

Inhabiting a Theological Imagination: Three Portraits from Parish Ministry

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Introduction

In an address to the 2009 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, the Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, spoke directly to the challenge of being in a denomination facing declining attendance and influence. She warned the church about the dangers of looking inward only. “The heart of this church will slowly turn to stone if we think our primary mission work is to those already in the pews inside our beautiful churches, or to those at other altars.”¹ Jefferts Schori continued, “We are in cardiac crisis if we think we can close the doors, swing our incense and sing our hymns, and all will be right with the world.”²

The church of the present day has taken Jefferts Schori’s warnings seriously. Though the language of *missional*, *emergent*, and *fresh expressions* was already in use in some parts of the church in 2009, this terminology is now employed widely in describing dioceses and parishes.³ The work of renewal and revitalization is regularly framed in these terms. As the church embraces its present reality, it is beginning to supplant older models of parish life, which focused primarily

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¹ Quoted in Christopher Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 8.

² Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission,” 8.

³ For example, the “Missional Communities” of the Diocese of Texas and the staffing of a “fresh expressions missionary” in the Diocese of Southern Ohio. See <http://www.freshexpressions.diosohio.org/about-the-movement.html>.

on membership and facilities, with a diversity of structures and activities embodying concepts of discipleship and mission along those lines.⁴

Theorists and practitioners of congregational life agree that church practices and structures need to be reexamined in light of the identified importance of the mission, leadership, and management of the church.⁵ Uncertainty still exists, however, in the question of *mode*: If mission is vital, how should it be fostered and taught? If leadership needs attention, what intellectual and practical tools are needed? If better management helps structure a parish, what counts as good management for the good of the church? These and related questions invite a response that seeks to find harmony between the speculative task of defining the church and a focus on the particularities and peculiarities of each local parish. We propose that one such mode for addressing these ecclesial practices and structures comes through fostering and inhabiting a theological imagination.

Theological imagination refers to the language, practices, and postures that invite a playful and improvisational mode of being the church. In this mode of being and acting, the church is deeply rooted in old texts, old memories, and old practices, while also having a contemporary, disciplined, and informed imagination that sustains how the community lives and acts. The definition and overall inspiration for our approach to theological imagination comes from Walter Brueggemann.⁶ We consider the inhabiting of a theological imagination to be

⁴ See Fred Hiltz, "Go to the World! Go Struggle, Bless, and Pray: Bishops, Theological Schools, and Mission," *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 307.

⁵ For mission, see Duraisingh, "From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church"; Steven Croft, Ian Mobsby, and Stephanie Spellers, eds., *Ancient Faith, Future Mission: Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2010). For leadership, see Mervyn Davies and Graham Dodds, *Leadership in the Church for a People of Hope* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2011); Mark Allen Fowler, "Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 11, no. 2 (September 1, 2012): 157–159. For management, see John W. Wimberly Jr., *The Business of the Church* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2010); Gilbert R. Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2003).

⁶ Specifically, see Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church*, ed. Carolyn Sharp (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2011), 226–227. The idea of the church as an improvisational community draws on Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004).

reflected in a kind of posture inhabited by individual members and the parish as a whole. This posture organizes and orients perceptions and actions, all in service to receiving and responding to an eschatological destiny of love, grace, charity, and freedom. This mode of imagination resists a vision of the church as only her buildings and membership. Instead, it offers an alternative vision of the church, opening us up to the possibility of personal and corporate change in response to what we learn through curiosity about the unknown and the other-than-ourselves.⁷

As a mode of being the church, as opposed to simply a conceptual construct or another set of predefined practices, inhabiting a theological imagination is embodied in the lives of communities addressing specific questions of identity and purpose in particular moments of time. An imagination that is a playful and improvisational mode of being the church is theological in character inasmuch as it integrates the reception of divine provision and joy encountered in scripture and our theological heritage. The response to this provision and joy is enacted in the shifts of attitude and behavior toward a more focused, honest, and active parish community.

Because the reception and response under consideration involves both perceptions and actions, the best way to consider the details of a theological imagination is through attending to how the imagination is and has been expressed as part of the overall life of a community. What follows are three expressions of a theological imagination at work within three diverse ecclesial settings: a midsize parish in pastoral transition; a small parish facing questions of sustainability; and a large, urban parish wrestling with political and economic realities. Across these particularities, what we hope to exhibit is the way a theological imagination, by being receptive and responsive, can assist the church as she presses on, with faith and hope, awaiting the coming of her Lord.

Imagination and Fantasy in Interim Ministry: Lyndon Shakespeare

The transition period in a parish represents a critical moment when a posture of imagination or fantasy influences how a parish community is able to do the work necessary to prepare for a new pastoral

⁷ Ellen F. Davis, *Imagination Shaped: Old Testament Preaching in the Anglican Tradition* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 244.

relationship, frequently guided by an interim priest. During the interim season, what is called for is an imagination that is oriented to divine provision and joy. This is accomplished by attending to the particulars of how a specific community is rooted in texts, memories, and practices, and informed by contemporary conditions. A parish where a theological imagination is inhabited and exercised is better prepared to resist the kind of fantasizing evident when a parish has unrealistic expectations of a new priest, or when, in order to project an idealized image of itself, a parish fails to acknowledge conflict and controversy in its past.

If we think of imagination and fantasy as postures taken both individually and corporately, imagination is oriented to receiving and responding, while fantasy tends to project and paper over. As the philosopher Iris Murdoch argues, imagination involves a disposition toward what is other than us, and a certain honesty before it. In contrast, to operate according to a mode of fantasy is to be turned inward. Human beings, Murdoch thought, are often “fabricating” and are “usually self-preoccupied.” That stance subverts the proper operation of the imagination, tending instead toward the weaving of a “falsifying veil which partially conceals the world.”⁸ Instead of a humble curiosity about reality (characterized by “objectivity and realism”), which is associated with imagination, we can be occupied in “fantasies and reveries.” Which way one is disposed is “profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act.”⁹

A fantasizing posture is oriented to living frantically but without attention. It can be defined by an undue reliance on modes of efficiency and control that are restless, preventing proper discernment. Fantasy promotes attitudes and activity that are unrooted from experience and hope, tradition and reality, since these modes appear sufficiently unattractive to a community unable or unwilling to recognize how, in Murdoch’s words, being curious about reality opens a community to live closer to each other, the neighbor, and to God. In contrast, to be capable of learning and daring to be inceptive, while nonetheless strikingly receptive, falls within the domain of true imagination. In not imposing or projecting predetermined results on a situation or

⁸ Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts,” in Peter J. Conradi, ed., *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 369. My thanks to Andrew Davison for this reference.

⁹ Murdoch, “The Sovereignty,” 369.

decision, space and capacity is opened for playful or improvisational habits to develop.¹⁰

Another way of saying this is that we are working in the realm of imagination when what we do, where and with whom we engage, displays a sense of integration within the web of a greater whole. Imagination, not fantasy, is a commitment to being obvious when the temptation is to obscure. Improvisation, Samuel Wells notes, is about being obvious. It is not about being spontaneous, clever, or witty, but bringing into the moment the training and traditions that have developed a person or community over time. One of the temptations for parishes and priests in transition is the assumption that profiles and resumes must paper over the ordinary aspects of ministry while emphasizing (and exaggerating) what is clever and heroic. The image Brueggemann and Murdoch are painting is of a playful openness and honesty that is both deeply rooted in the past *and* informed by contemporary conditions, each part being required in order to sustain an alternate vision to one created by an exclusively past or future orientation. The impulse of fantasy is to view the past and future as isolated and cut off, thereby creating unnecessary limits as to what action or decision is being considered. In contrast, imagination understands perceptions and actions in terms of their connection to the whole as experienced across time.

An example from a recent experience with a parish in transition will help elucidate the distinction we are making here between a posture of imagination and that of fantasy. The parish was emerging from a season that included two significant events in the life of the church within the space of a few years: first, the end of the tenure of a very outgoing and beloved longtime rector who faced allegations of abuse at the end of his ministry; second, the departure of a successor whom many in the parish found very difficult to work with, in part because of her regular explosive outbursts toward parishioners. By and large, there was a culture of silence regarding the behavior of the clergy. A mixture of fear, old-school reverence, and willful blindness contributed to a situation that prevented corporate acknowledgement of the parish's shared reality. Understandably, this contributed to new fears as it entered an interim period.

¹⁰ Samuel Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre as a Model for Christian Ethics," in Trevor Hart and Steven Guthrie, eds., *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 148.

The usually prescribed approach to attending to difficult topics such as clergy leadership is through creating space for conversations to take place. These may take the form of small group “listening sessions,” all-parish discussions, or private meetings with the interim or other church leaders. In the case of this parish, the imagination needed to seek and inhabit an alternative vision of authority and leadership was generated in conversations within a Lenten study on the temptations of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark.

Over the course of five sessions, we discussed life in the wilderness, the duration of forty days, each temptation and Jesus’ response, and questions of authority and control. I soon began to hear parishioners making connections between the biblical text and their recent experiences in the parish. As the weeks and lessons progressed, we noted the example of Christ resisting the tempter and his proffered illusions of total control, forging instead a way of trust and obedience. This provided language and images for participants to use in their own reflections on the current situation. As people shared with each other, they began to connect their experiences of leadership and authority that are shaped by patterns of silence and fear. With time, they were able to articulate a posture of openness and receptivity as an alternative mode of leadership within their community.

The effects of these discussions on the eventual search process was clear. First, in their transition profile, the parish openly acknowledged the challenges they experienced with their recent clergy. They spoke confidently about a more mutual approach to leading. An important aspect of their new approach was to pursue that desired mutuality without listing a set of predetermined characteristics that the priest must possess. The idea was not simply to find a better leader, but to discern how the exercise of power and authority is fundamentally communal in character. It would have been an exercise more of fantasy than imagination to suppose that only one style of leadership could contribute to a situation where both the parish and its priest can grow and flourish together.

Second, in their interviews, the discussions with candidates centered on developing a parish culture where matters of authority and leadership were engaged directly and without fear. If inhabiting a theological imagination includes nurturing a curiosity of the unknown, then the engagement between a parish and candidates in a search is an opportunity to approach both the challenging and joyous details

as gifts to be named, examined, and, if needed, transformed. What might have seemed like fate or bad luck for the parish and its history with pastoral leadership was, through their openness, becoming the very soil in which new behaviors and expectations could grow.

Despite the temptation for fantasy, which would seek through unrealistic and even deceptive means to hire a priest to either save the parish or fix it, this parish took a different and healthier position. What I witnessed in this parish was a kind of imaginative integration of theological engagement and reflection. I saw an approach to parish ministry that sought to orient the priest and the people to patterns of honesty and hope. Though the concepts of imagination and fantasy were not deployed as postures, in the way they are in the present article, what was more important to this parish moving forward was the fostering of an imaginative orientation that critically engaged with “old texts, old memories, and old practices,” while taking the risk to be open and receptive to alternative visions.

The experience of this parish contributes to a broader conversation about how the interim period for a church can be a time of renewal and not simply a season of changing leadership. An imaginative posture makes possible both a nurture of the existing gifts, strengths, and hopes of a community, and a reengaged emphasis upon how its location in a specific place and time invites curiosity of what (or who) is unknown and outside the parish’s current vision. The result is a Christian community engaged imaginatively in living out its vocation, in both its internal processes and its external mission.

*Fostering Theological Imagination as a Response
to Parish Anxiety: Robyn King*

One kind of fantasy that is often found in parishes is an overly optimistic evaluation of the state of the church. For example, we can paper over histories of conflict or individual and institutional sinfulness, deluding ourselves that the situation is not as dire as it seems. However, the twenty-first-century church can also engage in a more dystopian fantasy that is no less harmful. As the social conventions associated with Christendom continue to disintegrate, Christians may also develop the pessimistic fantasy that the church itself is shortly to crumble into either nonexistence or irrelevance. This dystopian view leads to anxiety, in which the church seeks either to control or to

succumb to the world. A better response would be to engage a theological imagination, which could help shape a robust counternarrative to these two fantasies.

It is true that the post-Christendom world is one in which the church in the West no longer functions as the social glue joining together a country and its citizens through a set of behavioral and cultural norms. This can be seen legally in the ongoing repeal of so-called blue laws, but it is also apparent less formally in the changing role of public prayer, or the loss of a general social assumption that involvement in the church is a signifier of a good personal character. In addition, as population centers shift, some parishes will close simply because the area they are in has a shrinking population. These facts add enough reality to the dystopian fantasy to reinforce the anxiety churches feel. While some parishes have reclaimed the importance of mission within their communities (a decision that may or may not be grounded in a robust theological imagination), for most parishes I have interacted with, the advent of post-Christendom creates a crippling anxiety.

A healthy theological imagination, however, leads to healthier congregations generally. It is particularly well-suited for the particular challenges faced by Anglicanism especially. I arrive at this conclusion not only because the various management models offered by corporate culture have fallen short of the challenges faced by most parishes, nor because I believe that it is only through an expansive imagination grounded in good theology and practice that we begin to approach the world as God does, with loving understanding. Rather, it is because I have seen how engaging a theological imagination transforms struggling churches into communities that can respond in faith rather than fear.

For the past four years I have been the rector of a small parish whose anxiety had brought them to a place where they were discussing closing within the twelve months prior to my arrival. The fundamental challenge was not that the parish was no longer needed. Rather, it was the fact that the parish model of the 1950s and 1960s, which most parishioners remembered as a time of flourishing and growth, was no longer sustainable. This means that much of my work has been in encouraging people to imagine church happening in new ways, and, importantly, to imagine who comes to church (and how often they come), and who does not come to church, in order to discern how best to deploy our ministry resources.

Following my arrival, it took eighteen months before parishioners stopped assuming that, when I talked about our future, I was using coded language that really meant, “We should close the church.” Navigating that time period required a theological fluency and deftness with family systems theory. As the newcomer to the church, one of my early goals was to familiarize myself with the languages they speak, liturgically and relationally. This does not mean that I adopted the approach that one should make no changes for the first year; we did not have the fiscal or spiritual ability to wait. While there is merit to not creating chaos until a priest can establish trust with a congregation, this was a case where there were significant changes that could not wait, because failing to address certain issues would reinforce unhealthy beliefs and expectations. Theological fluency helped me understand both what issues were truly pressing and how to discuss them in terms greater than my own preferences. Family systems theory invited me to keep from focusing too much on the figures the system presented to me, including myself.

At the core of my approach was the rejection of the belief that I represent or practice the best or, worse, the only, orthodox approach to Christianity. While avoiding theological ambivalence, I tried to take very few hard stances on nonessential matters. Instead of setting out a long list of new “rules,” however I might have dressed them up as something else, I talked about God’s love for each of us, about the need to respect the dignity of every person, and worked to set things out in spectrums. The statement, “There are faithful Christians who find themselves at many points between X and Y,” has been heard by my parishioners in many variations. I try to offer parishioners opportunities to express their opinions, and I make an effort to honor their positions—especially when they are different from my own. In fact, I insist that God loves and desires differences. Much of this is not new or revelatory, but it can be used to help reopen the treasures of Christian theology, especially to a generation used to a “Father knows best” approach to pastoral leadership.

I arrived at this parish in September and within four months we were working on the next year’s budget. In sitting down with the wardens to put together the proposal for the vestry, I began to understand the depth of need that existed. The first and only approach was to continue to spend as they had in recent years, a plan that would have had us running a forty thousand dollar deficit per year. While it was clear to me that staffing and spending needed serious reconsideration

and cuts, this possibility was impossible for the wardens or vestry to talk about. (It would take four years before parish leadership was able to have a nonanxious conversation about finances and stewardship.) With the assistance of the vestry, I prepared the budget we would propose for the coming year, which included eliminating the positions of part-time parish administrator and janitor. The parish's reaction was not confidence that this was the first step toward a bright new future. The anxiety rose, especially around the fear that a tired group would be called on to do yet more. I reduced the administrative duties to a minimum and have been doing them since. We reconsidered what things required cleaning and what things we wanted clean and started looking for a new janitor. We do not pay for enough time, but, with the help of a few volunteers, we manage. And, every time someone complains about things not being clean enough, I take the opportunity to talk about our priorities and budget.

Anxious systems are often caught in a reactivity that mirrors our adrenal-fueled fight, flight, or freeze reflex. Knowing that this would not serve the church well for long-term planning, I actively and explicitly recruited lay leaders who were unflappable. With the amount of anxiety in the parish system and the changes that would be necessary, I knew that parish leaders who could hear anything and still respond calmly would be essential. When I first needed to recruit wardens, I asked people whom I had come to trust and who had a deeper knowledge of the parish than I did. And I told those whom I recruited that I saw this characteristic as a strength, because that was a behavior that I wanted to reinforce. I still do this because, even after four years, we are still unlearning the belief that every issue is a crisis. I knew that my ability to model that most of our conversations could take the time they needed would have a direct effect on the reactivity of the larger parish. Unless the issue under discussion would compromise the safety of people or the building, or impair basic business functions, I started pausing conversations during vestry meetings and continuing them the following meeting. The more I practiced this, especially over significant issues like discussing moving to one service, the less frenetic conversations became, and the more people were able to respond thoughtfully and faithfully.

At the same time, much of my work has been oriented toward trying to decrease the focus on money, specifically the fact of how little of it we have. The mission of God is not about how large our bank

account is, even though our fears are often directly connected to that. Interestingly, I find that the time I have spent with the children's Sunday school curriculum Godly Play is helpful in this effort. The practice of telling a story, and encouraging people to wonder about what it means and how we live into it, is most useful. Encouraging people to imagine more than their first reaction, which was often pessimistic in those first years, has both helped lower the anxiety and become easier for them as the anxiety falls further into the past. This has meant everything from insisting that opportunity lurks in perceived scarcity, to seeking awe and curiosity in the light of the gospel: curiosity about who we are, who and what constitutes our neighborhood, and what we may be called to do. I find that asking people to consider more reasons for why people do not attend church is comparatively easy. These answers enable them to imagine a future for their parish, even if it is a strange one compared to their memories of forty years ago. Encouraging them to reconsider how altar guild works or how coffee hour happens is much harder. These are ideas that threaten too much change without providing a short-term reward. These conversations are still in progress.

The parish is still open. It is increasingly able to engage in the dreams and hopes that God has for the future of our church. We have started new things. Some of them have gone quite well, and some of them are struggling, but the struggle itself is part of trying new things. More importantly, the new things that are struggling are not being seen as catastrophes. This tells me that a deeper change is occurring, regardless of what is currently true of altar guild or coffee hour. We are beginning to act out of a richer theological imagination, one where our first focus can be on God. The considerations of monies and volunteer hours can then be stewarded in response to God's call.

It is worth noting that this is the same tack I took at my previous cluster of three parishes. They all closed. I came to that cluster of parishes when their resources were already far more depleted and they were situated in very different contexts. Growth was going to be nearly impossible for two of them and the third faced other financial constraints that meant that we did not have the time, or the kinds of support, that might have allowed for other outcomes. Engaging in a similar process to encourage theological imagination created positive change. The differences between the congregations I came to and the congregations as they were when we closed were noticeable.

When I arrived, they were tight communities acting out of fear and focused on specific hopes that, even had the parishes had remained open, would not have been part of their future. When they closed, they were in healthy Christ-centered relationships with each other and the larger church. Closing those churches was sad and hard for all of us. However, we were able to talk about God's presence in our sorrow and to look forward to futures where what we had done together and what we would do next are all important parts of the story of God's people. As a people of faith, we understand that death can be good and holy, and I think we should want that for our churches as much as for ourselves.

A theological imagination is one deeply rooted in the resurrection, finding hope and traction in relationship with a God who conquered death itself. As we increasingly find ourselves in a post-Christendom world, articulating a theological imagination will become necessary. Exploring these core parts of Christian theology are rich grounds for a church pondering not only the nature but the question of its future. This cruciform heart of a theological imagination compels us to remember that success is located in the transformation of the hearts of ourselves and our parishioners, not in the numerical metrics on which we so often rely.

Imagination and Apocalypse: Joel C. Daniels

We have noted above that one of the marks of a theological imagination is its rootedness in "old texts." As the previous sections have shown, a proper Christian theological imagination is, necessarily, a biblical imagination. The biblical narratives are the contours of our lives in Christ, whether those lives are in the wilderness or enacting resurrection. Biblical narratives are not only the stories we tell; for the church, they are our reality. Therefore, an extended, corporate, and theological study of biblical texts can help a parish develop a corporate, theological, and biblical imagination.

It is a commonplace of scriptural exegesis to note that a biblical imagination is, among other things, an apocalyptic imagination. The apocalypse—that is, the promised second coming of Jesus Christ—is the horizon against which Christians live and move and have our being. There is apocalyptic literature throughout the scriptures, in both Hebrew and Christian testaments, but pride of place goes to the book that is called the Apocalypse, the Revelation of Saint John the Divine.

For the purposes of developing a proper theological imagination, a study of Revelation is of great use, as I recently found over the course of an eighteen-week parish Bible study. Each Sunday for almost five months, a group of thirty to forty adult parishioners gathered for forty-five minutes and went sequentially through the book, guided by Anglican commentaries from the last half-century.¹¹ The class was titled “The End: Reading Revelation Theologically.”

For a contemporary congregation to pick up the gauntlet thrown down by Saint John the Divine is no mean feat. Engaging with Revelation on its own terms is a challenge, its terms being rather rigorous. One of its challenges for the modern-day Anglican of North America is that it is not the kind of book that “people like us” usually spend time with. Understandably so: it is a book with some sections that operate at a fever pitch, and many of its present-day proponents reflect that tone in their own rhetoric. Second, the distance between us and those first Christians may seem vast. Their theological concerns are not ours, their cultural references unfamiliar, their social and political environment entirely different. Theology, culture, society, and politics are subjects of express concern in Revelation, so this distance can be alienating. Third, the strange cast of characters, which include dragons and beasts, elders and angels, horsemen and plagues, can be off-putting to a people used to reading the Bible as primarily sets of instructions or historical narratives. Finally, the popularity of historical-critical exegesis makes Revelation ripe for interpretation in terms of its own local context alone. As with the historical-critical method overall, such a reading can be used either to help explain Revelation, on its own terms, or to explain it away, on ours.

Like all other texts, Revelation is a historical document embedded in a particular sociocultural context. That context is one dominated by the Roman imperium, centered around the Mediterranean, in which bands of followers of Jesus are gathering to worship their Lord in an environment of sporadic persecution. However, the message contained within Revelation is clearly intended as a message to all churches, including those of the present day, in all of their contextual diversity. Where the Pauline epistles are written to one, or

¹¹ Useful commentaries for this purpose were Joseph Mangina’s *Revelation* in the Brazos Theological Commentary on Scripture series; *The Book of the Revelation* by Philip Edgcumbe Hughes; and two commentaries written by Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* and *A Rebirth of Images*.

perhaps two, particular worshipping communities, in Revelation Jesus directs messages to the seven “churches in Asia,” implying its broad importance. It is also the one place in the Bible where we hear Jesus address churches as churches. (Ironically, the one place in the Bible in which churches are addressed directly is not read in churches on Sundays in the present lectionary.) It is therefore intentionally directed to worshipping congregations across space and time.

The temptation to shy away from the confrontation that Revelation brings is strong for all of the reasons above, but it must be resisted. The tendency toward historical distancing was frequently evident in the beginning of our Bible study. There was a palpable desire on the part of many of us to contain the text’s import to the first century. There is excellent critical scholarship on these historical questions, some of which we explored. However, the benefit of a line-by-line study over several months is that once the historical questions are addressed, the group is still left with the words on the page, the story of the book of Revelation, speaking in its own voice.

We also found that the book is conceptually challenging for our particular social and cultural milieu in a more intensive way than other New Testament texts. At first blush, Revelation seems to depict a strange world that the reader is invited to visit, traveling along to observe that world dispassionately with John himself. It then teaches the shocking lesson that the reader’s everyday life is already written about in its pages: we already live in the world it describes. Revelation is describing us when it speaks of the various factions of the people of the earth, the guilty and the innocent. The world of Revelation, with all its horror and all its beauty, is our world. To put it differently, one way of looking at Revelation is to think of it as a telescope, pointed up, giving us a glimpse of the heavenly host. Another is to conceive of it as a magnifying glass studying that long-ago society, showing us details of the world of the first-century Christians. But Revelation is also a mirror, holding up before us a view of ourselves and our communities.

So in a sense it is no wonder that the respectable present-day church avoids the book of Revelation like one of its plagues. Advocates of scriptural demythologization may prefer to isolate Revelation’s relevance to its first-century particularities, but the real demythologization operates in the other direction. That is, we found that it is Revelation that demythologizes us, stripping away our own idolatrous untruths. It encourages imagination, but it destroys fantasy, and it is fantasy that marks our present age.

Because of its universal message, this mirror with which Revelation confronts us captures within its image individuals and communities from all walks of life, including all political parties. In this way, its historical distance is actually a benefit: the hot-button issues of the present are not reflected directly in the text in such a way that would trigger the usual tribal divisions that are often effected when politics are discussed. Instead, the study group could see how the system as a whole is implicated. The mirror that is Revelation reflects back the whole *mélange* of social and political relationships, and the way they are marked by the powers of sin and death.

This is the challenging aspect of Revelation: its demythologization of our world and our beliefs. What it shows us is that all of our political, cultural, economic, and religious practices, from the nefarious to the edifying, are taking place in Babylon. It did not take long for the class to have the jolt of recognition that we are the ones about whom the book speaks. Thus, Revelation is not concerned with whether we contemporary Christians find God in our lives, or whether we consider ourselves to be participating in God's mission. God's mission is at work in all times and places, acknowledged or not, and it is fantasy to imagine otherwise. The question for our Bible study participants was not whether we are part of that mission, but in what way we are part of it. Revelation shows us that the Lamb as it has been slain is the ruler, judge, and Savior of creation, the source of all life and all truth. Revelation is also explicit—in its depictions of the martyrs who call out from the altar (6:9)—that worshiping the Lamb who gives life will result in death. Either way, however, the Savior reigns.

In our age, it is not Revelation that is fantasy, but our civic and economic structures, which live in the realm of the mythical and occasionally demonic, crying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. The development of a theological imagination, in this case, is the development of the ability to see what is already the case, resisting the fantasy that what is false is true. Revelation shows that, in the fullness of time, Babylon falls, as it must fall, destroying its inhabitants, its rulers, as well as its allies, saving only those who are called out ("Come out of her, my people" [Rev. 18:4]) and called apart—which is, of course, the meaning of *ecclesia*. However, we noted that, as the seven letters to the churches show, this quality of being "called apart" is not synonymous with church membership. "I know thy works," Jesus says to each church. "Nevertheless, I have something against thee." It would be better to be a run-of-the-mill Greco-Roman pagan of the first century,

perhaps, than a member of the church in Laodicea, which, because it is “neither cold nor hot,” the Lord promises to spit out of his mouth (Rev. 3:16). Instead, the claim to be a follower of Jesus, the presence of the baptismal seal, raises the existential stakes.

These risks are ongoing, because the distance between us and John of Patmos is less than we thought at the beginning of our Bible study. Consequently, one of the ways that I saw our theological imagination grow and develop was in the acknowledgment of our present-day participation in that apocalyptic reality, and to recognize that we are, even today, in the middle of that story, whether we see it or not. This recognition is the result of the development of a theological, biblical, apocalyptic imagination, which enables us to see what is true. In reality, we are those whom Jesus watches and judges, addressing us through the Spirit by the words he speaks. It is a reminder for privileged Christians, and in particular those who may be tempted to say, “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,” that considered apart from the saving grace of God in Christ in fact we are “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). Thinking otherwise is fantasy. True engagement with mission requires the recognition that we live in Babylon, and our churches are in Babylon, and our communities are in Babylon. But those who worship the slaughtered Lamb recognize a different telos than either the merchants of Babylon or the kings of the earth, the telos that is the true end of all things.

During the present-day earthly reign of the beast, which is allowed but not condoned by the slaughtered Lamb, nations rise and fall, and economies grow and fail, and the powerful oppress the powerless, world without end. But the theologically imaginative Christian lives in trembling anticipation of the return of Jesus Christ. On that day, victims judge oppressors, and Babylon falls, and the scroll of history is read, and we will not be saved by righteous consumer choices or nationalist piety. On that day, the truth is told, from the beginning to the end, by the one who is the Alpha and Omega. All of this conflict may make it sound like the Christian eschaton in which we participate is agonistic only. But we should not forget that the book of Revelation has the perfect ending, to which we look with joy: the establishment of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is a kingdom of everlasting peace. It is not the apocalypse that is violent, but the world as it is, under the reign of the beast. When, after months and months of wending our way through the intricacies of the text, we finally reached the closing passages of the book, with its beautiful city and words of

invitation—"and the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17)—it felt like reaching the promised land.

Precisely because its imagery is so alien to our experience, Revelation is particularly effective at developing the theological imagination, which for our class changed the outlines of what we think of as church and what it means to be the church. It also changed what we think of as the world and what it means to live in the world. Revelation is not a fantasy. It is the promise of an end that we can only imagine once we have demythologized the violence and corruption of the world and recognized the ultimate powerlessness of even the most powerful of its antagonists. The theological imagination then allows us to live, move, and have our being with joy and hope in receptive hearts, eagerly desiring to be disciples of Jesus Christ, whose service is perfect freedom. Through the development of a theological imagination, we are able to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches in our own age.

Conclusion

Because it is a posture, a stance of receptivity and improvisation, and not a set of tasks on a checklist, there is no one way to inhabit a theological imagination. These three portraits are real-world examples, however, of ways that the development of that imagination has occurred in diverse settings. We hope that they can serve as inspirations for other improvisational modes of being the church in the present age. We want to avoid the tendency, evident in other ways of approaching ecclesial renewal in the post-Christendom cultures of North America, of duplicating the values of the culture—a culture that is, after all, ambivalent at best about the core tenets of the church. To think of ecclesial renewal as traditioned flexibility, rather than as an anxious grasping for salvation through a (soon to be outdated) twentieth-century management science, for example, is to draw on the best of the gifts of the past while remaining open to the novelty of the future. It is to resist the insularity that Jefferts Schori warned about, while still benefiting from the resources of the tradition that gave us our swinging incense and singing hymns.

The state of the church in the medium term is hidden in the obscurity of the future tense. Like all things, however, the church is under the sway of God's providence, and God is always already at work

in the world as the lord of history. Given the confidence imparted by the promise of the coming New Jerusalem, the faithful church can respond by nurturing imagination and resisting fantasy, by demythologizing the deceptions of Babylon, by fending off denial and despair. We hope that inhabiting a theological imagination, less a technique than a spiritual rule of life, will assist the church and her people with nurturing a relationship with the truth that sets us free.