTRODUCTION

This book, written over the past year, is the second in the four-book series entitled “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored,” based upon the popular podcast by the same name that I produced during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21. That podcast included many episodes relevant to spiritual leaders, ministers, and pastors, and the unique challenges they faced during the pandemic and continue to face. While the first book, *A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored: Why Is God Taking Apart the Church?* is a kind of sampler of the podcast episodes while also serving as a foundation that lays out the major themes of the series, this book and the remaining ones in the series will each address specific themes found in that first volume but upon which I expand in each respective new release.<sup>1</sup>

When I began to write the podcast episodes in May, 2020, I had no intention of stepping down from local congregational ministry any time soon. My wife, Heidi and I had been serving the same congregation for nearly fifteen years and enjoyed our ministry together. But as the months dragged by, and the combined impact of ministry stress and the emotional thinness of my life due to the continued progression of Parkinson’s disease, we made a decision that I would retire by the end of 2021. In some ways perhaps, this book documents the evolution in my own ministry journey and changing sense of call across the lengthy season of the pandemic and political polarization experienced by an already weakened and fragile American church, whose dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad L. Kanagy, *A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored: Why Is God Taking Apart the Church?* (Morgantown: Masthof Press, 2021).

mantling only seems to have accelerated in the past eighteen months. The current book is organized according to various ministry related themes. To provide a contextual timeframe, each chapter indicates the month in which it was written.

The subtitle of the book—To Tear Down or Build Up?—reflects the dilemma that we pastors find ourselves in during the current context of the American church. Book upon book offers guidance as to how to rebuild your church, change your church, transform your church, and on and on. Indeed, just like for the individual an entire industry of self-help materials have emerged offering to remake, restore, transform and more, so such an industry of church experts has arisen with promises of salvation in tow.

This book offers no such promise and points to the fact that the biblical record so often includes destruction, “plucking down,” and lowering mountains as part of what God is up to in the Church and the world, and in your life and my life. I have received plenty of resistance to this message, perhaps because for some it seems so “unGod-like.” But if I cannot believe that the desolation I see all around me does not include the providential hand of God, then frankly, I am left without hope. And so are you. But if I can claim and even glimpse the Almighty’s shadow in the midst of everything crumbling around me, than once again hope returns!

For me, dismantling the Church is about joining God’s grand excavation project of Isaiah 40 (which has captured my imagination ever since I was a child), by lowering mountains that are barriers to the shalom of God’s coming kingdom, by raising valleys in which the marginalized have had to hide for fear of being overrun by those who hold the power strings, by making crooked paths straight and rough places a level plain along which the lost, the wounded, and the destitute may find their way home. Contrary to the vision of Isaiah, the Church too often has done the opposite, by erecting mountains, deepening valleys,

and making pathways rougher and more crooked than they already were.

Which brings me to the second aspect of what I mean by the Spirit's dismantling of the Church. That is the removal of those "mantles" of our own devising that we have placed on the Church and the Christian faith. These cover up the truths of God's kingdom that we are called to live by as our truths.

The dismantling that I identify in this book has been both personal and autobiographical, as I confess my own false mantles while also calling out the false mantles of the Church that have displaced the true mantle of Christ—whether those false mantles be imposed upon any one or all of us, or upon God, or upon the Church itself.

From very early on as a child, I was caught in cycles of torment and depression characteristic of obsessive-compulsiveness, which were fed by the oppressiveness of an "old order" of cultural fog that emphasized goodness, performance, perfection, and, on top of it all, God's wrath. So whenever I failed to hit the high mark, which was every moment of every day, I remember having these kinds of thoughts: *Am I the only sinner among this bunch of saints? Are all the others okay with their sins? Do they know some secret about how to survive with a guilty conscience, which no one has shared with me? I don't understand why everyone says the gospel is so wonderful, when to me, when often it feels like hell instead of good news.*

Slowly and over time, I began to understand that what the Church had done (and all too often still does) was to "mantle" (as in "muzzle") the truth, by declaring one thing while being altogether comfortable with something else. It would market its product with false advertising, claiming that the naked emperor wore a fine suit of clothes and that his wife wore a starched bonnet, but what I saw underneath was something altogether different.

To "mantle" means to cover up and smooth over. And, dear

folks, you and I both know that the Church has too often covered up truths and smoothed over falsehoods. It was recognizing the false mantles of the church for what they are that saved me from giving up on God. And I suspect that I will spend the rest of my days doing the work of dismantling if it means that even one more person could be set free, as I have been set free over the course of this past year—set free by the One named Jesus who so dismantled the religious arrogance and edifices of his day that it cost him his life in order to save the world.

In 2017, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at the age of fifty-two. For the first year I cried and raged as I grieved the losses to come. But over time, I have also begun to recognize the gifts that I am receiving as a result of this disease. One of those gifts is the clarity with which I now see the horizon ahead, and the knowledge that my days of quality health are limited. This recognition has been transformative for me, as I realize that my own body is being dismantled at the same time that the Church itself is being dismantled. My weaknesses are being exposed; the mantles I wore to cover those weaknesses have been stripped away. I can't hide my vulnerabilities or deny my fragility. Over the past four years I have had a new conversion to Jesus and a new awareness of God's incredible love for his children—meaning every human being created with the imprint of God upon them. I have little doubt that the podcast or this book series would ever have emerged without this disease that took me by such surprise, but which I now realize is my own unique path home.

It has been clear to me during the past year that I am not alone in my sense that the Church is in the process of being dismantled. The podcast "A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored" has appealed to many more listeners than I ever imagined it would. Nearly 50,000 episodes have been downloaded in more than eighty countries and nearly 1,600 cities. It seems my writing has had a special appeal to folks who have become disillusioned with the American Church



and have perhaps left it. I call these folks “the diaspora”—those who have left what we have long presumed to be the primary institution by which one discovers the kingdom of God but which too often is the one that leads folks in the wrong direction or in no direction at all.

I have so many persons to acknowledge and thank for their support of this project over the past year and longer. I have walked with my wife Heidi for more than three decades, and she more than anyone has influenced my love for God’s Word and the truths found in the holy scripture. I have been deeply formed by her and by our journey together and the ministry we have shared. Our collaboration has been one of the richest and most meaningful experiences of our life together. As I have pulled back in ministry due to my health, Heidi has expanded her own ministry while at the same time covering for me in those areas where I have had to make adjustments. She has become my strongest and most loyal advocate whose wisdom, courage, and capacity I increasingly rely upon. This new dependency upon Heidi reflects what I foresaw during our sabbatical in 2017, just after learning of my Parkinson’s diagnosis—that I would still get home, but would do so by leaning on the shoulder of a friend.

Elizabethtown College for nearly three decades has given me space to engage in my church related research and practice of ministry. Across four college administrations I have been blessed by the same support and encouragement, without which I would not have been able to “pastor” as a minister and “profess” as a teacher at the same time. In keeping with what I have always experienced, the college has supported and promoted the podcast “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored” and has publicized my efforts widely. The college has also given me a sabbatical for the fall of 2021 to continue to write and publish my work.

The pastors and spiritual leaders who have shaped me over the years, particularly in light of my own lack of seminary training: My

grandfather Erie “Pap” Renno, Gerald Peachey, Guy Rocker, Max Zook, E. Daniel Martin, Richard Frank, Keith Weaver, Keith Yoder, Eldon Fry, Stan Shantz and many others.

Our congregation at Elizabethtown Mennonite Church has graciously been a space for me over the last decade to hone my preaching and writing for an audience that lives and labors in the everyday world of work, home, and play.

Trinity McFadden copyedited the manuscript and Linda Boll proofread with a keen eye for discovering errors others of us had missed—I am particularly grateful for her assistance. I wish to thank my cover designers Mark Aquino and Elizabeth Petersheim (Masthof Press) for their creative and attractive work.

Dan Mast and the staff of Masthof Press have been a valued collaborator on this project, speeding the project along, marketing the book, and being extremely organized, nimble and responsive in every way. Frankly, I cannot imagine a better publishing partner!

I also want to thank my podcast listeners of the past year and the members of my Facebook group “A Church Dismantled” for their ambitious collaboration and their ongoing support. They have been a consistent source of affirmation and have helped me to feel less homeless and less alone in this dismantled church.

Thanks go to publicist Rob Eagar for his excellent counsel and direction in thinking about how to market this book and those that follow.

Finally, I am grateful for the willingness of my long-time spiritual director, Eldon Fry to write the Foreword for the book. Eldon has taught me much, including that “God does not shame me” and that “God is not the church,” both of which I have recalled time and again in the midst of doubt, fear, shame and resistance as a local congregational pastor. Eldon’s wisdom is timeless and his support has enabled me to minister as long as I have done so.

Nearly all of these essays were written during the Covid pandemic. I have sought to retain, for the most part, the present tense in which they were originally penned. This book and the podcast episodes that preceded it represent for me the intersection and integration of various areas of my professional and personal life that had been disparate entities in the past. They have allowed me to draw upon nearly three decades of teaching sociology, thirty-five years of sociological research, fifteen years of church and denominational consulting, twenty years of pastoral ministry, my childhood and coming-of-age in a conservative Mennonite-Amish community, my life-long struggle with a terror of God's wrath exacerbated by obsessive-compulsive disorder, and the diagnosis, four years ago, of Parkinson's disease.

My prayer is that my reflections throughout this book, and the previous as well as future volumes, *In a Church Dismantled—The Light Still Shines: Reflections in Sacred Time* and *A Dismantled Church and One Pilgrim's Journey: Finding My Way Home in the Dark* will be an encouragement to you, and will cast a bit of light on your own journey toward the new heaven and new earth that is just over the horizon.

So, accompanied by the gracious words of the apostle Paul, himself plagued by weakness and troubled with a thorn in the flesh that God would not remove, may you receive my words, like Paul's, as means of encouragement. For, in the midst of the dismantling: "We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Cor 4:16–18).

—Conrad L. Kanagy, Elizabethtown, PA  
September 3, 2021

## READERS' RESOURCES:

The website [www.achurchdismantled.com](http://www.achurchdismantled.com) contains resources to support the material in this book, including a short video in which I address each of the eight sections of the book as well as study guides for personal or group reflection and discussion. Readers may contact me directly through the website as well as subscribe for continued updates about the book series and future projects.

# **PART ONE**

PASTORS IN  
AN IRON CAGE



## CHAPTER 1

### *My Pastoral Word at the Outset of a Pandemic*

May 2020

In May of 2020, during the early months of the Covid pandemic, I wrote what I simply call the “Weekly Email” to our congregation, where my wife, Heidi, and I have served as a ministry couple for fifteen years. I titled that week’s email message “Why the Church Cannot Be Reopened,” which was my reaction to the incessant calls of local church leaders to “get back to church” as soon as possible.

That little piece caught the attention of a few folks, who then passed it on to others, which led to a series of blog-like postings on Facebook and eventually to a year-long podcast of 275 episodes. The primary theme of the podcast was at least fifteen years in the making and was based upon research on the American church that I conducted in 2006-2007, resulting in a book titled *Road Signs for the Journey*.<sup>2</sup>

At that time, I raised the question: “Is God’s Spirit dismantling the church because we have so failed God’s mission?” For me the question has now become rhetorical, since I do embrace the idea that God is up to a grand deconstruction or dismantling—a taking apart—of the Church as we know it and as it has been constructed in the West. This question was quickly followed by another: “If this is what God’s Spirit is doing, then how can we as leaders work with the Spirit rather than against the Spirit?”

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<sup>2</sup> Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007).

At the onset of the Covid pandemic, I quickly saw this moment as a season rich with transformational opportunities for the Church, if only we would see and embrace them. Over the past century, the Church in the West has staked its future on the rational structures of modernity—on Enlightenment ideals about what is real and true and right and good. But little have we understood just how vulnerable we have made ourselves by doing so. It's almost as if some days we have thrown Jesus in as an afterthought. Over the years, I have repeatedly cautioned my students that we have no idea whether modernity is sustainable or not. When we embrace the cultures and structures of modernity, we are vulnerable to whatever attacks them.<sup>3</sup>

Given our confidence in the reliability of empiricism and science, the last thing we expected was an unpredictable and unknown virus to threaten the modern foundations upon which we have built the Church. My concern at the onset of the Covid pandemic was that if we failed to be honest about how thoroughly accommodated the Church had become to modernity, including its economic and political manifestations, then we were unlikely to weather the pain and discomfort of the Spirit's reorientation of the Church during the pandemic. I repeatedly stated, "If we are not converted to the ways of Jesus in this moment, we may never be."

And so I crafted a letter to our congregation to try to provide a holy context for gaining traction in our life with God while in the midst of the pandemic:

Greetings in Christ's precious name. After a week of sharing prophetic reflections on Facebook about where we are and the meaning of what I sense God is up to, I want to share with

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<sup>3</sup> In recognizing the reality that the local church is part of the universal Church, even if it so often fails to reflect the qualities of Christ's bride, I use the upper and lower case "C" interchangeably.



you a more pastoral message on how I sense God is resetting us.

In doing so I want to plead with you to stay grounded in God. No matter what President Trump says or Governor Wolf says or CNN or MSNBC say or FOX News or Rush Limbaugh say, please first of all ask the Lord what he is saying—spend more time with the Lord than listening to any of these other voices. The problem for God’s people just before exile is that they failed to ask, “Where is the Lord?” Even the priests failed to ask, “Where is the Lord?” Friends, whatever happens and wherever we end up in all of this, please let us not be guilty of not having asked, “Lord, where are you?”

The next several weeks are critical ones for our congregation. Many congregations will be “reopening,” and many voices will be emerging and swirling around us, and some of you may feel that pressure to respond to questions of, “When is your congregation reopening?” I want to encourage you to lovingly respond that, “The church has been open all along,” and that we will, “Reassemble once we have collectively heard from the Lord what he is saying about how we reset going forward into his future.” This approach is not about ultimately resisting the government nor taking our orders directly from the government—it is about listening to the King of kings and the One who is writing the story that is taking us to the new heaven and new earth. It is about doing what the Church is always to do—listening to its Leader and the One who is our Maker and Creator.

When we only focus on, “When do we reopen?” and, “How do we reopen?”, we are only focusing on mere technicalities, such as where to put the hand sanitizer and whether to wear masks or not and how to socially distance, etc. These are merely technical changes that do nothing to address the deep spiritual and cultural changes that God is up to at this time.

Even questions about whether resetting involves continuing to livestream our services, using electronic bulletins, using Zoom for certain meetings, etc., are still at the technical level

rather than the deeper adaptive level of change that addresses our corporate sins and habits and ways of doing things that have gotten in the way of the Spirit having its way in us.

My concern is how we have accepted and absorbed a world that made us tired, that kept us fragmented and disordered, that placed ourselves at the center and put Jesus on the outside, that abandoned the poor and marginalized—white, black, brown, citizen, undocumented non-citizen, widow, Republican, Democrat, divorcee, addict, felon, gay and straight, young and old, the one who just had an abortion and the one who gave away her child for adoption, Christian and not. Our political allegiances, our self-centeredness, our ways of always doing things have all gotten in the way of sharing Christ's love with them—these who, like you and me, are created in God's image and have his imprint upon them. We will be and likely are being judged for these sins, just as God's people were in the sixth century B.C.

I plead with you to abandon political allegiances—right and left—that have kept you from truly asking, "Where is the Lord?" For a moment, please hear me. I am not saying that it is a sin to vote or to be involved in the political process, but I am pleading with you to spend as much time with God as you do getting input from your favorite news outlet and that you not filter God's Word through what you hear these outlets saying but that you filter what they are saying through what you heard God saying to you this morning.

If we do not reset our engagement in the political process as a Church, we will find ourselves in a day when it will be safer to be a true follower of Jesus in the world than in the Church, and maybe that is what needs to happen to get us out of the Church and into the world with the message that God so loved the world and loves it still.

Nearly all of Jesus's last words to his disciples included the mandate that they were being sent not into the Church but into the world. And they were going out like sheep among

wolves. He never promises safety, but he assures them that he will never leave them nor forsake them. And he promises them authority. And he promises them joy. And all of this he can promise because in a few days he will be sending the Spirit.

You see, the forty days of resetting between Jesus's death and resurrection included resetting the disciples to receive the Spirit and to prepare them to be reset by that same Spirit. Reset for what? The answer occurs immediately after the tongues of fire and the mighty wind: reset for God's mission, reset to tell the good news to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

But this reset involved ceasing from their daily activities and quarantining in a room together until the Spirit of God came to them. My concern with the rush to get back to church—and, frankly, to get back to anything that created bondage for us and kept us away from our First Love, including church—is that we will not pause long enough in this transition to receive the resetting of the Spirit anew, a resetting that will result in a revelation of our deepest sins and confession of these, a resetting that will move us more fully into God's mission to the world.

Who of us will be reset by the Spirit? Who of us will repent of lives that took us further from God than closer to him? I am confident that despite Christ's offer of life, some of us, even given that chance after death, will still choose hell over heaven because we have done so all of our lives. This Covid crisis has come in part to give us the chance to once again choose heaven. Inevitably, some will remain in their hell. But damnation is not our destiny, folks—the new heaven and new earth are!

But as the months rolled along, I began to sense frustration among some of the saints, who wondered, "Conrad, just what do you mean by the dismantling of the Church, and how long will you keep rattling the same cage?"

I responded that I believe the Spirit is deconstructing, or tear-

ing down, or taking apart the socially constructed elements of the Church that recently have become—or for a long time have been—irrelevant to the central message of the gospel. That is to say, ways of being the Church that have lost sight of the essential meaning and purpose of the Church, ways of interpreting scripture that have justified remaining culture-bound and period-bound, and ways of forming political alliances with principalities and powers, which has terribly compromised the message of Jesus.

This deconstruction may require eliminating tiresome committee meetings, which often spend more time discussing who will clean the church than on who will care for the diversity of neighbors in all degrees of circumstances surrounding the church. These meetings will spend time on anything that can take our eyes off the imperatives of the gospel, to which Jesus urgently summons us in mission. Parenthetically, our youth flee the Church, not as pagans who renounce the Church, but as insightful persons who see more clearly than the rest of us just what the Church has become.

When I left ministry the first time, I discovered the existence of missional theology, which was so very helpful in understanding the condition of the Church and what was required for its transformation and renewed faithfulness. But fifteen years later and after a decade of working intentionally at a radically different model of ministry and mission, I am now uncertain whether the Church in the West is willing to take the steps to operationalize this theology and to be obedient to God's missional calling.

I have come to believe now that what we need is less a theology of mission and more a theology of “dismantling” that is consistent with the story of a God throughout history who intervenes to undo and tear down when God's people are stuck in the wildernesses of our own doing. This book series is in some ways an effort at developing such a theology, and the fact that it has resonated with so many

other folks suggests to me that more of us are ready for the same divine answer.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Iron Cage of Modernity and the Recovery of a Model Wherein Every Member Ministers*

October 2019 (Pre-covid)

When Heidi and I were called back in 2011 to lead Elizabethtown Mennonite Church for the second time, having ministered in that congregation from 2000-2005, we came with a set of priorities that included deconstructing the exclusiveness of the professional ministry model, minimizing the distance between clergy and laity, seeing every member as a minister, and removing the barriers between the church and the community around it. We did so intentionally, recognizing this as a missional experiment.

But this was not always my approach to ministry. When I was called to ministry in 2000, I read John Piper's book *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*. I reacted negatively to that book, fiercely opposed to the idea that pastoral ministry was not professional. But by 2007, when I was deep into my study of the American Church, and someone asked me, "What is the greatest crisis facing the Church?" my immediate response was "the professionalization of the clergy."

In saying that, I want to note that my critique is not of any of us in particular, nor does it invalidate the incredible leadership of so many pastors and ministers, the suffering they have experienced in ministry, the frustration they have felt, nor the contributions they have made. My critique is with a structure that has tended to shut down the calling of leaders and to create the perception of exclusivity, even when that is not the intention of any of us.

Results from my research in 2006-07 of American church members and leaders, showed that when asked about their expectations for their ministry role, pastors responded that they wanted to preach, cast vision, and equip the members for ministry. When members were asked what they expected of their pastors, they responded that they wanted pastors to preach and to take care of them. The difference between these two sets of expectations is a major reason so many congregations are in conflict, why so many pastors burn out, why pastors are difficult to find, why members fail to engage in ministry opportunities in their congregations, and why congregations do not achieve the mission God has called them to carry out. When pastors become paid and contracted professionals, we are suddenly subject to several hundred “employers” (depending on size of congregation of course) and are expected to carry the primary responsibility for the “success” of the congregation’s mission. Those same pastors also join an elite and exclusive club of ministry professionals with degrees, credentials, and income.

When this occurs, members can disengage from ministry, and in doing so are free to criticize the pastor rather than to see themselves as empowered by the Holy Spirit to be part of the ministry and mission of the Church. A division between those ministering and those being ministered to occurs that is not healthy or biblical or consistent with the Reformation model of an “all believers’ priesthood.” And when the pastor leaves, congregations often struggle because the professional ministry model is too often individual-centric rather than ministry/mission-centric. The church goes out and hires a new pastor who brings in a new vision and changes things up and starts all over again. To be effective, the mission requires that we raise up some level of leadership from within our congregations.

I concluded from my research at the time that healthy and growing congregations and those fulfilling their missional call rec-

ognize that every member is a minister or a missionary with a calling and with spiritual gifts. In these congregations, the gap between clergy and laity is minimized and the elite clergy class disappears as the mission of God comes into view.

When I think of the Church these days, I go back to Max Weber, a sociologist in the early 1900s who predicted that modernity would result in an iron cage of rationality. He said that in embracing the rationality of the Enlightenment, humanity would abandon mystery and imagination and lock itself into bureaucratic processes that appeared efficient and rational on the surface, but which would become inefficient and irrational in reality. As a pastor now exiting my own congregation, I am painfully aware of how the church and its structures, organization, and formally rational ways have gutted a sense of the incredible mystery of Christ and the Gospel, and how desperately such a recovery is needed not only in my own life but in the Protestant church in this country.

Weber said this: “No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without hear...”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In his book *The McDonaldization of Society* (California: Pine Forge Press, 1993), social theorist George Ritzer addresses the qualities of “modernity” or what we mean when we describe the modern world. Throughout the book you will hear me describe the “formal rationality” of the modern world, by which we mean that the world is organized in efficient and bureaucratic ways and through social institutions such as government, the economy, education, religion, health care, and more. These institutions are organized in ways that have come to “make sense” to us and that are largely structured according to formal rules, procedures, and regulations or what we often call “red tape.” Formal rationality has come to dominate modernity as predicted a century ago by German sociologist Max Weber, who argued that the bureaucracies resulting from such rationality would lead to all of us being captured within an “iron cage of rationality.” Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019 [1922]).



Adapting Weber's notion of the iron cage to the ways in which the Church is stuck, we might paraphrase Weber this way: "No one knows who will minister in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new missional prophets will arise, or if there will be a great rebirth of old missional ideals, or, if neither, the result will be missional and ministry petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive and professional self-importance . . ."

What is my beef with the professionalization of the clergy? First, it is not the "priesthood of believers" recovered in the Protestant Reformation. Second, it is very recent (within the last two or three generations) for my Anabaptist tradition and has led to our difficulties in developing and calling new leaders. Third, it has prevented us from developing an every-member-a-minister culture and led to only-a-professionally-trained-pastor culture. I hear us talk far too often that if we can just get a pastor, then everything in our congregation will be okay again. But just getting a pastor is not ever going to solve our missional calling—too often it is a technical fix for what is a deeply spiritual and cultural problem.

What do I consider professional? Well, it is anything about ministry that creates a sense that we leaders are an exclusive group of people or in any way an elite class because of our credentials, education, status, language, or anything except God's calling on our lives and his Spirit empowering us. In the summer of 2019 I stumbled upon the writings of Rolland Allen, and I did a double take as I read his work from nearly one hundred years ago; I saw much of what I had been thinking for the last decade. Born in England in 1867, and a former missionary within the Anglican church, Allen was very opposed to the idea of mission stations that included all of the attachments of Western culture and education that missionaries brought with them. He believed in what he called the "spontaneous expansion of the Church" in which local, indigenous churches were

the key to the growth and spread of the gospel. He closely studied the apostle Paul's methods and saw in Paul a great simplicity to the spread of the gospel that he desperately appealed to the Anglican church to replicate. Said Allen:

This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Allen promoted the idea of local, indigenous churches that “managed their own local affairs under the leadership of their own officers . . . administered their own sacraments . . . controlled their own finance, and they propagate themselves, establishing in neighboring towns or villages Churches like themselves.”<sup>6</sup>

For Allen, “indigenous” meant self-governing, self-supporting, and self-extending. It did not rely on a larger organization for support, and he saw no distinction between church plants and fully established churches; they were all churches of Christ. Allen believed that only local, indigenous churches could propagate themselves, and a metric of whether a church was truly indigenous was whether it was in fact “propagating itself on the soil.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes Which Hinder It*. American ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Allen, “The Essentials of an Indigenous Church,” *World Dominion* 3 (1925), 111.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Allen, “The Use of the Term Indigenous,” *The International Review of Mission* 16 (1927), 262.

For Roland Allen, his opposition to the stipendiary system of the Anglican church represented that exclusivity. Said Allen:

That Churches do not spring up where they live is due to the modern tradition that no church can be established anywhere without a particular type of cleric especially trained and set apart and paid. It is due to the fact that all our Christians are today taught this tradition and are so bound by it that their hands are tied and their spiritual power is atrophied. This tradition is so powerful that the establishment of new Churches by the scattering of Christians seems today almost a revolutionary doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Allen resented the efforts of missionary societies to control the spontaneous expansion of the Church. In his view, only a church free of control could propagate. He argued that Paul practiced a process of devolution, meaning that Paul recognized the spiritual authority of the local, indigenous church at the time of its origins. There was no moment of handing the church off once its leaders were mature or the church had a sufficient number of members. While Allen had fears about the loss of central control of these new churches, he also argued that losing that control was consistent with Paul's church planting methods and made sense since the Holy Spirit was clearly at work in these new churches. This allowed Paul to speak glowingly of the churches in the epistles despite their on-the-ground reality—because he recognized them as peers with him in the gospel project rather than as novices to be paternalized.

In 2008-2010 I completed a survey of Anabaptist churches in the Global South. What amazed me was the fact that these congregations have no trouble identifying new leaders and that profes-

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<sup>8</sup> Roland Allen, "Voluntary Service in the Mission Field," *World Dominion* 5 (1927), 136.

sionalism (to the extent that it exists) is secondary to the call that one has from God to minister. I discovered a quote by a sociologist who studied other Global Southern churches, which impacted me greatly:

[T]he genius of Pentecostalism is that it was a populist religion which affirmed the “priesthood of all believers,” and so the missionaries could easily be replaced by indigenous leaders . . . anyone who was called by the Holy Spirit could be a minister of the gospel, which resulted in many bi-vocational clergy—even to this day. These men and women were powered by the Spirit rather than by titles, salaries, and pension plans. Many Pentecostal clergy have little formal theological training. Instead, they are schooled in the biblical narratives of personal transformation and find empirical verification for their beliefs in self-transcending experiences *where God intervenes in their life*.<sup>9</sup>

This quote so captures what I believe about the church and about leadership in the Church—empowered by the Holy Spirit and God’s call rather than titles, credentials, and income. Interestingly, this model that Miller identifies is actually a very old model and one that we may well need to recover in dismantled Church, where we may need to rely on bi-vocational leaders called from within their congregations.

Credentialing was a largely mainline Protestant response to the rationalization of the twentieth century. They awarded a credential to those who had gone through college and seminary and now had earned the right to step into the pulpit. It was an accommodation to the rationality of the modern world in which all fields sought to offer credentials to those who were trained specialists.

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<sup>9</sup> Donald E. Miller, “Progressive Pentecostalism: An Emergent Trend in Global Christianity,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 30 (2009), 284.

But what about the stay-at-home mom with a calling on her life to minister? What about Joe the Plumber who knows his calling is to ministry? What about the teenager who will be lucky just to finish high school but stays up nights rehearsing sermons that God has laid on his heart? What about the lifelong farmer whose evangelistic gift no one has ever called? What about the young couple whose family went through a spiritual revival that sent them to Bible college, but both are fully employed? What about folks who are sitting in our pews believing that because they lack the training and the credentials they have nothing to offer the mission of God?

What if they are filled with the Spirit, called by God to minister, and clearly reflect the gifts of the Spirit? Then what? What about them? The local church needs the capacity to nurture, call, and commission ministers without the cumbersome process of credentialing (a process that elevates some above others). If the local congregation is going to multiply, it will do so only as it is given the freedom to do the discerning and the calling and the commissioning without restrictions.

In other words, every member a missionary all of the time and everywhere, but especially in the local and indigenous context of the community within which the Church exists as the presence of Christ.