

BOOK REVIEW & DISCUSSION

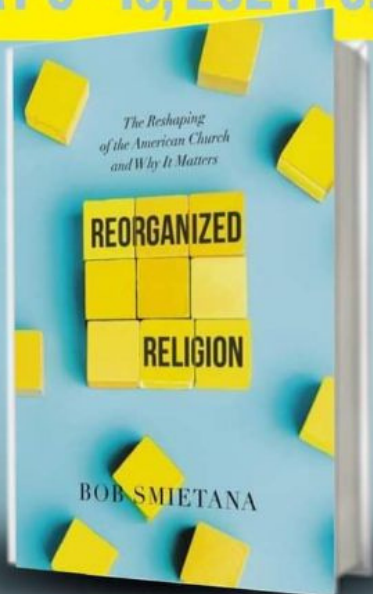
THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL ZION CHURCH
MID-ATLANTIC EPISCOPAL DISTRICT

SPIRITUAL EMPHASIS

WEEK

MORNING MEDITATION & PRAYER CALL

JANUARY 8 - 13, 2024 | 6:30AM



CALL INFORMATION: 425 436 6370 | ACCESS CODE: 2071139

REV YOLANDA W BUCK, COORDINATOR
MRS. DEVIETA C. MOORE, MISSIONARY SUPERVISOR
BISHOP W. DARIN MOORE, PRESIDING PRELATE

PREFACE

"And the one sitting on the throne said, 'Look, I am making everything new!' And then He said to me, 'Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true.'"

- Revelation 21: 5

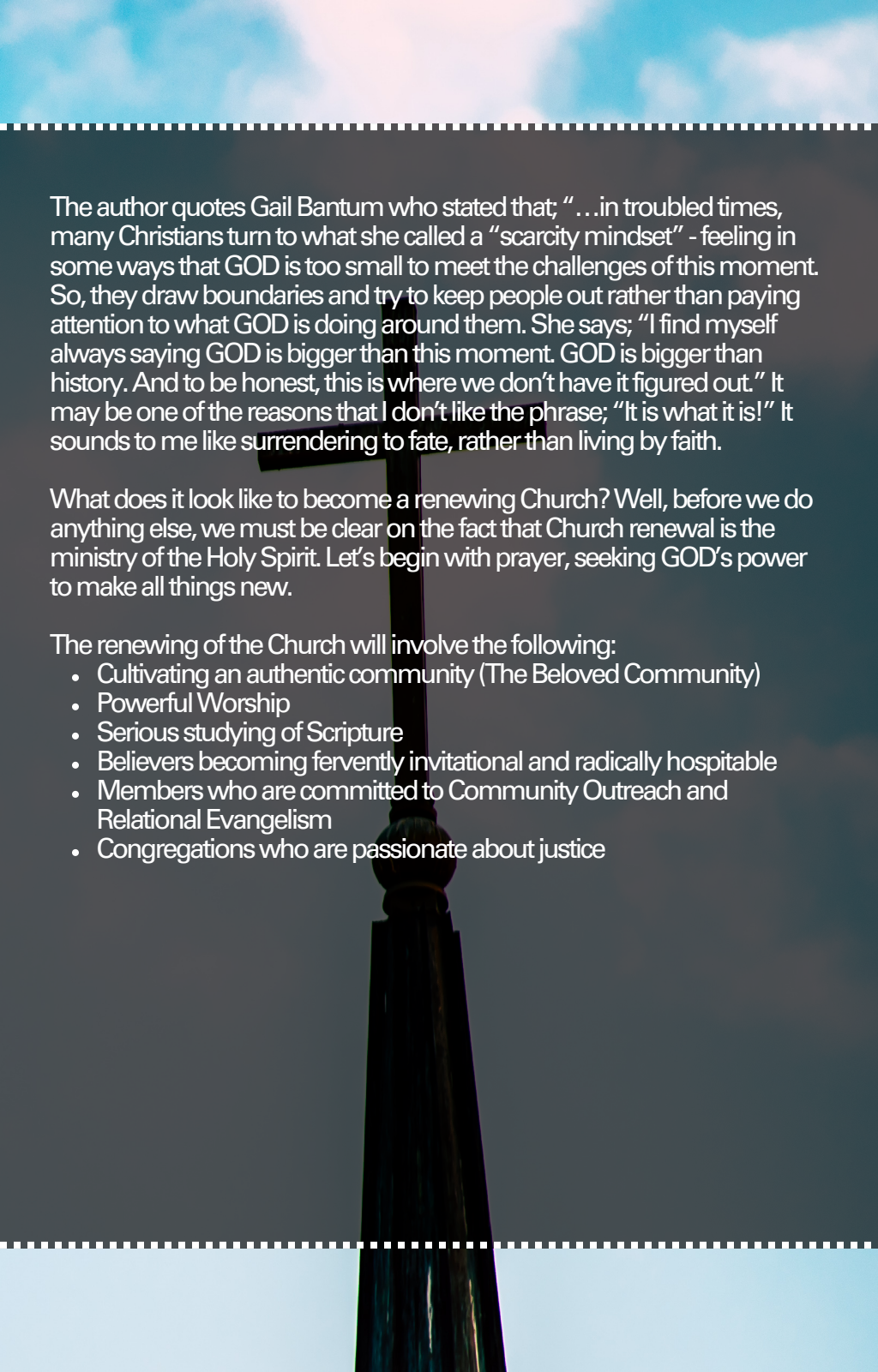
Some will read this book; Reorganized Religion by Bob Smietana and will check a box and say; "Okay, I've read the book. Good information, now back to business as usual." Others will read the book and set out a strategy to reorganize their churches but actually, it will be little more that simply rearranging the same old furniture.

Many of us are content to provide hospice care to slowly declining congregations without prayerfully pursuing GOD's will for the Church to experience healing and renewing.

The Church, the AME Zion Church needs to pray for, prepare for, and position for RENEWAL. What would it look like if our leaders, clergy and laity rather than talking about the church dying, instead would begin to shift our thinking and begin to prepare to LIVE, to be RENEWED?

We are people of the Resurrection so even though individual congregations may cease to exist, and even some denominations will fade onto the pages of history book, the Good News is that the Church, the Bride of Christ, is alive and cannot die.

So, what does it mean to be the CHURCH in this moment of history? Some of the answers may not be the same for John Wesley, DC, John Wesley in Chambersburg, PA, and St. John in Sunberry, NC. The context for The Rock Church in Cleveland is not the same as Brighton Rock in Portsmouth. No one should think that everything that is effective at Alleyne AME Zion Church in Alexandria, VA will work at Alleyne AME Zion Church in Georgetown, Guyana. Context matters, but being Credible matters, being Committed matters, having Character matters, and having the Courage to change always matters in every context.



The author quotes Gail Bantum who stated that; "...in troubled times, many Christians turn to what she called a "scarcity mindset" - feeling in some ways that GOD is too small to meet the challenges of this moment. So, they draw boundaries and try to keep people out rather than paying attention to what GOD is doing around them. She says; "I find myself always saying GOD is bigger than this moment. GOD is bigger than history. And to be honest, this is where we don't have it figured out." It may be one of the reasons that I don't like the phrase; "It is what it is!" It sounds to me like surrendering to fate, rather than living by faith.

What does it look like to become a renewing Church? Well, before we do anything else, we must be clear on the fact that Church renewal is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Let's begin with prayer, seeking GOD's power to make all things new.

The renewing of the Church will involve the following:

- Cultivating an authentic community (The Beloved Community)
- Powerful Worship
- Serious studying of Scripture
- Believers becoming fervently invitational and radically hospitable
- Members who are committed to Community Outreach and Relational Evangelism
- Congregations who are passionate about justice

BISHOP'S PRAYER

Lord Jesus, speak to us today and in the days ahead. May we experience more in 2024.

We pray for renewal. Renewal of our minds, renewal of our hearts, renewal of our families, renewal of our churches, renewal of our communities, renewal of our country, and renewal of your world.

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, and thereby enable us

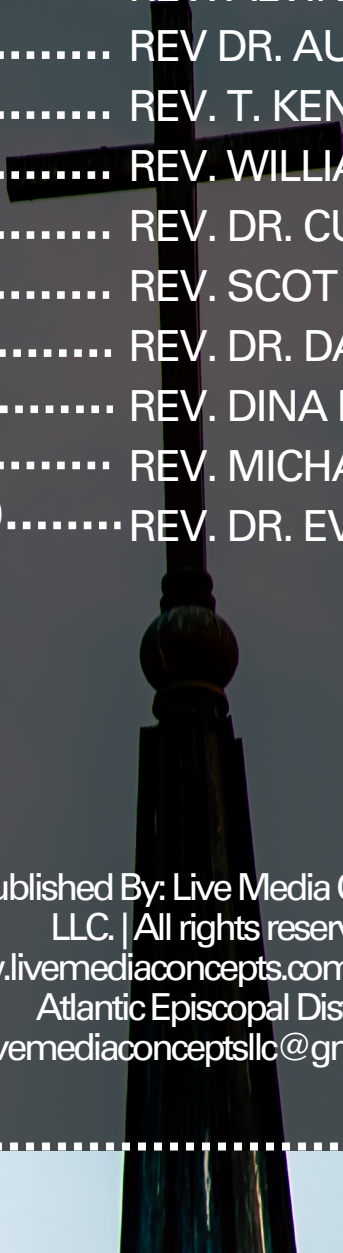
- to hear you clearly
- to listen to each other attentively
- to imagine our future boldly
- to discern your direction wisely
- to persevere in your holy will courageously
- to stay together through love
- to surrender our own plans to your will
- to embrace the greater good
- to pass on the gift of your church to future generations.

Lord, fill us with a fresh and fervent passion for You. May your presence be manifested powerfully among us, and may we be open to the transforming work of your Holy Spirit. Renew our passion for worship, prayer, and communion with You, so that others will know that we are Christians by our love. AMEN!

- Submitted By:

Bishop W. Darin Moore

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CHAPTER 1

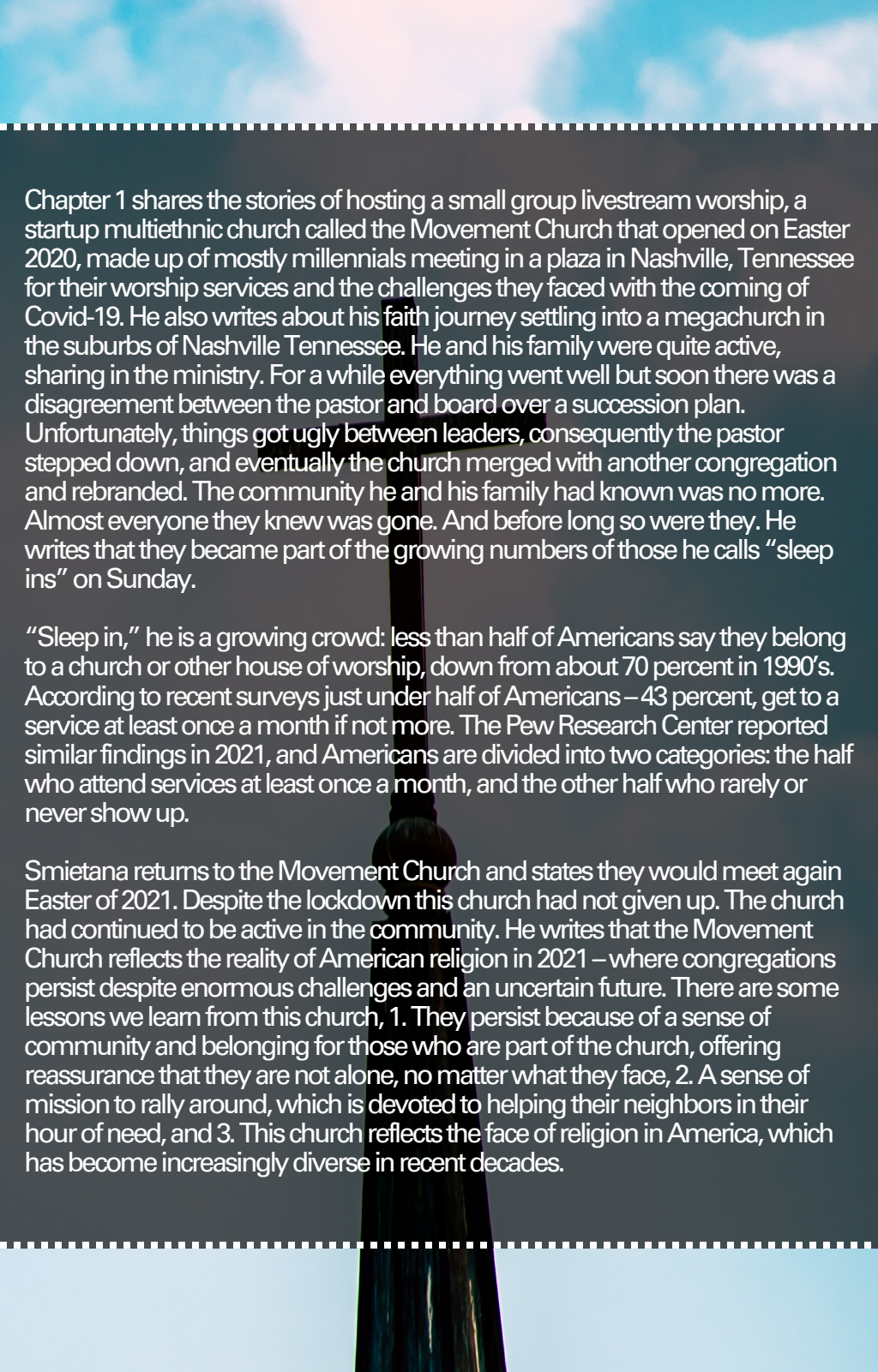
To Bishop W. Darin and Mrs. Deveita Moore; Rev. Yolanda Buck, Presiding Elders, Pastors, Ministers, and Laity of the MEAD – Happy New Year! My task this morning is to present the Introduction and Chapter 1 of our Spiritual Emphasis Week book of study, *The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters – Reorganized Religion* by Bob Smietana. Bob Smietana is an award-winning reporter and well-respected journalist. He writes that he is a reporter – an observer and chronicler of the way religion shapes every detail of the world around us.

In the Introduction in part 1, Smietana looks at where we are – how demographics changes and a loss of faith in institutions are reshaping the America we once knew, and how those changes are fueling a decline in organized religion that is unlikely to stop anytime soon. He also looks at the role organized religion plays in American culture and how it impacts most of our lives and community no matter what we believe.

Part 2, takes a deeper look into why people leave organized religion – and how external changes in the culture are playing out in denominations, local congregations, and the lives of individual Americans.

Part 3, looks at what comes next – how congregations and institutions are adapting to the changing American religious landscape and how they are, as the “calmly plotting the resurrection.”

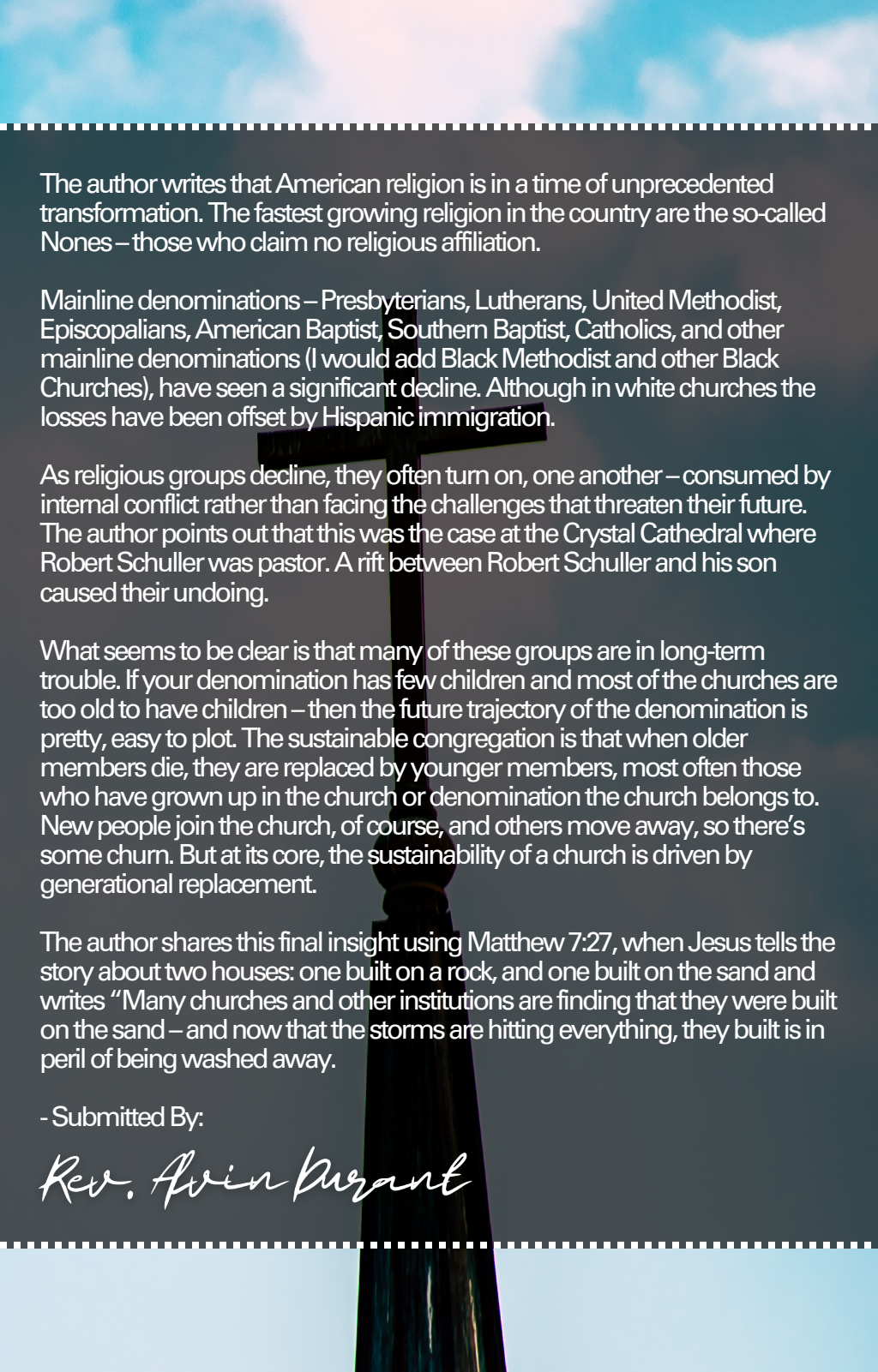
The author shares some of the stories Smietana heard based on both new reporting and on his twenty-two years on what he calls the “Godbeat.” He looks at how organized religion functions in the world and the crucial role that churches and other faith-based institutions play in the day to day lives of individuals, families and communities; the ties that bind us together and how those ties are increasingly frayed; and why the decline and loss of congregational religion – which gathers people together, inspires them to do good, rallies them together and then sends them out to the world to make it a better place, should worry us. He argues that organized religion is worth saving. But it’s going to take a lot of work.



Chapter 1 shares the stories of hosting a small group livestream worship, a startup multiethnic church called the Movement Church that opened on Easter 2020, made up of mostly millennials meeting in a plaza in Nashville, Tennessee for their worship services and the challenges they faced with the coming of Covid-19. He also writes about his faith journey settling into a megachurch in the suburbs of Nashville Tennessee. He and his family were quite active, sharing in the ministry. For a while everything went well but soon there was a disagreement between the pastor and board over a succession plan. Unfortunately, things got ugly between leaders, consequently the pastor stepped down, and eventually the church merged with another congregation and rebranded. The community he and his family had known was no more. Almost everyone they knew was gone. And before long so were they. He writes that they became part of the growing numbers of those he calls “sleep ins” on Sunday.

“Sleep in,” he is a growing crowd: less than half of Americans say they belong to a church or other house of worship, down from about 70 percent in 1990’s. According to recent surveys just under half of Americans – 43 percent, get to a service at least once a month if not more. The Pew Research Center reported similar findings in 2021, and Americans are divided into two categories: the half who attend services at least once a month, and the other half who rarely or never show up.

Smietana returns to the Movement Church and states they would meet again Easter of 2021. Despite the lockdown this church had not given up. The church had continued to be active in the community. He writes that the Movement Church reflects the reality of American religion in 2021 – where congregations persist despite enormous challenges and an uncertain future. There are some lessons we learn from this church, 1. They persist because of a sense of community and belonging for those who are part of the church, offering reassurance that they are not alone, no matter what they face, 2. A sense of mission to rally around, which is devoted to helping their neighbors in their hour of need, and 3. This church reflects the face of religion in America, which has become increasingly diverse in recent decades.



The author writes that American religion is in a time of unprecedented transformation. The fastest growing religion in the country are the so-called Nones – those who claim no religious affiliation.

Mainline denominations – Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Methodist, Episcopalians, American Baptist, Southern Baptist, Catholics, and other mainline denominations (I would add Black Methodist and other Black Churches), have seen a significant decline. Although in white churches the losses have been offset by Hispanic immigration.

As religious groups decline, they often turn on, one another – consumed by internal conflict rather than facing the challenges that threaten their future. The author points out that this was the case at the Crystal Cathedral where Robert Schuller was pastor. A rift between Robert Schuller and his son caused their undoing.

What seems to be clear is that many of these groups are in long-term trouble. If your denomination has few children and most of the churches are too old to have children – then the future trajectory of the denomination is pretty, easy to plot. The sustainable congregation is that when older members die, they are replaced by younger members, most often those who have grown up in the church or denomination the church belongs to. New people join the church, of course, and others move away, so there's some churn. But at its core, the sustainability of a church is driven by generational replacement.

The author shares this final insight using Matthew 7:27, when Jesus tells the story about two houses: one built on a rock, and one built on the sand and writes "Many churches and other institutions are finding that they were built on the sand – and now that the storms are hitting everything, they built is in peril of being washed away.

- Submitted By:

Rev. Arvin Durant

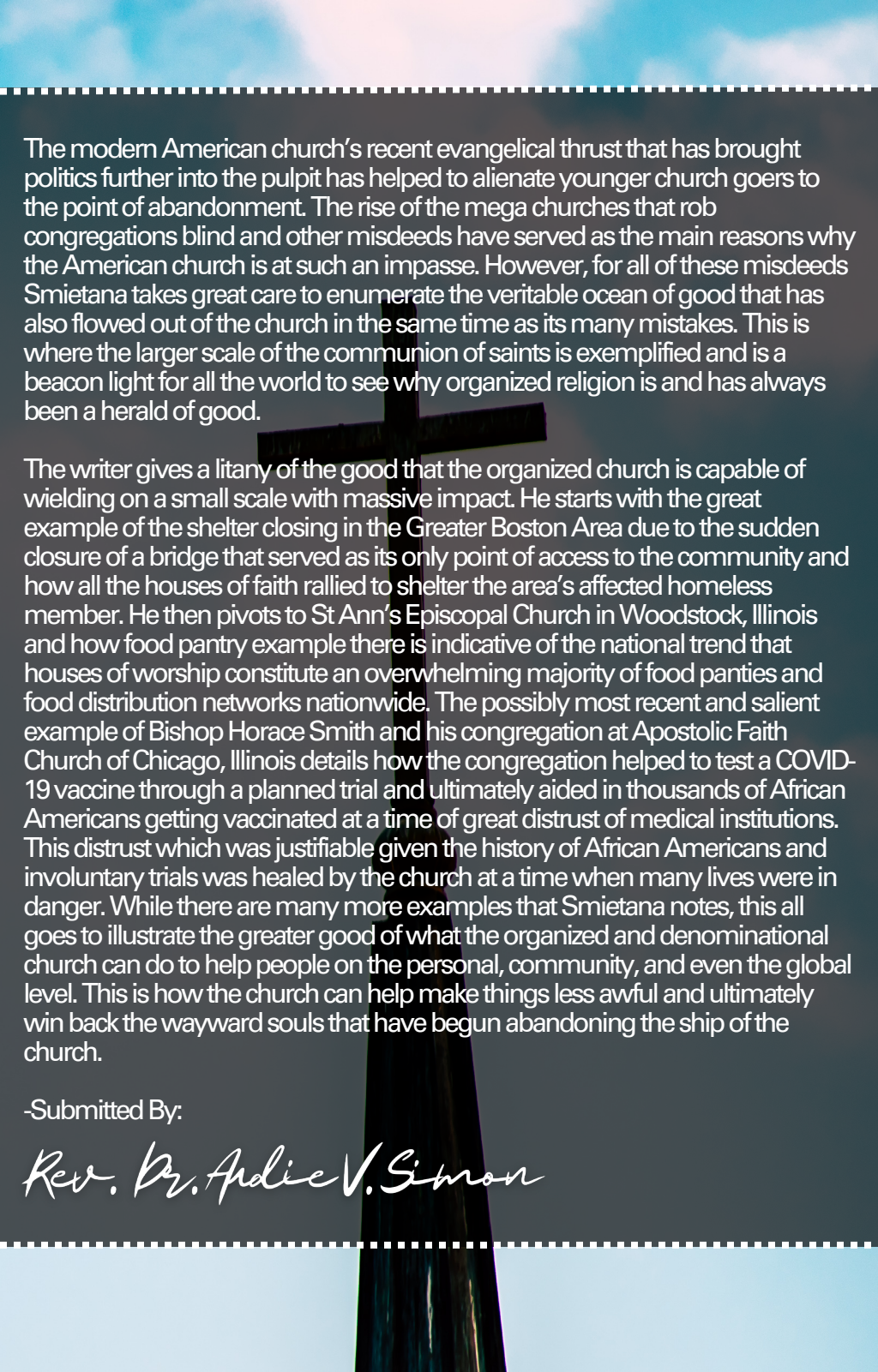
CHAPTER 2

Smietana's opening of this crucial stage of his exposition begins with an adage about a dejected and downtrodden pastor. The writer's adage is a story from noted Philosophy Professor Dr. Arvid Adell, who is the friend of the pastor. The example ultimately highlights an academic's observation of religion and a crucial organized religious principle that will serve to highlight the thrust of how the church can do so much good. The pastor in the example has his pastoral career salvaged by the "Surrogate Faith" of the congregation.

This concept of "Surrogate Faith" is explored and built upon in the chapter through numerous examples and further expansion of how the church can help to cultivate a communion of souls. The writer highlights how this happens in the church from both an interpersonal and a larger perspective through many great examples. Smietana notes how as he was going to cover a story about Kay Warren's missionary work with her church's global AIDS initiative. The interview was canceled but the front porch feel of the waiting area in the beautiful mega church helmed by her husband Rick Warren prompted him to call his brother for what would be the last time. He details how this call would be days before his brother's untimely passing and how his local church and community rallied to his family's need at this time of almost inconsolable loss. This undergirding that the church almost alone can exhibit at such perilous times, is how Smietana makes the case for how the church can be an agent of hope, love, and comfort to the world.

The writer notes, "Faith harms and heals. It pulls us apart and binds us together. It builds cathedrals and burns down cities." His main premise in this chapter, which echoes throughout the book, is that churches are important and that the loss of organized religion, whether you are religious or not will have a detrimental impact on the world.

Smietana is keen to note all of the modern criticisms leveled at the church for its misdeeds and wrongdoing that have permeated modern society and perhaps has set the stage for the great distrust of the church and organized religion as a whole. His exploration of the Catholic Church's complicity in so many things from sanctioned colonization, slavery, abuse of the congregation by the clergy only served as propellants for a stoked fire.



The modern American church's recent evangelical thrust that has brought politics further into the pulpit has helped to alienate younger churchgoers to the point of abandonment. The rise of the mega churches that rob congregations blind and other misdeeds have served as the main reasons why the American church is at such an impasse. However, for all of these misdeeds Smietana takes great care to enumerate the veritable ocean of good that has also flowed out of the church in the same time as its many mistakes. This is where the larger scale of the communion of saints is exemplified and is a beacon light for all the world to see why organized religion is and has always been a herald of good.

The writer gives a litany of the good that the organized church is capable of wielding on a small scale with massive impact. He starts with the great example of the shelter closing in the Greater Boston Area due to the sudden closure of a bridge that served as its only point of access to the community and how all the houses of faith rallied to shelter the area's affected homeless member. He then pivots to St Ann's Episcopal Church in Woodstock, Illinois and how food pantry example there is indicative of the national trend that houses of worship constitute an overwhelming majority of food pantries and food distribution networks nationwide. The possibly most recent and salient example of Bishop Horace Smith and his congregation at Apostolic Faith Church of Chicago, Illinois details how the congregation helped to test a COVID-19 vaccine through a planned trial and ultimately aided in thousands of African Americans getting vaccinated at a time of great distrust of medical institutions. This distrust which was justifiable given the history of African Americans and involuntary trials was healed by the church at a time when many lives were in danger. While there are many more examples that Smietana notes, this all goes to illustrate the greater good of what the organized and denominational church can do to help people on the personal, community, and even the global level. This is how the church can help make things less awful and ultimately win back the wayward souls that have begun abandoning the ship of the church.

-Submitted By:

Rev. Dr. Andie V. Simon

CHAPTER 3

At the outset of this section, the author says that there is no simple explanation for why organized religion is on the decline in America, and as a result, there's no simple solution to the problems churches face.

The author first, makes a list of external pressures: *Changing demographics *A lost of trust in institutions *A global pandemic *Increasing political polarization *Evolving social norms *The weight of America's unresolved history of racial division.

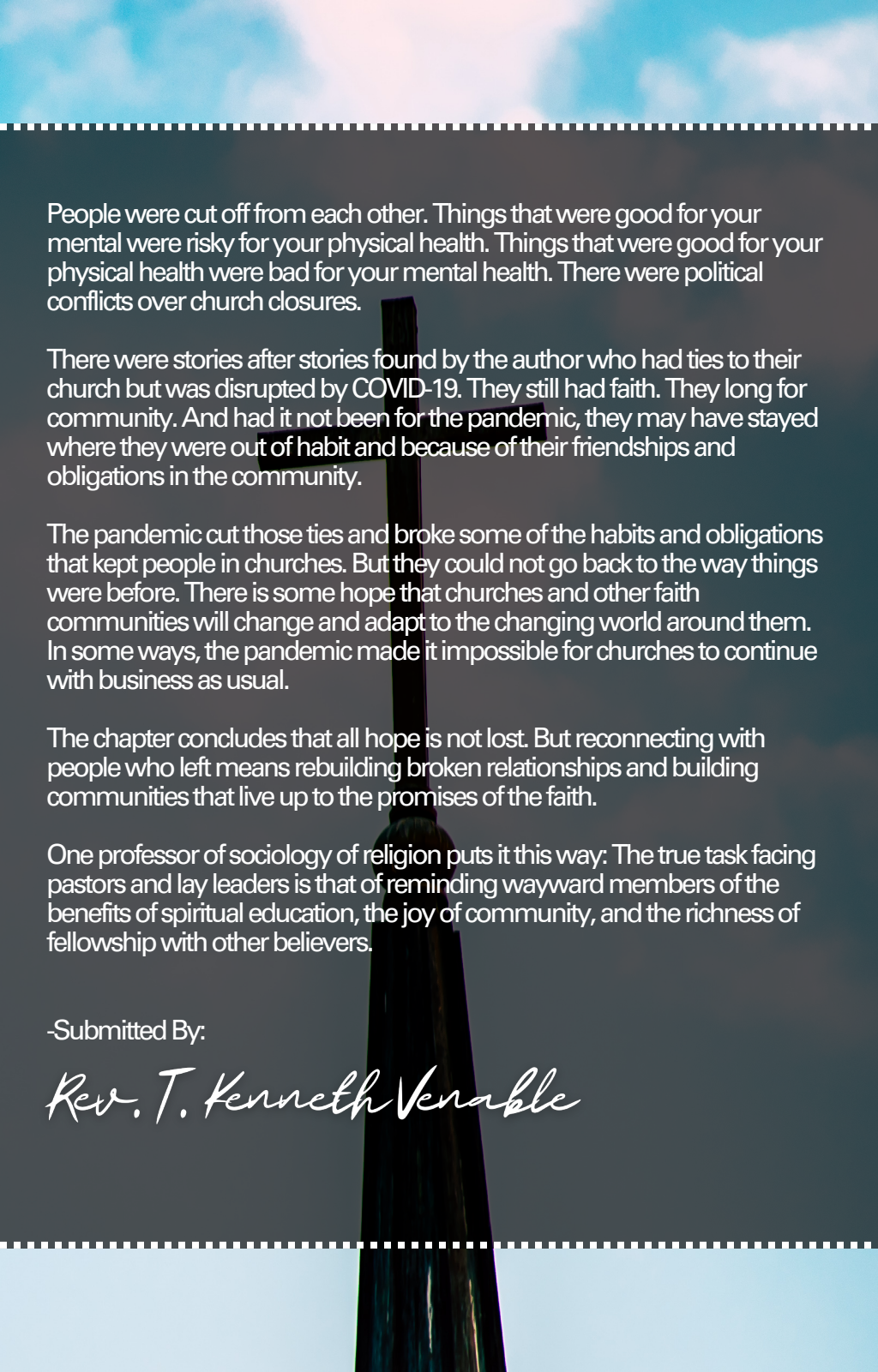
And then he goes on to present a list of internal pressures: *The consolidation of people in larger and larger churches *The increasing frailty of small "ordinary congregations" *Tensions over how to deal with issues of sexuality *Unhealthy pastoral leadership models – that weaken them from within, making them less able to cope with those outside pressures.

And if that wasn't enough, the author quotes from a science fiction novel titled *Old Man's War* – The main Character describes the aging process this way: "The problem with aging is not that it is one dam thing after another – it's every dam thing, all at once, all the time."

COVID interrupted the habit of Church going and all of the stuff boiling under the surface started popping up and all you had was zoom. The shutdown took weeks, and some churches took a couple of years before coming back. Some folks still have not returned to their church or former church. The hard part is that we don't know how many people we have anymore. People can turn on their computers, phones, or tablets and watch services online.

Religious sociologists often talk about the 3 B's: belief, behavior, and belonging – when talking about how religion works. We often focus on what people believe, thinking that their decisions about where they belong and how they behave flow from their beliefs. It's more complicated than that.

There were no vaccines in the early stages of COVID-19. So the best way to limit the spread was to limit social gatherings.



People were cut off from each other. Things that were good for your mental were risky for your physical health. Things that were good for your physical health were bad for your mental health. There were political conflicts over church closures.

There were stories after stories found by the author who had ties to their church but was disrupted by COVID-19. They still had faith. They long for community. And had it not been for the pandemic, they may have stayed where they were out of habit and because of their friendships and obligations in the community.

The pandemic cut those ties and broke some of the habits and obligations that kept people in churches. But they could not go back to the way things were before. There is some hope that churches and other faith communities will change and adapt to the changing world around them. In some ways, the pandemic made it impossible for churches to continue with business as usual.

The chapter concludes that all hope is not lost. But reconnecting with people who left means rebuilding broken relationships and building communities that live up to the promises of the faith.

One professor of sociology of religion puts it this way: The true task facing pastors and lay leaders is that of reminding wayward members of the benefits of spiritual education, the joy of community, and the richness of fellowship with other believers.

-Submitted By:

Rev. T. Kenneth Venable


CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 of the book *Reorganized Religion* by Bob Smietana delves deeper on serious and substantive scandals caused by leaders within organized religions. These scandals have led to the damage, to decline, and to the demise of individuals who have experienced, in my words, "church hurt." In chapter 4, entitled *Preserve the Base*, the author describes the spiritual journey of two individuals who were raised and devoted to organized religion and to their churches. However, they left because of church hurt.

The first person, Chrissy Stroop, left her roots in an "evangelical church." Smietana describes her departure like a "moment of liberation when(she) walked out of the door of a place where she was no longer wanted to find a new life waiting for her." Although, she initially loss her faith in her church roots. Eventually, she lost her faith in God altogether and has become a very local activist.

The author details Chrissy's education and experience in a Christian school that taught her to "lie for Jesus" and cheat on the AP exam to hold firmly to the teachings of evangelical creationism while regurgitating the theory of evolution. As an adult, Chrissy "abandoned the identity she had been brought up with and everything that went with it." The author states that Chrissy "came out and is now a trans, as in transexual. For Chrissy, her family are working through the tensions that her new sexual identity has caused. Nevertheless she/he is supported by family. While many others, the author points out, are outcasts.

She is an "advocate for nonreligious Americans and for queer Americans, especially those in evangelical spaces." Smietana indicates that Chrissy's faith "growing up was bult on a kind of Christianity that saw those outside the faith as a threat to be either converted or defeated. With this in mind, Chrissy supports the ideology of the "Nons." She believes that the "Nons" will grow as white evangelism dwindles and eventually dies. In describing the base, "Pluralism" is a nonstarter for them, Chrissy said. This makes it hard for them to fit into a truly democratic society. **THEY NEED ENEMIES.**



Secondly, Smietana describes the personal and painful departure from the church of Alabamian Ms. Kara Million. Kara went to church weekly, did mission trips, studied theology and believed whole-heartedly everything that her church taught. She even believed that she would spend her life as a pastor's wife. But while in her late twenties, the church "broke her heart and tore her life apart."

What was Kara's church hurt? Kara was part of a group of women who reported the church's pastor to the denominational authorities in 2019 for improper behavior. Instead of support, the women were treated like pariahs, were counter-sued, and continue to suffer through the legal system.

Chapter 4 spells it out in a painful and profound way. The Scripture found in Thessalonians 2:11-12 comes to mind; "For this reason, God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness."

Preserving the base does harm. It is an ideology that distorts truth with lies and causes people to be dismissive, dehumanizing, and in denial when the lie is confronted.

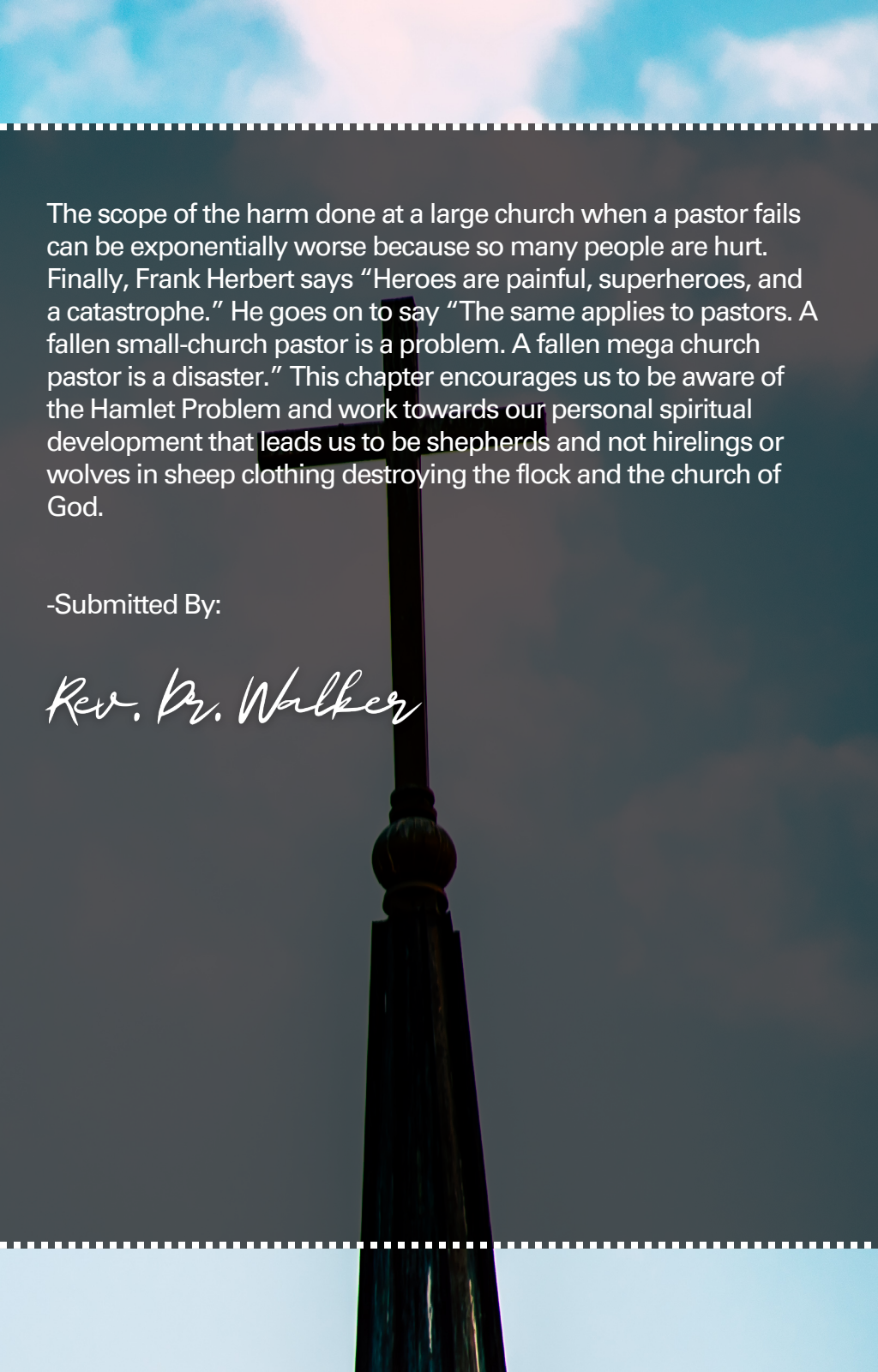
-Submitted By:

Rev. William Hagan

CHAPTER 5

Chapter Five is entitled “The Hamlet Problem.” The Chapter opens with the story of Laura Everett, a female pastor and director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches. Everett realized early on that people would not follow her because of her title. Instead, she had to lead by building trust with others and persuading them to follow her leadership rather than assuming that they would follow her because of her status as a pastor or her institutional role. She and the church ought to ask these questions-“What does this look like for someone who never opened a Bible, never opened a hymnal, and never walked through a church?” How do we reach those people? The chapter goes on to highlight remarks by John Packard who talks about loss of trust in the church and church leadership. He suggests that churches have to understand the difference between things they can control and change and things they have to adapt to. Thus, the Hamlet problem. Here Church leaders take on the characteristics of Hamlet. They want to be in full control. They are the central actors on the stage and everything revolves around them. The Hamlet problem is when the leadership fail the people and the church is destroyed. Packard gives the example of two churches and pastors who failed because of the Hamlet problem. The Willow Creek Community Church, Pastor Hybels, and Mars Hill Church, Pastor Mark Driscoll. When the leaders failed, the churches collapsed. If you disagreed with the pastor, you were shunned or cast out.

Chapter Five also warns against using business models, management books, and leadership summits which focus more on the individual and their brand than on spiritual developments shaping them into loving and nurturing shepherds of the people writes Skye Jethani. Bob Smietana says while all pastors are human and are bound to fail at some point – in small and large ways the risk is higher in larger churches. Any pastoral failure is painful and causes harm. If the pastor of a small church makes a mistake, that church can more easily recover, because the damage of such a mistake is fairly limited. If they implode, that will be harmful, but relatively few people are hurt.



The scope of the harm done at a large church when a pastor fails can be exponentially worse because so many people are hurt. Finally, Frank Herbert says “Heroes are painful, superheroes, and a catastrophe.” He goes on to say “The same applies to pastors. A fallen small-church pastor is a problem. A fallen mega church pastor is a disaster.” This chapter encourages us to be aware of the Hamlet Problem and work towards our personal spiritual development that leads us to be shepherds and not hirelings or wolves in sheep clothing destroying the flock and the church of God.

-Submitted By:

Rev. Dr. Walker

CHAPTER 6

As I was reading this chapter several conversations came to mind: There was a couple buying a home. The husband wanted a 5,000 square foot house but the wife simply wanted a quaint 2,500 square foot house. I was shopping for a new car. I was initially looking at a model 4 or model 5 but then when I arrived at the dealership and got a glimpse of the model 7, it triggered something. While in the bank the other day, the Vice President of the branch knew me and introduced me to one of the people in the bank. The first question he asked was, "What is the size of your church?"

That brings me to ask the question, DOES SIZE REALLY MATTER? Many of the people in Mega Churches are not new converts but simply people who have left smaller churches. The author sees this shift as another possible sign of decline of organized religion... LESS RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION. The author presents situations with several small congregations that are having struggles, some that have closed, and some doing great ministry!! Smaller congregations have an advantage when it comes to relationships, when it comes to loving people, when it comes to warm things!!!

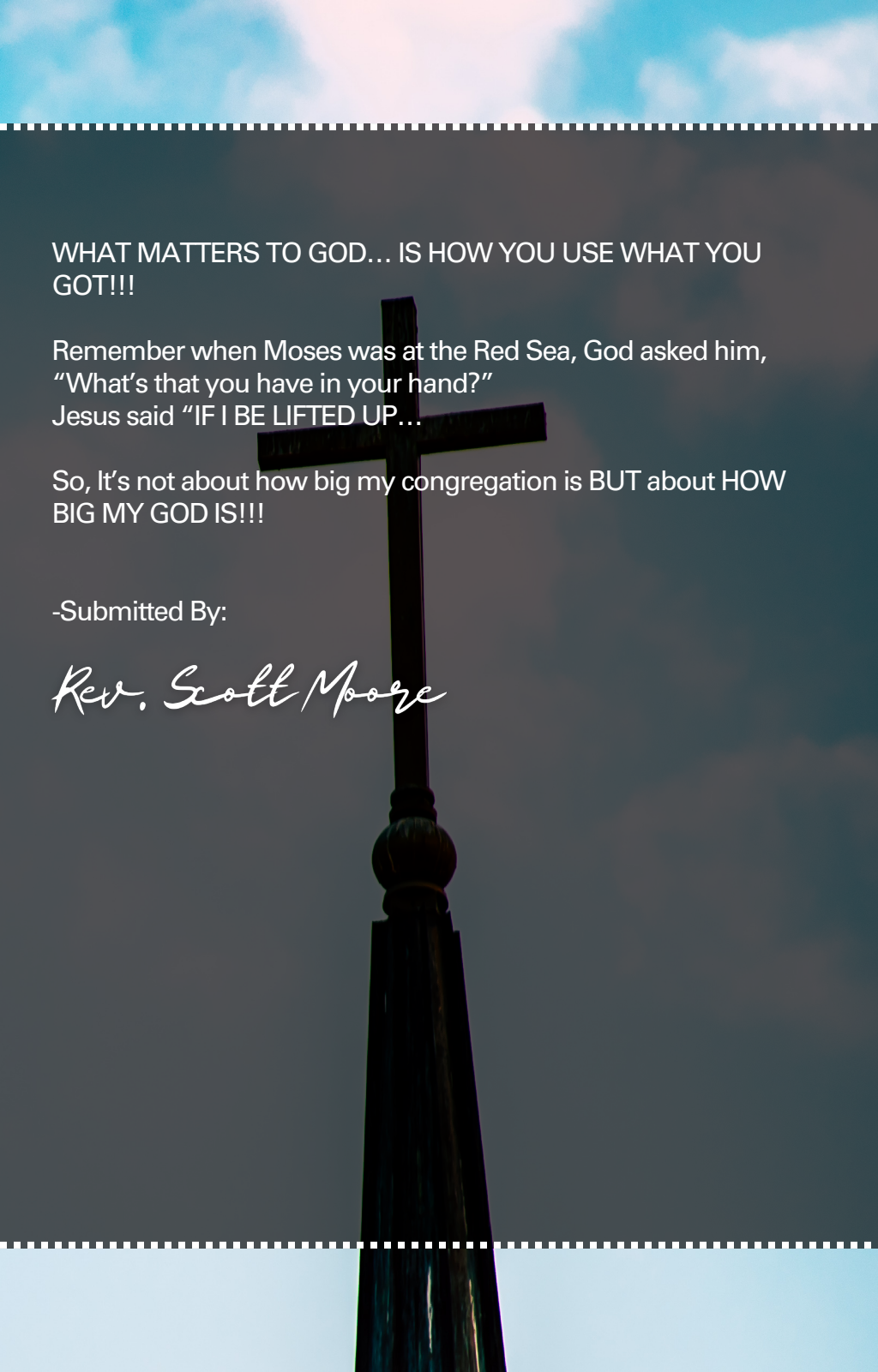
So the answer to the question, Does Size REALLY MATTER? Is simply YES!!!

IT MATTERS TO:

- This Materialistic Culture
- Many Politicians
- Many Financial Institutions
- People driven by Nickels, Numbers, and Noise
- People who are impressed with Cash, Cars, and Cribs
- and unfortunately ... Carnally Minded Christians

BUT TO GOD!!!

It's not the SIZE of the DOG in the FIGHT BUT the Size of the FIGHT IN THE DOG!!!



WHAT MATTERS TO GOD... IS HOW YOU USE WHAT YOU GOT!!!

Remember when Moses was at the Red Sea, God asked him, "What's that you have in your hand?"

Jesus said "IF I BE LIFTED UP..."

So, It's not about how big my congregation is BUT about HOW BIG MY GOD IS!!!

-Submitted By:

Rev. Scott Moore

CHAPTER 7

In chapter 7 Bob Smietana lets us know that there is a political problem in the church. He introduces us to Pastor David Platt at the time this book was written was the Pastor of McLean Bible Church, a prominent mega church in the Washington DC area.

Pastor Platt had just finished his sermon and worship service was about to end when he got word that the president of the United States was on his way to the church and in fact would be there in a few minutes.

But to make matters worse this was in June 2019, so we know who the President was at that time. Yes, what if Donald Trump showed up at your church.

Platt stayed out of politics and was not a Trump supporter. Platt was still new to the role of senior pastor.

Smietana states that Platt had just finished preaching a sermon about planning for the church's future and he asked his congregation "what if our best days as a church are ahead of us and not behind?"

Platt was shocked by the visit and there were some in his congregation that were thrilled at Trump's visit and others were angered. So, Platt like many of his fellow evangelicals believe Christians are supposed to pray for their leaders. Platt indeed had a Political Problem:

Smietana in saying No Church is immune from the political divides that are facing the country.

Because this Political Problem

I. DISTORTS OUR IDENTITY

Paul said, in (Philippians 1:21) "for to me, to live is Christ". He identified himself as a servant of Christ. His identity was found completely in the Lord Jesus, and he said it's the same for us. We may be persuaded by a political viewpoint. But when it becomes our worldview and shapes our reading of Scripture and view of reality, we can forget we are children of God, set apart, to be holy as God is holy.

II. IT DIVIDES OUR BODY

In John 17, Jesus prayed that we would be one. So, anything that divides us is working against God's will. The current climate that tells us to make enemies of those who disagree with us drives us apart. And the COVID-19 pandemic only seemed to make matters worse. It divided the church.

We also lose a tremendous ability to convince anyone that Jesus has power to bring real change to the real world. If the gospel is not powerful enough to break down the dividing walls of hostility between Republican Christians and Democratic Christians, what good is it?

III. IT DESTROYS OUR WITNESS

As our Bishop has talked about the rise of the "nones" (those who say they have no religious affiliation—the fastest-growing religious group in America) and the "dones" (those who have exited the church, often disillusioned) has ties to this political habit of some Christians. Christians aren't called to have their primary focus on gun rights, border issues, abortion legislation, or even religious freedom. Some will contend, "But those things are important!" Yes, they are important. I'm not saying they are not important.

When someone comes through the doors of our church, they don't need to know where we stand on various issues; they need to know where we stand with Christ. They need Jesus. He is the only source of healing and hope for the people of this country. It's time to remember the main things and stay focused on our mission.

-Submitted By:

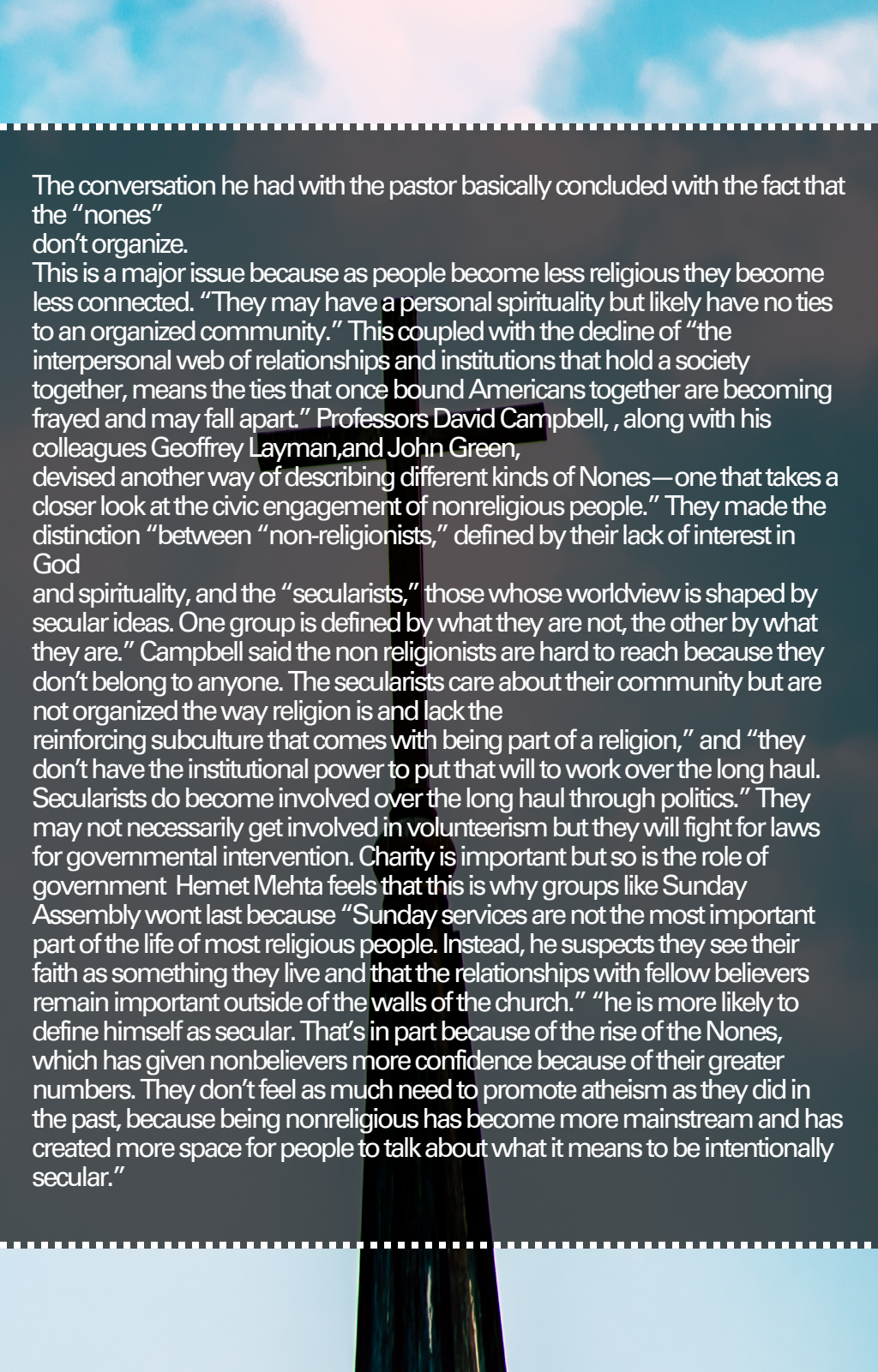
Rev. Dr. Darwin B. Little

CHAPTER 8

Chapter 8 opens with a story about Ross Llewellyn, “president of an organization known as “Sunday Assembly Atlanta”, a secular congregation that builds community and celebrates life together. Their motto, is simple: “Live Better, Help Often.”

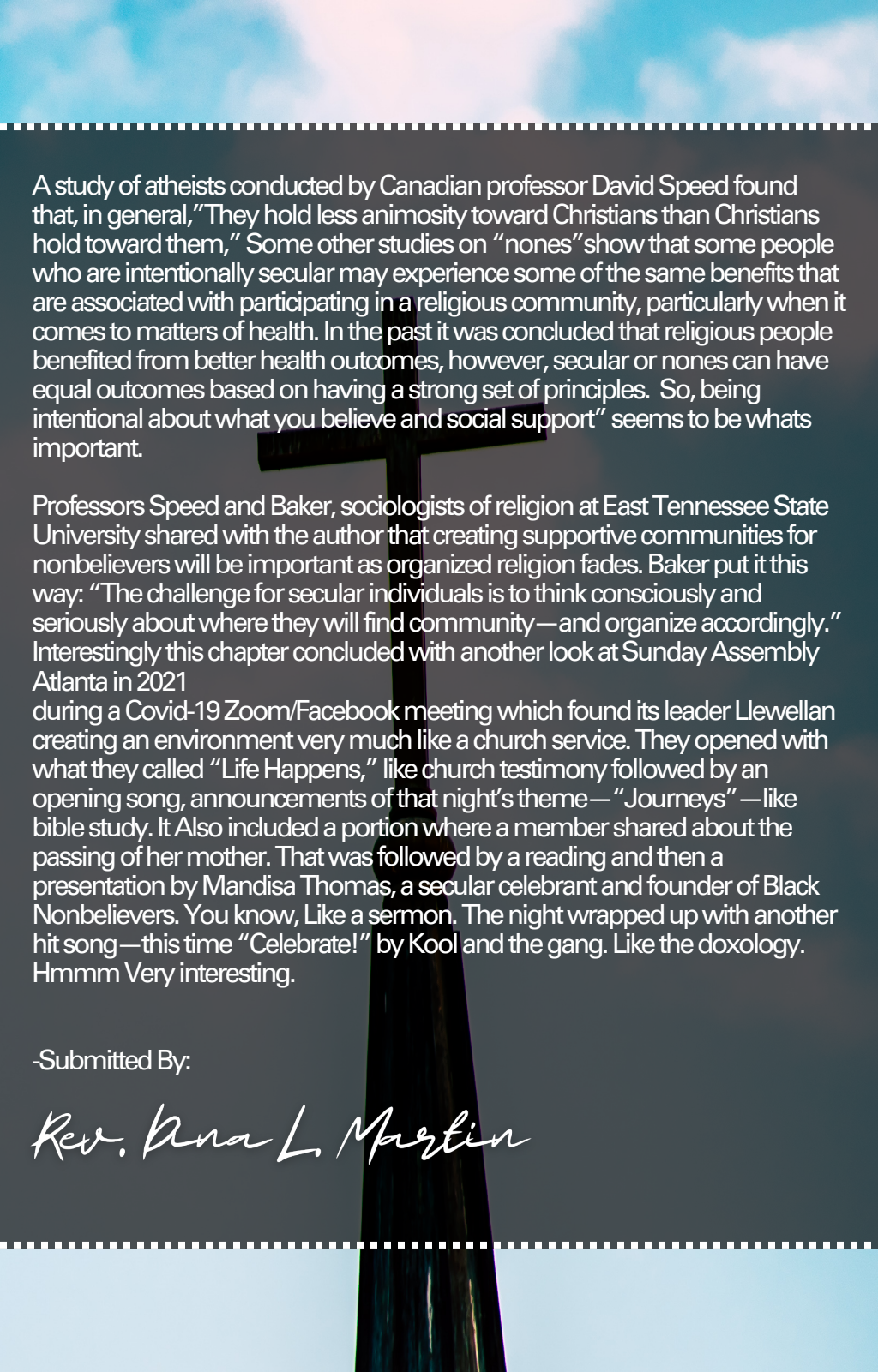
“Llewellyn can be classified as a “None”, someone who claims no religious identity.” Not atheist. Not Agnostic. None. But the idea of having a supportive community has always appealed to him.”

People who have had a religious tradition and have come to love the culture of the church like the gathering. The singing. The sense of social responsibility and community but without the God of it all. The first assembly began in 2013 and in a few short years grew to more than 70 assemblies in the UK. US and other countries, however, the pandemic had dwindling effects as with other in person gatherings. As we see in churches as well. Which is why, as the author puts it, “decisions that church leaders and congregation members make in the coming years will be crucial.” “The 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey, which is Based on data from fifteen thousand congregations gives a bleak view of congregational life in the United States. The survey focused on congregational life because they believed that religious life in America is best understood by looking at congregations”. The finding is not unlike what we too are experiencing in the AME Zion Church which is declining attendance. Alarming in the findings is the rapid rate of decline. Since the year 2000 church attendance has shrunk to nearly half. Scott Thumma, the surveys author says, “half the congregations in the country have danger at their doors. Yet things are not all hopeless if churches are willing to change and address their challenges head-on. But there’s not much time to waste.” Going on to add: “In such a situation as this, congregations and religious leaders must embrace a willingness to change and an attitude of innovation and adaptation to maintain a vibrant and diversely sized congregational presence in the future.” At this point the author turns his attention back to the “nones” as he remembered his visit to the First Baptist Church of Mount Vernon, Illinois which is also experiencing a great decline.



The conversation he had with the pastor basically concluded with the fact that the “nones” don’t organize.

This is a major issue because as people become less religious they become less connected. “They may have a personal spirituality but likely have no ties to an organized community.” This coupled with the decline of “the interpersonal web of relationships and institutions that hold a society together, means the ties that once bound Americans together are becoming frayed and may fall apart.” Professors David Campbell, , along with his colleagues Geoffrey Layman, and John Green, devised another way of describing different kinds of Nones—one that takes a closer look at the civic engagement of nonreligious people.” They made the distinction “between “non-religionists,” defined by their lack of interest in God and spirituality, and the “secularists,” those whose worldview is shaped by secular ideas. One group is defined by what they are not, the other by what they are.” Campbell said the non religionists are hard to reach because they don’t belong to anyone. The secularists care about their community but are not organized the way religion is and lack the reinforcing subculture that comes with being part of a religion,” and “they don’t have the institutional power to put that will to work over the long haul. Secularists do become involved over the long haul through politics.” They may not necessarily get involved in volunteerism but they will fight for laws for governmental intervention. Charity is important but so is the role of government Hemet Mehta feels that this is why groups like Sunday Assembly wont last because “Sunday services are not the most important part of the life of most religious people. Instead, he suspects they see their faith as something they live and that the relationships with fellow believers remain important outside of the walls of the church.” “he is more likely to define himself as secular. That’s in part because of the rise of the Nones, which has given nonbelievers more confidence because of their greater numbers. They don’t feel as much need to promote atheism as they did in the past, because being nonreligious has become more mainstream and has created more space for people to talk about what it means to be intentionally secular.”



A study of atheists conducted by Canadian professor David Speed found that, in general, "They hold less animosity toward Christians than Christians hold toward them," Some other studies on "nones" show that some people who are intentionally secular may experience some of the same benefits that are associated with participating in a religious community, particularly when it comes to matters of health. In the past it was concluded that religious people benefited from better health outcomes, however, secular or nones can have equal outcomes based on having a strong set of principles. So, being intentional about what you believe and social support" seems to be what's important.

Professors Speed and Baker, sociologists of religion at East Tennessee State University shared with the author that creating supportive communities for nonbelievers will be important as organized religion fades. Baker put it this way: "The challenge for secular individuals is to think consciously and seriously about where they will find community—and organize accordingly." Interestingly this chapter concluded with another look at Sunday Assembly Atlanta in 2021 during a Covid-19 Zoom/Facebook meeting which found its leader Llewellyn creating an environment very much like a church service. They opened with what they called "Life Happens," like church testimony followed by an opening song, announcements of that night's theme—"Journeys"—like bible study. It also included a portion where a member shared about the passing of her mother. That was followed by a reading and then a presentation by Mandisa Thomas, a secular celebrant and founder of Black Nonbelievers. You know, like a sermon. The night wrapped up with another hit song—this time "Celebrate!" by Kool and the gang. Like the doxology. Hmmm Very interesting.

-Submitted By:

Rev. Ana L. Martin

CHAPTER 9

In Chapter 9 of Bob Smietana's book *Reorganized Religion*, the author describes how several churches decided to navigate periods of uncertainty and decline and how those decisions impacted the outcomes for the respective congregations and surrounding communities.

Among the churches Smietana profiled were Interbay Covenant Church and Mars Hill Church. These two Seattle congregations took different paths toward dissolution, but both ended up (intentionally or otherwise) part of a newer ministry called Quest Church. The Interbay congregation and leadership were open to change, willing to dream of new possibilities, and prepared to confront challenging issues. They purposefully embarked upon a merger to promote what they believed was "best for the flourishing of the Kingdom of God and their community" above their congregational needs. (184)

Alternatively, Smietana described Mars Hill Church, a large church with all the trappings of success, as a "toxic," "volatile," misogynistic, personality-driven culture (164-165). They refused to adjust in the face of leadership problems, public scandal, and legal proceedings and were forced to close. In the aftermath, the Mars Hill property was liquidated, and the aforementioned Quest ministry purchased a sizable portion of their main campus. (167)

Other congregations analyzed in the chapter (Hillview, Galilee, Cottage Grove, Calvary, Table, etc.) were in different areas and had some unique details. Yet, they all had a common element. . . the choices made by members and leaders strongly affected the continued existence, improved success, or failure of the respective faith communities. Ultimately, I submit that all accounts in the chapter point to the fact that:

"The world is changing, and churches have to adapt to find their way forward. . . And sometimes this may mean letting go and imagining a different future. The other option. . . is to avoid those difficult conversations and continue on the same way things have always been. When we are afraid, we live in denial. Doing that, however, risks that a congregation will eventually shrink and the church will close, and a building that was once a sacred space, used for ministry and creating spiritual community will be lost." (176)

-Submitted By:

Rev. Michael A. King

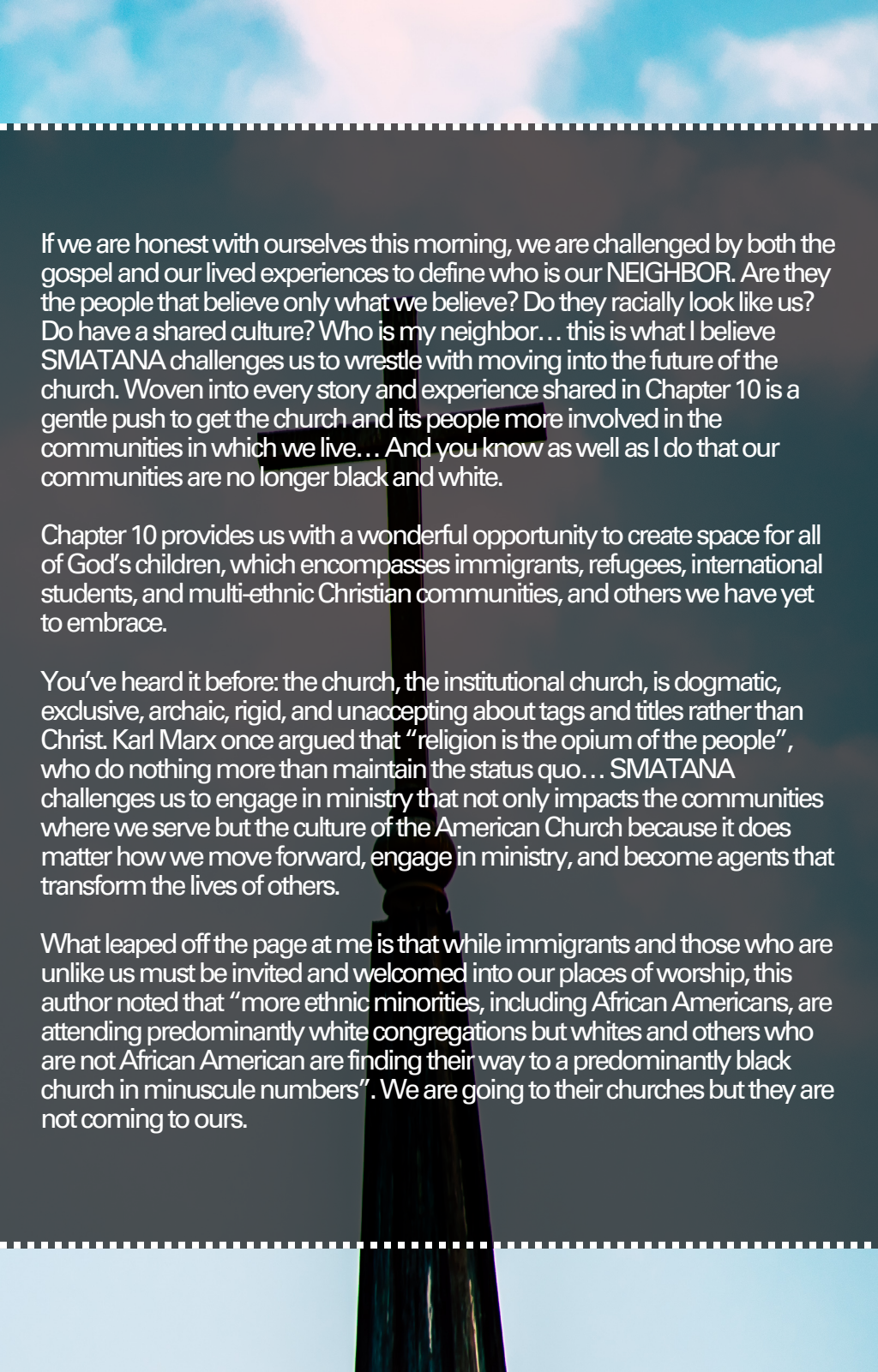
CHAPTER 10

There is a question that looms over the Christian Church; in fact, there are several questions that the church must answer if it is to move forward. The first question is the obvious: which is also the subtitle of Part Three of BOB SMATANA'S book. . . Where do we go from here? We've explored all week long some of the possibilities and opportunities we have to move the church forward. . .

And after nine chapters, it's now up to us to resolve in the places where we are called to serve the following questions. . . What will our church look like in this next season of ministry? Are you and I prepared, positioned, and poised to explore, like SMATANA and Imtiaz's ministry, a more communal, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and diverse faith community that is open to refugees and immigrants, and international students? How inclusive must we become to survive as the future church where God is still redeeming, transforming, and equipping the saints for the work of the kingdom?

Will we ever be able to return to the church of yesteryear, or do we accept the challenge to reshape, reimagine, and re-envision the church of tomorrow? If the gospel is for the Jew and Gentile, are we willing to embrace both and the diversity they bring?

Chapter 10 is an active conversation between Samenta and Imtiaz, a Pakistani photographer, who decided after encountering some refugees in a Target preparing for the 4th of July that he no longer wanted to capture the photographs of people but rather to see them as human beings first and then risk getting to know them as his neighbors long before the shutter on his camera snapped. I stopped here for a moment because while we preach and teach, Mark 12:28-31 says, "One of the teachers of the law asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

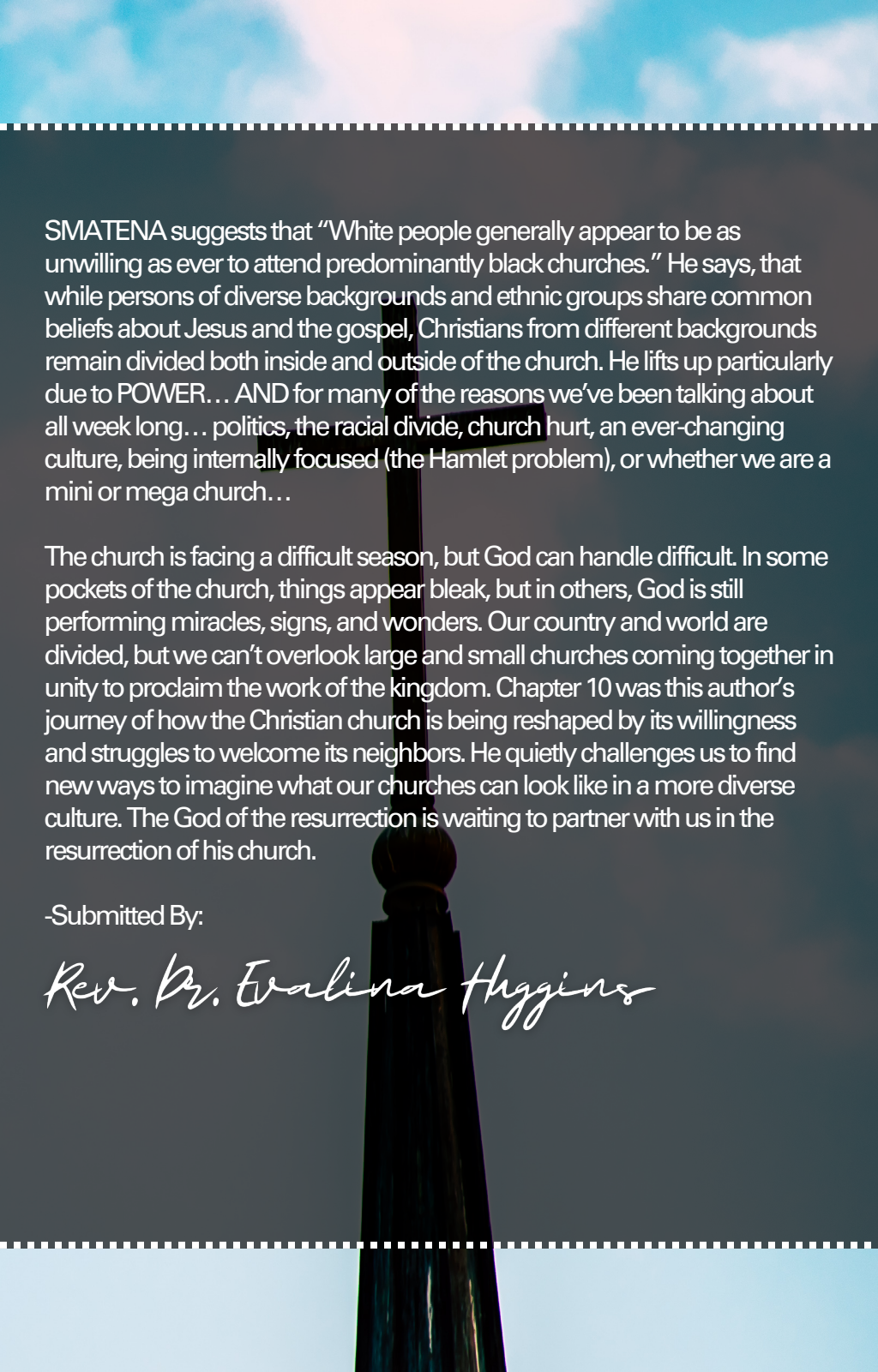


If we are honest with ourselves this morning, we are challenged by both the gospel and our lived experiences to define who is our NEIGHBOR. Are they the people that believe only what we believe? Do they racially look like us? Do they have a shared culture? Who is my neighbor... this is what I believe SMATANA challenges us to wrestle with moving into the future of the church. Woven into every story and experience shared in Chapter 10 is a gentle push to get the church and its people more involved in the communities in which we live... And you know as well as I do that our communities are no longer black and white.

Chapter 10 provides us with a wonderful opportunity to create space for all of God's children, which encompasses immigrants, refugees, international students, and multi-ethnic Christian communities, and others we have yet to embrace.

You've heard it before: the church, the institutional church, is dogmatic, exclusive, archaic, rigid, and unaccepting about tags and titles rather than Christ. Karl Marx once argued that "religion is the opium of the people", who do nothing more than maintain the status quo... SMATANA challenges us to engage in ministry that not only impacts the communities where we serve but the culture of the American Church because it does matter how we move forward, engage in ministry, and become agents that transform the lives of others.

What leaped off the page at me is that while immigrants and those who are unlike us must be invited and welcomed into our places of worship, this author noted that "more ethnic minorities, including African Americans, are attending predominantly white congregations but whites and others who are not African American are finding their way to a predominantly black church in minuscule numbers". We are going to their churches but they are not coming to ours.



SMATENA suggests that “White people generally appear to be as unwilling as ever to attend predominantly black churches.” He says, that while persons of diverse backgrounds and ethnic groups share common beliefs about Jesus and the gospel, Christians from different backgrounds remain divided both inside and outside of the church. He lifts up particularly due to POWER... AND for many of the reasons we’ve been talking about all week long... politics, the racial divide, church hurt, an ever-changing culture, being internally focused (the Hamlet problem), or whether we are a mini or mega church...

The church is facing a difficult season, but God can handle difficult. In some pockets of the church, things appear bleak, but in others, God is still performing miracles, signs, and wonders. Our country and world are divided, but we can’t overlook large and small churches coming together in unity to proclaim the work of the kingdom. Chapter 10 was this author’s journey of how the Christian church is being reshaped by its willingness and struggles to welcome its neighbors. He quietly challenges us to find new ways to imagine what our churches can look like in a more diverse culture. The God of the resurrection is waiting to partner with us in the resurrection of his church.

-Submitted By:

Rev. Dr. Evalina Higgins



Closing Recognitions

We would like to give a Special Thanks to each of our presenters, devotional participants, and prayer warriors for sharing their wisdom, insight, and knowledge with us. It is our prayer that the information shared and enclosed within this book will stimulate further study and deepen your desire for the Word of God.

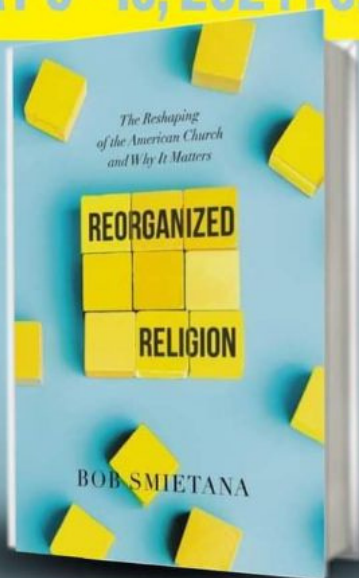
THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL ZION CHURCH
MID-ATLANTIC EPISCOPAL DISTRICT

SPIRITUAL EMPHASIS

WEEK

MORNING MEDITATION & PRAYER CALL

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