

ORTHOCARDIC LEADERSHIP –  
PASTORAL LEADERSHIP INSPIRED BY DESERT SPIRITUALITY

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# Introduction – Misdiagnosing the Leadership Problem

The United Methodist Church (UMC) has a leadership problem; specifically, that *there is too much of it*.<sup>1</sup> An abundance of leadership may be surprising to consider given the current state of the UMC. The universal concern about declining church membership and participation, the dwindling number of people who seek and stay in vocational ministry, and even the denominational splintering might suggest that the UMC is lacking leadership. The denomination believes there are two parts of the leadership problem. The first is the concern of a quantitative lack of individual leaders. The second is a lack of leadership quality. Because of this, the denomination spends considerable energy to recruit, train, and prioritize leaders within the UMC. Consider the shifts within the UMC over the past two decades. The UMC adopted “Four Areas of Focus” at the global level. These focus areas signal denominational priorities, and one of the four areas has the broad label of “leadership.” The denomination addresses this area of focus by attempting to identify more leaders and provide regular and consistent leadership training for clergy and laity. One of the first ways this focus reached local churches was by changing the function and role of a certain committee that the local pastor was already the chairperson. The denominational polity book, called *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (BOD), changed the name and focus of the “Committee on Nominations” (a committee that would nominate laity to roles in the local church) to the “Committee on Nominations and Leadership Development” (a committee that is to guide the church “on matters of leadership”).<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity purposes, the words “clergy,” “clergy leader,” and “clergy leadership” do not reference all clergy around the world. This project uses these terms interchangeably and are used specifically to reference ordained clergy elders in the United Methodist Church.

<sup>2</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), Paragraph 258.1.a.

committee must identify and train people to be leaders in order to address the perceived denominational lack of leadership.

According to article eleven of the Constitution of the UMC, the fundamental body of the church is the Annual Conference (Conference).<sup>3</sup> Each Conference sets up its own structure and priorities to help meet the denominational focus areas. The Central Texas Conference (CTC) has taken the assumed lack of leadership in the denomination very seriously, as evidenced in the way the Conference is structured. One of the three stated core values of the Conference is “leadership development,” and one of the stated core strategies is “clergy and lay leadership.” CTC has dedicated an entire one of three Conference centers to clergy and lay leadership development. The Core Leadership Team of the Conference, a group convened by the bishop, is a key body “designed to move the Conference from a process and program model to a leadership model that is organic, flexible and constantly evolving.” Clergy in new settings are required to attend “right start” seminars where they learn best practices of leading in a new setting. Clergy with new assignments are encouraged or even given a leadership coach. The individual person cannot move through their day without confronting countless books, podcasts, seminars, and consultants providing an endless stream of advice on leadership. The denomination operates as if there is a leadership lack, and this contributes to the problem. The problem is not a leadership lack, but a leadership abundance.

This leadership abundance is even visible in the different parachurch organizations and ministries. Let us consider a legacy organization and a more recent organization. What has historically been a financial institution, The Texas Methodist Foundation (TMF), states that their core purpose is to support the “Methodist church with financial and leadership services,

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<sup>3</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016).



emboldening it to achieve its God-appointed mission and find bold solutions for bringing about the loving world God imagines through cultures of purpose, generosity, and courage.”<sup>4</sup> While a denominational financial institution is expanding its umbrella to include leadership, parachurch organizations are as well. One of the more recently formed ministry organizations is Project Transformation (PT). PT is a ministry that provides what they call “key services:” after-school and summer day camp programs as well as leadership development and ministry exploration opportunities. TMF and PT are only two examples of the perpetuation of an implicit message that the denomination lacks leaders. One does not have to look far or for very long to see that the denomination believes the problem is a lack of leadership, however this is an incorrect diagnosis of the reason for a leadership problem.

This project addresses the problem of clergy leadership as well as the major models contributing to this problem. The first chapter argues that there is a collective misdiagnosis of the leadership problem in the local church. This creates conditions where efforts to treat the leadership problem not only fail, but also compound the problem. This chapter will more clearly expound the misdiagnosis as well as a more accurate diagnosis of the issue with clergy leadership. It will also highlight the primary leadership models clergy operate from, and will point out how these models are failing clergy and churches today.

Chapter two investigates historical sources to uncover a more helpful clergy leadership model that can address the problem. This model, which this project calls Orthocardic Leadership, pulls from two historic Christian sources: John Wesley and the Desert Ammas and Abbas. The

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<sup>4</sup> "Core Purpose and Values," Texas Methodist Foundation, accessed September 8, 2023, <https://tmf-fdn.org/about-us/core-purpose-and-values>.

majority of chapter two will clarify why these sources are not only helpful, but also vital to address the clergy leadership problem in a more appropriate way.

After considering these historical sources, chapter three examines contemporary sources to help uncover the model of Orthocardic Leadership: active clergy of the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church. Through three structured focus group conversations guided by the work of Roberta Bondi, this chapter uncovers how Orthocardic Leadership might look as an operational model for clergy today. This chapter highlights other clergy who affirm the misdiagnosed problem of leadership, and explains how Orthocardic Leadership could be more helpful. Readers will see ways that other clergy can utilize the ideas from John Wesley and the Desert Abbas and Ammas to more accurately address the leadership problem.

Chapter four synthesizes the preceding chapters so the reader can more clearly see the outline and basic sketches of the Orthocardic Leadership model. The goal of this chapter is to give the reader a sense of the possibilities of implementing the Orthocardic Leadership by clergy and local churches.

The final chapter, chapter five, speaks to the significance of this work, the Orthocardic Leadership model, and some of the limitations of this project. By the end of this final chapter, readers will also get a glimpse into future areas of study and development to address the problem of clergy leadership.

# Chapter 1 – Understanding the Leadership Problem

Abba Carion said, “I have performed many more physical tasks than my son Zachariah, but I have not attained to his stature in humility and silence.”<sup>5</sup>

From the day of my ordination as an elder in the United Methodist Church, I have lost track of the number of times and voices who have expressed that the denomination has a leadership problem. While there seems to be an agreement that there is a leadership problem, there is little agreement as to what the problem is. Is the problem the leaders who make headlines with scandals and criminal behavior? Is it aging leaders who are concerned there are not enough people to fill pulpits behind them? Is the issue that church leaders are out of touch with cultural questions, creating a growing concern for relevancy? Is the problem that there is a lack of training for new clergy who are expected to run organizations that are more complicated and complex than ever before? Is it the lack of leaders who are willing to start new churches or take risks out of fear of a financial or professional loss? Is the issue that leaders are not convicted enough with Christian doctrine and that clergy leaders are unwilling to lead the church in what some might say is a post-Christian America? While each of these questions looks different, fundamentally the concern around clergy leadership is rooted in the same diagnosis. The denomination has diagnosed the fundamental problem as a quantitative lack of leadership.

The denominational diagnosis is not misguided, but rather assumed and unexamined. There is a certain assumed logic to this diagnosis. The denomination *is* in decline, and so logically, this decline is across every aspect of the denomination, including the number and quality of leaders. In the past several years, the denomination has asked seminaries to create leadership courses, because many students graduate with a lack of understanding of how to run an organization. For their part,

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<sup>5</sup> John Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers; The Systematic Collection* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2018), 252.

seminarians flock to these classes not only to meet denominational requirements, but also to address a sense of inadequacy to be a leader in a denomination that places a high priority on leadership. Augmenting this formal training, the denomination and the Conference continue to emphasize leadership among clergy and laity with additional seminars, annual training, and various consultants. However, prioritizing and emphasizing leadership development only intensifies, rather than alleviates, the leadership problem. If a “lack” is the problem, then a capitalist culture suggests the solution is to add more. Like other spheres influenced by capitalism, the assumption is that the problem can be remedied with the introduction of an outside product or process.<sup>6</sup> However, this logic and this capitalist solution do not align with the organization called the Church. Let us take these assumptions one at a time.

If we assume that the problem is a “lack” and the solution is “more,” then we overlook a basic insight from Paul in Romans 7:15<sup>6</sup> –“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (NRSV). Social scientists highlight the fact that humans are prone to inaction in the face of overwhelming choice.<sup>7</sup> Providing more choices and new leadership philosophies does not fill the leadership lack, but contributes to greater apprehension to lead. So many options overwhelm the individual leader, contributing to inaction or scattered actions. Also, if the church promotes leadership in order to address the lack of formal clergy training, then it seems to betray several Biblical stories of God working through and in spite of individual lack. The Bible is replete with people who lack any formal education and yet they were able to lead the people of God. Even Paul, who had formal training, did not give any indication in his writings that he benefited from more training. On the contrary, Paul goes out of his way to list

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<sup>6</sup> Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

his credentials as something to be counted as trash (Philippians 3). Capitalism has a remarkable ability to influence spheres even beyond the economic to suggest that any lack can be filled with the acquisition or purchase of a product or process. Of course, technologies from “outside” a person, such as a calendar or digital communications, can assist clergy leading local churches. However, to assume that the lack of leadership can be fulfilled and eliminated by finding the right product or process betrays foundational structures of faith: that with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26), that God’s grace is sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9), and that God in Christ has given the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2).

The denominational diagnosis of the leadership problem, and specifically the belief that more leadership is the remedy, creates a negative feedback loop. First, clergy leadership is emphasized in all parts of the denomination. Second, clergy leaders are given an abundance of tools, training, programs, and ministries to focus on their leadership. Third, this abundance leads to clergy paralysis or at best a moving target of adequate leadership because clergy are awash with philosophies, training, and tools. Subsequently, as the church continues to feel the impact of declining religious participation, clergy are implicitly (and in many cases explicitly) told that church decline is the result of their failure of leadership. Finally, clergy seek out more training and education in order to try to meet the demands and expectations put on the clergy leaders. The seeking of “more” in turn completes the loop by compounding the problem of abundance. For all the attention that the denomination places on leadership, it is surprising how often the denomination overlooks this feedback loop.

Clergy are not blank slates, nor are they vacuums of knowledge and wisdom. Clergy are human beings with experience and *embedded* leadership philosophies. When students arrive at

seminary, they examine the “embedded theologies” they bring with them.<sup>8</sup> These embedded theologies about issues such as the role of the church in the world or the nature of God are assumed or inherited. Seminaries help students identify, unpack, and examine embedded theologies in order to help the students graduate with examined, reimagined, and integrated theologies. The graduate never loses these embedded theologies, but seminary gives the graduate the ability to choose theologies that are more helpful and faithful in the practice of ministry. In the same way, clergy leaders have an embedded leadership philosophy. However, there is no equivalent process for a clergyperson to examine these embedded leadership philosophies. Consequently, many clergy leaders operate out of unexamined leadership philosophies and practices. The denomination overlooks the embedded leadership philosophies of clergy and fails to see the abundance of leadership practices already in the denomination. Taken in whole, the UMC has a leadership problem, but not in its lack, rather, in its abundance.

Misdiagnosing the leadership problem only makes the matter more difficult to remedy. Clergy leaders are often confused and overwhelmed about how to lead a local church. Feeling overwhelmed and confused is the result of the abundant demands of the role, function, and purpose of the clergy leader. Clergy are expected to be leaders in numerous and diverse areas. Regardless of the size of a local church, the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* lists over forty points in the clergy job description which include, but are not limited to: shepherd/servant leader, community organizer, resident theologian, advocate for justice causes, chief executive officer, liturgy and worship crafter, chief financial officer, social worker, chief communications director, counselor, chief developer and fundraiser, funeral director, spiritual formation leader, denominational

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<sup>8</sup> Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 13.

contributor, gifted teacher and inspiring preacher, wedding coordinator, and social media influencer.<sup>9</sup> In attempts to meet all these demands, clergy leaders have tried to tame the abundance of leadership by sharing best practices and ideas. These are the building blocks of different working models and, over time, three clergy leadership models have become the most common and prolific in the Central Texas Conference. These models function like a gravitational pull in that they can only be seen indirectly. Clergy in this project feel these models influence everything in their ministry and most things in the denomination, which the reader will discover more in later chapters. In an effort to help readers who may not be clergy living with the felt experience of these models, what follows is a name and basic sketch for each of the three most influential operational clergy leadership models: the Evangelist, the Servant Leader, and the CEO. But first, one must address the most fundamental question – what is the *telos* of clergy leadership?

### ***Telos and Skopos***

Ironically, even in the abundance of leadership in the UMC, an answer to this fundamental question of clergy leadership remains unclear. *Telos* may not be a word that we use often today, but it is an important concept to begin to address clergy leadership. The *telos* is the ultimate end or object. It is what one aims at, or a target that informs actions and behaviors. Today we may be less likely to hear the word *telos* than we are *skopos*. Educators create or receive a “scope and sequence” for each class they teach. The “scope” of the class is what the educator aims for throughout the course. In this way, we conflate *telos* and *skopos* as the same thing. However, the word “scope” comes from the Greek word “*skopos*” which means “aim” and the Greek word “*telos*” literally means “end.” The *telos* and the *skopos* are different things. In chapter four of part one of *Conferences*, John Cassian makes statements highlighting the distinction between the two: “The

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<sup>9</sup> United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline*, Paragraphs 305-309.

end of our profession (*telos*) is, as I said, the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven: but the immediate aim or goal (*skopos*), is purity of heart.”<sup>10</sup> The difference between the *telos* and *skopos* among clergy leadership models is the first area to address.

The Evangelist, the Servant Leader, and the CEO: some may think that these three clergy leadership models have a flawed *telos*. This thought is tempting because it allows for the creation of a straw man fallacy. However, creating straw men out of these models disrespects the faithful clergy leaders who did the best they could with the tools and contexts within which they practiced ministry. It is too convenient to write models off as lacking any merit or redeeming value because of a flawed *telos*. Rather, let us consider what these models look like in their most faithful expressions. It is not that these clergy models are not beneficial for some; the argument is that *even when these popular clergy models are beneficial to church growth, they are failing to reach the telos of the kingdom of God*. Out of respect for the different clergy leaders and models, as well as giving each of these models the same starting point and benefit of the doubt, this project assumes that the outlined models for clergy leadership all share in the same *telos* of clergy leadership: *clergy leadership helps actualize the reign of God*. The reign of God can be thought of as the times and places when humanity is in right relationship with God, self, others, and all of creation. Assuming a shared *telos*, then, in what ways do these models differ? These models begin to diverge at the stage of *skopos* – the purpose, aim, or intent – and grow in their differences from there.

### **A Sketch: The Evangelist Model**

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<sup>10</sup> John Cassian, Colm Luibhéid, and Eugène Pichery, *Conferences [Collationes patrum XXIV.]* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 11.



The first model to examine is the pastoral leader as Evangelist. To begin, the word “evangelist” come from the Greek *euaggélion*, which meant “good news.”<sup>11</sup> Christians identify the four Gospel writers as evangelists, but these authors are not the only ones who tell the good news of Jesus Christ. For instance, Paul and Phillip preach the Gospel of Christ in the book of Acts. Regardless of the number of people identified, the Evangelist model has a set of characteristics that guide the leadership model today. This model suggests that the pastor is an individual (usually male) who uses words to convey the Gospel with the aim of *converting* others from one belief system to another. The desire to convert others comes from the understanding that if people have the “right opinion,” then people would believe and act accordingly. The “right opinion” is called Orthodoxy (from the transliteration of the Greek *orthodoxia*.)<sup>12</sup>

At its best, this model encourages people to have a set of beliefs that the Church might argue is essential to the Christian life. These beliefs might include things such as the resurrection of Christ or the forgiveness of sin. Historically there is a broad interpretation of these beliefs within the Christian tradition. For instance, is the resurrection of Christ physical or spiritual? Is forgiveness of sin something given to all creation or just those who identify as Christian? At its weakest, this model flattens the richness of belief to a narrow interpretation that are put into a hierarchy of importance. For instance, one church might prioritize the belief in the physical resurrection of Christ and the virgin birth, while another church might prioritize the belief that humans reflect God’s image and that Jesus is one of many ways to heaven. This model assumes that having the right belief (orthodox) is what defines a Christian and that it is the role of the pastor

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<sup>11</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,uid&db=nlebk&AN=41117&site=ehost-live..>

<sup>12</sup> Ian A. McFarland, "Orthodoxy," in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, et al., 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press), <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGljbGU6MTAyNTY0Mg==?aid=104549>.

to teach these prioritized beliefs. This model is informed by an unexamined interpretation of Romans 10:14, “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” Additionally, a pastor may point to other scripture verses to support the model that encourage the leader to teach clear doctrine:

If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed (1 Timothy 4:6).

He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it (Titus 1:9).

But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine (Titus 2:1).

The prioritized set of beliefs guides the leader in their decisions and behaviors. Where the aim of the Evangelist is to convert others to adopt the prioritized set of beliefs of the community, it may be unsurprising that the model privileges speaking. Even when this model is functioning effectively, a notable drawback is its tendency to foster a culture of conformity, wherein dissent is unwelcome and differences might be perceived as threats. There are incentives for members of a church operating with this clergy model to conform to things that may be misguided, warped or unhealthy. These same incentives also make it clear where the pastor should spend their time: preaching, teaching, and studying, all in service to preaching and teaching.

### **A Sketch: The Servant Leadership Model**

Whereas *converting* is the *skopos* of the Evangelist, *service* is the *skopos* of the Servant Leadership model. The Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership describes Servant Leadership as “a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better

organizations and ultimately creates a more just and caring world.”<sup>13</sup> When applied to a local church context, this model suggests that if the world would do as Jesus did, the reign of God would manifest. Like the Evangelist, the Servant Leadership model is present in theologically divergent churches. The progressive and traditional church leaders might encourage members to engage in political protests, serve in local projects, collaborate with overseas organizations or churches, or even build a ministry of service on the local church’s campus. Just as scripture informs the Evangelist model, the Servant Leader model finds support in the Bible. Perhaps the most commonly cited story is Jesus in John 13 verses 15 and 34. After washing his disciple’s feet Jesus said in verse 15: “For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.” Just a few lines later, Jesus says in verse 34, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” This model may point to scriptures such as James 2:26, “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” Alternatively, they may refer to 1 John 2:4-5a, “Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him, ’but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection.” The messages and emphases might vary in different local churches, but the Servant Leadership model privileges *action over words*.

Privileging action over words also contributes to the problematic aspect of this model—there is nothing uniquely Christian to this model. When actions are more important than words and the beliefs that matter are beliefs that the community should work to make the world a better place, this model can be grafted into any organization. In some ways, this model may even benefit

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<sup>13</sup> "What is Servant Leadership?" Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership>.

by downplaying a Christian message out of concern that it may drive others away, and in doing so there would be fewer people to “do the work.”

The Servant Leader model has its merits, but these merits often mask the more problematic assumptions that the clergy leader is the one who should always be serving. Leaders busy serving others can overlook the internal work of their own needs or even reject others' help. Both the Evangelist and Servant Leader models, left unchecked, tempt the leader by putting them in the position of God or Jesus rather than that of a follower or disciple. Identifying as the one who is in the position of God or Christ fuels a savior complex where the leader is beyond reproach. Where the Evangelist model elevates orthodoxy (right belief), the Servant Leader elevates *orthopraxy* (right action). Both the Evangelist and Servant Leader model will suggest that orthodoxy and orthopraxy are like the chicken and egg problem. Both are essential, but one must come first and the pastor will privilege the chicken or the egg, orthodoxy or orthopraxy.

### **A Sketch: The CEO Model**

The past few decades have seen the dominance of another model of pastoral leadership, that of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The Oxford Dictionary describes the CEO as “the highest-ranking person in a company or other institution, ultimately responsible for making managerial decisions.”<sup>14</sup> The CEO model of leadership is not limited to the business or church world; one can also see it in the political area. It is such a common leadership model that, for many, it is the image of what a leader in the world looks like today. In many ways, the CEO model and the concept of leadership are two sides of the same coin. In the work by Tom Lin, “CEOs and Presidents,” Lin convincingly argues the CEO leadership model heavily influences the office of the modern

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<sup>14</sup> “Chief Executive Officer,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004),

President of the United States.<sup>15</sup> Lin defines the work of the CEO as the one who manages “with the goal of maximizing shareholder wealth.” Within a local church which lacks traditional shareholder wealth, the CEO model might focus on growing the membership, the financial wealth and physical property of the congregation, or even the CEO’s own compensation package. In these efforts, the CEO model uses the language and best practices of the commercial business world, and aims “to make” something. The CEO is not the one who specifically makes a widget or a particular product, but they make an organization most capable of fulfilling the company's goals. The CEO is successful if the company grows larger with more products, services, or market share. The language of the CEO model peppers the current UMC pastoral leadership landscape even at the highest levels. For instance, the UMC's mission statement is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”<sup>16</sup> Scripture suggests many things the church could be on a mission to do. Maybe it should convert others to Christ, proclaim the Good News of salvation, serve the poor, reconcile for justice, or forgive enemies, but it chose the imperative “to make.”<sup>17</sup> The last half of the mission statement is open to interpretation. What sort of transformation is the church looking to make? Would it be acceptable if the world just transformed into something different from the status quo? The lack of clarity on what transformation looks like and the clear directive “to make” bolsters clergy leaders to pursue a leadership model that can make disciples without a sense of what constitutes a disciple of Christ. One imagines that the United Methodist

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<sup>15</sup> Tom C. W. Lin, "CEOs and Presidents," *U.C. Davis Law Review* 47, no. 4 (2014), 1351.

<sup>16</sup> United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline*, Paragraphs 120-121.

<sup>17</sup> In his 1993 book published by Abingdon Press, *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, Integrity*, Lovett Weems suggests the corporate world took language from the church first and that the church should consider reclaiming and re-sanctifying this language. I might suggest in this case that the church does not have a mission statement or even a mission, but that the church *is* a mission. However, even if conceding that Weems' argument is valid, the project to re-sanctify this language is also conceding a lack of imagination in our unwillingness to consider new or alternate language to describe the work of God and the church in this post-structural age. It is more practical to re-discover ignored language than attempt to re-sanctify language co-opted by a capitalist system.

Church, the Westboro Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ all believe members are following Christ, but these followers look rather different from one another. The Biblical justification for the making of disciples often comes from an interpretation of Matthew 28 where Jesus commands his followers “to make disciples” (Matthew 28:16-20). This is not to suggest that creating space for the Holy Spirit to transform people to be disciples of Jesus Christ is somehow misguided. Rather, placing the emphasis on making disciples opens the possibility for the Church to graft the values of capitalism onto the value of discipleship of Jesus Christ.

One can most easily see this grafting in the language of the Church. For instance, the Church might shift from privileging measures of *faithfulness* to privileging measures of *fruitfulness*. It is such a subtle shift that one may not even notice it first, much less see why this is a capitalist encroachment into discipleship. Who would disagree that fruitfulness is important? However, in practice the unintended consequences set up a self-justifying feedback loop. Fruitfulness functions as a synonym of “more.” Therefore, whatever practices generate more people, money, participation, or fame, are “fruitful.” The fruitful practices then gain additional resources, which demand the practice generate “more.” Leaders undervalue and abandon practices and ministries that do not generate “more” because they are not “fruitful.” Additionally, leaders hesitate to take action that could jeopardize fruitfulness, such as prophetic preaching, sun setting popular ministries that do not tend toward transformation, splitting groups that are too large, or consolidating worship services. Regardless of the fidelity to Christ, a ministry practice elevating fruitfulness over faithfulness ultimately leads to practices that can miss the *telos* of the reign of God.

Finally, in the CEO model, the church looks to the pastor to guide them to understand what the church should be doing, which means this model privileges the leader’s *vision*. This vision will

guide the congregation toward something the congregation cannot see, but the leader can, which creates conditions for an abuse of power. Like emphasizing fruitfulness, when the church privileges the leader's vision, a self-justifying feedback loop can appear. The CEO model needs to generate a vision and so the leader points to things that are the "most fruitful." Often, corporate worship is considered the most fruitful ministry, in which of course the pastor-leader has a key role. The CEO Pastor is able to consolidate authority within the local church by pointing to the fruitfulness of corporate worship as evidence of their correct vision. This feedback loop is not only self-justifying but also paradoxical. The church grows dependent on the leader's vision, but because the vision is tied to fruitfulness, the leader's vision is dependent on the church to grow. Otherwise, the validity of the vision is called into question. As a metaphor that mirrors the above models, I suggest the CEO model pursues "*orthophthalmoi*" – right eyes.

### **Cultural Context: Privileging the CEO Model**

Context and systems exert influence through incentives, norms, and expectations. For more than a decade, the context and system that is the Central Texas Conference (CTC) of the UMC has exerted influence in such ways as to prioritize and privilege the CEO leadership model. What follows is a basic sketch of the cultural context of the CTC to show how the CEO leadership model and CTC commingled.

Perhaps the most obvious example is the "Wildly Important Goal," aka the WIG. The WIG of the CTC is "to increase market share in the CTC from 1.10% in 2016 to 1.25% by 2026 and to increase professions of faith from 1,845 in 2016 to 3,500 by 2026."<sup>18</sup> There are many attempts to clarify that the WIG is not just about the numbers, but clergy find it difficult to accept these

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<sup>18</sup> "WIG Frequently Asked Questions," Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, Accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.ctcumc.org/wig-faq>.

attempts. For several years, churches and leaders who saw numeric growth in a ministry or church received a “WIG award.” For a long season, the CTC shared in email and on social media a “WIG Scoreboard” (Figure 1). These scoreboards show how each district is doing in relation to the WIG.

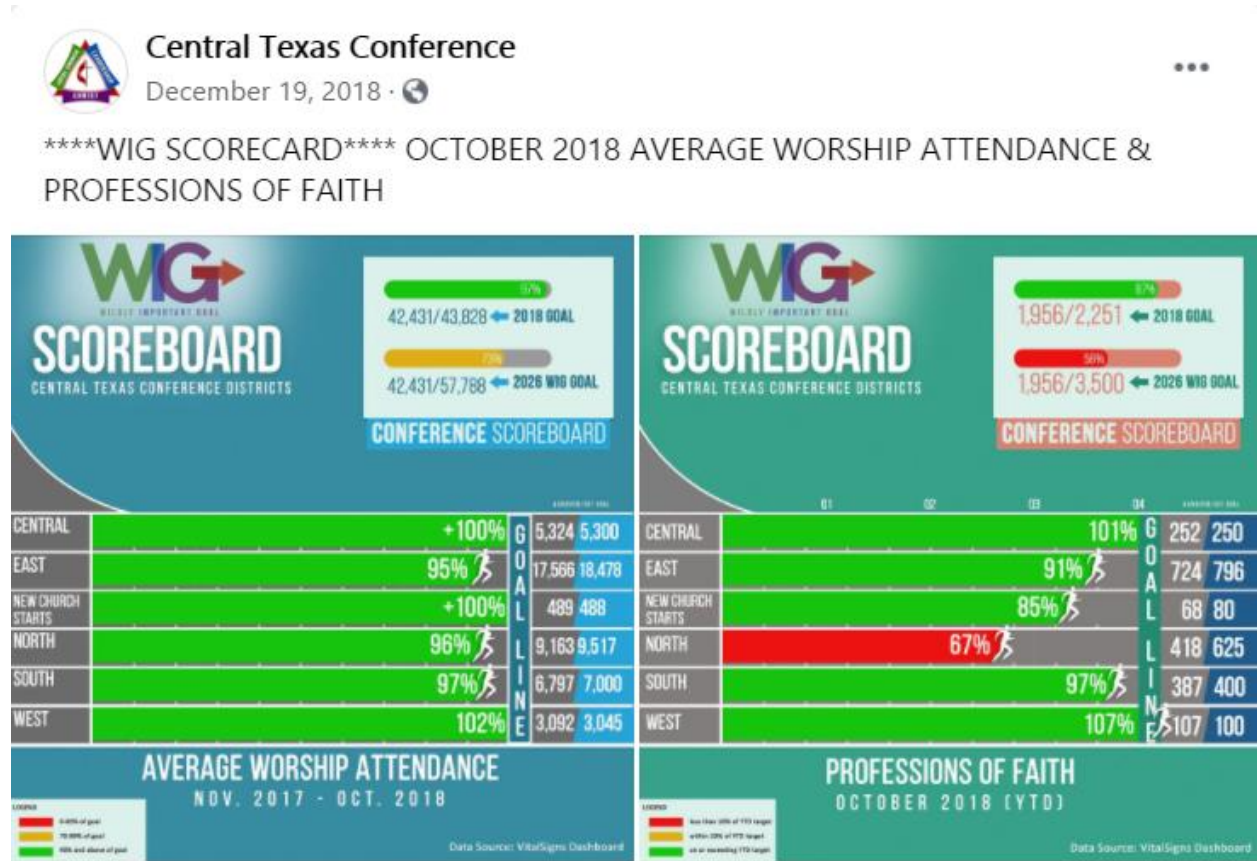


Figure 1

Notice the language and artwork portray the work of the Annual Conference as a game that pits districts against one another, almost as though we were not one body as Paul describes in Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians 12. This sort of “score keeping” amplifies feelings that the CTC places greater emphasis on numeric growth than depth of discipleship. The CTC leadership might push back on this assessment and suggest that the Conference puts equal preference on the numbers and the narratives around the Conference. To the credit of the CTC, there are attempts to elevate the narratives within the local churches. However, these narratives often reflect numeric growth more



than faithful expressions. For instance, narratives of clergy and churches advocating for state legislative changes or people engaged in non-violent protests are unheard. The influence of the CEO model helps mask the lack of these narratives because often these ministries do not generate something to fit on a scorecard.

Vision setting, language, and artwork are not the only ways one can see the CEO model's influence. It is also present in the types of resources the CTC provides. The CTC can offer various resources to local churches, and one such resource is access to a service called MissionInsite. According to MissionInsite, the tools they provide on their website have the capability to offer "a unique fusion of your organization's data, our [MissionInsite's] comprehensive set of community demographic data, technology, and analytics to reveal solutions to your organization's greatest strategic challenges."<sup>19</sup> This tool allows local churches to import membership data and receive a report on how the local church members and surrounding community fit into "Experian's 71 unique Mosaic Household Portraits." Providing this resource encourages local churches and pastors to spend time and energy doing demographic research in order to meet the ever-changing desires of the market. This tool provides additional justification for the church leader to operate like a CEO who makes organizations that can deliver on the promise of market capitalism. The leader is encouraged to use MissionInsite to identify market needs and then create programs, ministries, or even products to fill these needs. MissionInsite even provides language and image suggestions that are more likely to resonate with these 71 different mosaic portraits. Tools like MissionInsite create the conditions where the tail of the market wags the body of the Church. The only reason a leader or a church would create a ministry or a message is if there were an unaddressed market need. It

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<sup>19</sup> "Grow Your Denomination or Diocese," ACSTechnologies, Accessed March 11, 2024, <https://www.acstechnologies.com/missioninsite/solutions/denominational-offices/>

is not that tools like MissionInsite are without use, but one must be keenly aware of the reason to use such information. Without holding market research tools in conversation with scripture and the living presence of the Holy Spirit, the church's mission and ministry can follow what the market demands rather than what God desires. Two times in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea who said that God desires mercy and not sacrifice (Matthew 9:13; Matthew 12:7). However profitable, popular, or powerful it may be, sacrificing others in order to satiate anger, grievance, and resentment is counter to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Core tenets of the life of Christ such as grace, mercy, and forgiveness, are not always profitable, popular, or powerful by market standards, but they are the very things that make one into disciple of Jesus Christ.

Rather than providing MissionInsite and promoting the CEO model of leadership, the CTC could consider alternate resources. For example, if the CTC privileged the Evangelist model, it might provide payroll services to liberate the church to spend resources on converting non-Christians. If the CTC privileged the Servant Leader model, it might have social workers on retainer or a medical debt relief ministry to help those in need.

Another example of the CEO model influencing the CTC is that for over a decade, clergy have heard from the Conference leadership that the "client" of the appointive cabinet is/are:

- God and the reign of God
- The mission field, which is the larger community and area of an appointment
- The local church
- The clergy

In an effort to state these priorities as clearly as possible, this fourfold sequence concludes with the imperative, *In that order!* It is unclear if it is intentional or not, but this sequence suggests that clergy are disposable, or at least the most undervalued part of the Conference. When clergy are last on the list, clergy may not feel supported or even may feel that they are disposable. This sequence is similar to the scoreboard above—motivating for some clergy but harmful for others.

Whatever benefits the CEO model has brought to the CTC, it has come at a great cost to clergy morale.

Evidence of low morale in the CTC comes in many ways, but some examples include the suspicion of Annual Conference actions as observed in anecdotal conversation, clergy leaving the ministry, the need to mandate Conference/district events to prevent low participation, the tenor of colleague conversation, etc. This erosion of morale is not just the result of the leadership problem stated above, but is amplified by a number of factors facing clergy across the United States. An April 2021 interview with Barna Group's CEO, David Kinnaman, highlights that "29% of pastors have given serious consideration to quitting full-time ministry in the last year."<sup>20</sup> Some of those factors felt among clergy in many denominations include:

- The decline in the number of people joining churches
- The growing demands on each pastor
- The spiritual and emotional burden that comes with ministry
- The political environment of the nation, state, and community
- The fallout of the COVID pandemic

Some factors felt specifically within the North American UMC include: the denominational unrest about LGBTIA+ ordination and marriage, local churches leaving the denomination, decline in apportioned giving, and the discomfort of declining American influence in the General Church.

On top of these, there are CTC-specific forces that contribute to the erosion of morale. Specifically, the CTC is several years into a restructure (Exodus Project), which made way for fewer District Superintendents, fewer Conference-wide ministries, and less support staff at the Conference office. The stated missional needs of the Conference are the given reason for the Exodus Project. However, many clergy are suspicious of this stated reason for several reasons: 1)

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<sup>20</sup> "29% of Pastors Want to Quit: How to Keep Going When You Have Lost Confidence in Yourself," Carey Nieuwhof, *Carey Nieuwhof blog*, accessed September 14, 2023, <https://careynieuwhof.com/29-of-pastors-want-to-quit-how-to-keep-going-when-youve-lost-confidence-in-yourself>.

the lack of clergy support from the Conference, 2) influence of special interest groups within the CTC, and 3) local churches disaffiliating with the denomination.

The advent, adoption, and implementation of “The Exodus Project” has proven to be a factor in declining morale. The Exodus Project is a Conference-wide restructuring of districts and Conference support with the aim of liberating clergy and local churches from denominational and budgetary demands. However, many churches rely upon the administrative support of the CTC for a wide range of things, from health benefits to sexual assault prevention training to mission/service trips. Removing these ministries from the Conference level puts additional pressure on local church leaders to fill these needs. The last iteration of the Exodus Project (“Forward to a New Spring”) made a number of changes to Conference support that affected all congregations and clergy. Some examples include:

- Moving from five districts to three district areas—a district area differs from a district in a similar way to how a Conference differs from an “episcopal area” in that one District Superintendent (DS) oversees a district area, which may contain more than one district
- Re-defining the role of the DS from the pastor or pastors to “mission strategist”
- Splitting full-time Conference positions into several part-time positions
- Moving from each district having their own administrator to having three district areas sharing two administrators
- Driving ministry to the local church with little Conference support puts additional pressure on the local church to do more with less

Clergy experienced liberation from some denominational obligations, but not from the denominational demands of a clergy leader outlined in the *Book of Discipline*. The irony of the Exodus Project is that clergy experienced a sort of liberation without any support in the new land. In the end, clergy morale declined, echoing the people wandering in the wilderness with Moses.

Special interest groups accelerated the declining Conference morale in the CTC. For instance, a number of local church pastors and clergy in leadership have been engaged in the Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA). The WCA is a special interest group working for the denomination

to split over a number of issues including, but not limited to, the possibility of full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Some of the high-level clergy engaged with the WCA included 1) the then-bishop, 2) the Dean of the Cabinet, and 3) the Executive Director of the Smith Center for Evangelism, Mission & Church Growth, and New Church Start District Superintendent. In addition to these leaders, a number of local church pastors or large congregations are also involved with WCA. In the two years of local churches disaffiliating from the denomination, a number of these leaders, including the then-bishop, left the UMC and joined a breakaway denomination called the Global Methodist Church (GMC). While it is unclear how many local churches joined the GMC, the Central Texas Conference is one of the most heavily impacted by disaffiliations of all the Conferences in the United States, with 124 local churches disaffiliating.<sup>21</sup> In 2019, there was an effort among some centrist/progressive clergy within the CTC to organize to find ways for greater representation of centrists/progressives. The work of this organization resulted in the election of centrist/progressive individuals as delegates to the General and Jurisdictional Conferences.

Clergy and lay delegates will actively participate in the postponed 2020 General and Jurisdictional Conferences, scheduled for April/May (General) and July (Jurisdictional) 2024, with the ability to contribute their opinions and cast votes during the proceedings. Additionally, there are a few voices in the CTC in progressive interest groups such as Reconciling Ministries. However, while traditionalists are only now experiencing the beginnings of centrist/progressive organization, progressives have felt the decades long, highly organized, and well-funded impact of traditionalist interest groups (Good News, The Institute on Religion and Democracy, Confessing Movement, and the WCA are just a few of the many traditionalist interest groups). It should be

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<sup>21</sup> "Disaffiliations Approved by Annual Conferences," United Methodist News, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/disaffiliations-approved-by-annual-conferences>.

clarified that there is a power difference between those who make decisions about appointments around the CTC and an elected group within the CTC. Whereas the elected group is subject to term limits and voted on by clergy and laity, employment and appointments are often at the pleasure of the bishop. While it is possible for an annual conference to organize and elect a delegation that reflects their positions, the annual conference does not determine the leaders of Conference Centers or local churches. Even though there is a power difference, it is fair to say that elected and appointed leadership have a dialectical relationship. Without speaking to the merits of these causes, the very presence of special interest groups over the years contributes to a sense of suspicion, mistrust, and “us vs. them.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, local church disaffiliation is the most recent contributing factor to declining morale. Every church split involves experiences of the pain of misrepresentation, character assassination, malicious intent, threats, and betrayal. Approximately 48% of the CTC disaffiliated from the UMC. Ironically, many local churches cited the decline of Conference support as a reason to disaffiliate. The decline of Conference support was a direct outcome of the Exodus Project, and many of the same people who ultimately disaffiliated from the UMC were the authors of the Exodus Project. It is painful for local churches and clergy to part ways, especially in a denomination that historically has been so relationally connected. It is said that everyone is the hero of their own story and no one believes that they are wrong or doing harm. Regardless of the reasons for disaffiliating, clergy leaders often took aim and received arrows from others who were, until recently, considered friends and colleagues. Taken in total, local church leaders are suspicious

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<sup>22</sup>Two examples that highlight the suspicion each side has of the other:

"WCA Central Conference Fund Created with Decades of Withheld Tithes and Diverted UMC Gifts," Hacking Christianity blog, Jeremy Smith, accessed June 23, 2023, <https://hackingchristianity.net/2019/05/wca-central-conference-fund-created-with-decades-of-withheld-tithes-and-diverted-umc-gifts.html>.

"The New Anti-Methodists," *People Need Jesus*, Chris Ritter, accessed June 23, 2023, <https://goodnewsmag.org/2016/10/the-new-anti-methodists/>.

of any other Conference-wide efforts to move forward. Suspicion only feeds feelings of isolation and low morale.

The leadership problem is not new, but it is at a fever pitch because of the convergence of the many factors mentioned above: the abundance of leadership resources, the abundance of leadership models with prominence placed on the Pastor as CEO, the erosion of morale, the uncertain denominational future, the fallout of COVID-19, and the disaffiliation process. All of this suggests that CTC clergy need a different leadership model that is rooted in an alternate understanding.

## Chapter 2 - Sources of a Different Leadership Model

### John Wesley

In times of change, it is common to look to our history and see how our ancestors addressed their seasons of change. Members of the United Methodist Church (UMC) looking to history for some guidance often begin by looking to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. In the most recent season of disaffiliations from the denomination, many more local church pastors are reconsidering John Wesley to support their position. Those who choose to disaffiliate from the UMC do so with the confidence that John Wesley would agree with them, while those who remain in the UMC are equally confident in their understanding of Mr. Wesley's desires. Each side has sections from Mr. Wesley's writings and sermons to justify their convictions and confidence. The problem is not that these sides go back to Mr. Wesley; it is that they do not go back far enough. Each side stops at Wesley's writings and sermons and neither side considers the sources that informed his preaching and teaching. In this way, the UMC and those disaffiliating are attempting to replicate the Wesleyan experience. For instance, those who choose to stay in the UMC point to Mr. Wesley's sermon on the unity of the church found, in his sermon entitled "Catholic Spirit," where Wesley writes:

But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union; yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 39, 'Catholic Spirit', §2.4, in *Sermons II* [vol. II of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 82.



Those who desire to disaffiliate argue that the Methodist Episcopal Church started as a breakaway denomination, which Mr. Wesley endorsed. Of course, what is overlooked is that Mr. Wesley permitted the creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States only after he saw that “many of the provinces of *NorthAmerica* (sic) are totally disjoined from the Mother-Country, and erected into Independent States. The English Government has no Authority over them either Civil or Ecclesiastical, any more than the States of *Holland*.”<sup>24</sup> meaning Mr. Wesley agreed to the creation of an expression of the Methodism in the United States because the Church of England no longer had authority in the newly liberated colonies. There is nothing wrong with invoking John Wesley’s sermons and actions to provide guidance, but in doing so, the denomination is settling to replicate what Mr. Wesley experienced.

While it is impossible to replicate what Mr. Wesley experienced, it is possible to recreate some of the conditions in which his experience happened. However, in recreating similar conditions, we can anticipate our own Holy Spirit experience. This disparity is similar to the difference between a cook and a chef. The cook can only replicate, but the chef can recreate. The cook follows the recipe as though it were an incantation. If the conditions are just right then the cook can replicate high-quality meals. However, the cook struggles when conditions are not ideal. If the oven runs hot or the fish is rancid, the cook is unable to replicate the meal. Through their training and experience, the chef is able to modify their meals in light of the current conditions of the kitchen or the quality of the produce. The chef knows different culinary philosophies that shape food and meals. Chefs are able to create a meal out of scraps and excess. While a cook will take

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<sup>24</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 71.

the day-old fish and throw it away, the chef turns the fish into a seafood gumbo to feed the masses. John Wesley was more of a chef than a cook. He did not simply abandon the church because it had gone bad in his eyes. He considered the bits and parts of the church that were working and created a new thing. He and his brother would take familiar tunes sung in the local pubs and write new lyrics to praise God. He took the derogatory name of “Methodist” as a badge of honor and helped the Church establish a way of salvation rooted in grace. For the purposes of this project, Mr. Wesley took the teachings of an earlier age and reimagined their work in his time.

John Wesley wrote in 1789, “From a child I was taught to love and reverence the Scripture, the oracles of God, and next to these to esteem the primitive Fathers, the writers of the first three centuries. Next after the primitive Church I esteem our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national church in the world.”<sup>25</sup> For John Wesley, even before his own Church of England, Mr. Wesley was shaped by the “primitive Fathers” of the Late Antiquity period. In *An Address to the Clergy* in 1756, Mr. Wesley lists out who he considered to be among the “primitive Fathers”:

“This is the religion of the primitive Church, of the whole Church in the purest ages. It is clearly expressed, even in the small remains of Clemens Romanus, Ignatius, and Polycarp; it is seen more at large in the writings of Tertullian, Origen, Clemens Alexandrinus, and Cyprian; and, even in the fourth century, it was found in the works of Chrysostom, Basil, Ephrem Syrus, and Macarius.”<sup>26</sup>

Contained in this list are a number of influential people in the history of the church. Not all of these listed would be counted as part of the desert tradition this paper is drawing from. For instance, the first seven names listed all died before the Edict of Milan. Even as this list spans several centuries Mr. Wesley includes a number of monks from the African and Middle Eastern

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<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, ‘Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church’, §1.1, in *The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design* [vol. IX of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 538.

<sup>26</sup> John Wesley, “An Address to the Clergy (1756)” in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume X, ed. Thomas Jackson, 1872, 492.

regions of Late Antiquity. If the wisdom of some of the early monastics was significant to John Wesley to help him discern how to lead in his time, then what wisdom do these monks have for us today? Admittedly, the Late Antiquity period is chronologically distant from this time, and yet, there are a number of similarities between those deserts and our world. Let us briefly consider five similar characteristics of these different ages before we turn more specifically to the desert ascetics: 1) a crisis of leadership, 2) socio-technical advancement, 3) virtue ethics/Stoicism, 4) inversion of ecclesial privilege, and 5) withdrawal.

### **Abbas and Ammas Context**

Noted historian and scholar Peter Brown writes that in the Late Antiquity period, there was a problem of leadership.<sup>27</sup> Today the leadership problem is one of abundance, but beginning in the early fourth century, the leadership problem was that of a lack. The traditional patron system was breaking down in those years. This patron system was one where a wealthy patron supported farmers and workers in return for goods and services. The Syrian countryside became very prosperous in both resources and population. This distributed prosperity gave birth to a new socio-economic class of independent farmers and workers. This new class was less dependent on patrons of the area, and the role that many patrons served diminished. The breakdown of the patron system exposed a lack of leadership in a number of social services. The services were not just monetary support, but also services like the patron serving as a judge in criminal matters or an arbiter of civic matters. The lack of leadership from the patron left communities searching for others who might fulfill these roles. The *holy man* filled many of these roles.

The *holy man* existed, both literally and figuratively, at the margins of society. They set up their dwellings on the outskirts of town and would enter the town in order to resupply or to tend to

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 80-101.

a personal matter. These individuals also were figuratively on the margins of society in that they sought to straddle the natural and the supernatural worlds. As marginal members of the society, they took on an outsized role in society. They functioned as healers, teachers, judges, and arbiters of the community's needs. Living at the margins of two worlds, members of society thought these "holy men" had a more neutral and even elevated point of view on matters. In the beginning, these "holy men" were not Christian, but that changed after the Edict of Milan in 313 CE. The Edict of Milan gave individuals permission to observe the religion of their choosing. While many people converted to Christianity because of the conviction of their hearts, many people (including these "holy men") converted to Christianity in part because that was the emperor's chosen religion. New converts to the Christian faith had several desires to learn how to follow Christ. Some desired to mature in the ways of Jesus and still others desired to advance politically. Regardless of their motivation, people sought needed leaders and there was a lack of such teachers or leaders to model the Christian way of life. The Christian "holy men" (and women, but in fewer numbers) addressed the leadership lack. While fulfilling the traditional role of the "holy men," these Christian men and woman were given the title *Abba* (father) or *Amma* (mother). Consider this story of how the holy man Antony became Abba Antony:

One day Antony received a letter from Constantine asking him to come to Constantinople. He wondered whether he ought to go, and he asked his disciple his thoughts. The follower said, 'If you go, you will be called simply Antony, but if you stay here you will be called Father (Abba) Antony.'<sup>28</sup>

Not unlike the fourth century, systems are breaking down and new ones are replacing them. People are less inclined to trust traditional institutions such as governments, media, and even the

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<sup>28</sup> Henry L. Carrigan, Athanasius, and Jerome, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: Contemporary English Version* (Paraclete Press, 2010), 95.

Church. In a similar way, people are more inclined to seek out individuals on the margins for guidance. Rather than consulting a *holy man* on the edge of town, today many people seek the guidance of an *influencer*, a life coach, or any other self-proclaimed expert. These individuals usually live in the margins of two worlds, the material and the virtual. The fourth and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries both have a leadership problem and look to the margins for help.

In addition to a leadership problem, Late Antiquity and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century also share rapid socio-technical advancements. In Late Antiquity, one of the greatest socio-technological advancements was the Roman road system. This network of roads connected people and cultures more quickly than ever before. These roads allowed for the rapid proliferation of other technologies such as aqueducts and windmills to aid in food production. New domed buildings to gather large groups of people were possible because of the widespread use of concrete and new masonry techniques. This new and shared knowledge might have died out within a generation if not for the advancements in papyrus manufacturing and bookbinding. The connectivity of computers, genetically modified food production, more sustainable material for infrastructure, and even Artificial Intelligence feel similar to these ancient achievements. The rapid technological advances in both ages contribute to a sense of excitement and social anxiety.

Virtue ethics is more ancient than the Church; however, since the 1981 publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* there has been a renewed interest in this way of life.<sup>29</sup> Businesses and tech leaders such as Ryan Holiday and Tim Ferriss, as well as the founder of the Huffington Post, Arianna Huffington, are among the contemporary leaders extolling virtue ethics and its philosophical roots in Stoicism. Much of the conversation today mixes and blends Stoicism and virtue ethics together which make it difficult for many to distinguish the differences between these

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<sup>29</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

two discourses. It may be of little surprise to the reader that nuance is often lost in the popular conversation, however it should be noted that while both emphasize the importance of a virtuous life, Stoicism and virtue ethics each have a different history, telos, and legacy. It is important for this project to consider their relationship with Christianity; if not, then the Church misses the opportunity to show the “more excellent way” of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:31). The desert Fathers and Mothers were also teachers of virtue and influenced by Stoicism, but were not under the impression that either of these philosophies were ultimate. For example, the Stoics and the desert tradition both affirmed some level of social responsibility and perseverance in the face of adversity. However, the desert tradition diverges with the Stoics in a number of important ways.

The Stoics elevated rationality and logic rooted in the human conception of reason and logic, but many of the things that the Abbas and Ammas would do defy an obvious rationality or logic. The Stoics would not engage in a practice that they did not see or understand the end of prior to taking the practice on, whereas, in the desert tradition, students were directed to engage in actions that the student did not know the outcome of before taking on the practice (i.e. the example below of Brother John who watered dead wood for three years.). Another point of divergence between the desert and the Stoics was the prioritizing of time. Stoicism teaches the student to privilege and even focus on the present. This makes logical sense in that the present is at hand. However, the desert Mothers and Fathers privileged the past and the future over the present. Students in the desert learned that one should elevate the past by remembering the actions of Christ. Additionally, this tradition taught that one should always be awake or alert to a future return of Christ. According to the desert tradition, the present was always fleeting and full of passions that pulled a disciple away from the goal of love. What guided the Abbas and Ammas were God’s past promises and a hope for a future yet to be fully realized, which points to another example of

divergence. According to the Stoics, the goal of life was *eudaimonia*, what we might translate as individual *flourishing*. The Mothers and Fathers argued that the goal of life was to actualize the reign of God. Many Abbots and Ammas lived lives that the Stoics would not call flourishing, but they lived lives that were faithful to the goal of actualizing the reign of God. Just as today, the desert Mothers and Fathers also lived in a time where Stoicism was in the zeitgeist.

The Edict of Milan in 313 CE meant that Christianity had moved from a non-privileged place in culture to a privileged one. Christians no longer had to live with a fear of choosing fidelity to Christ or adhering to the state. For the first time, Christians could move openly in the society without fear of negative repercussions. In fact, because Christianity was practiced in the house of the emperor, to be a good Roman citizen often meant to be a Christian. The co-mingling of the state and Christianity promoted the Christian holy person as superior to the non-Christian holy person. Large parts of the contemporary world are currently undergoing this same shift, but in the opposite direction—Christianity is moving from a privileged to a non-privileged position.<sup>30</sup> The switch of positions for Christianity is most pronounced in Western Europe and becoming more common in the United States. This is not to suggest that Christians in Western democracies are facing the same persecution of Christians in places like modern China or third century Rome, but only to point out the position of Christianity within society is in flux. The cosmopolitan and multicultural society of the United States suggests in the not-too-distant future, the USA will be much more diverse and interconnected than ever before.<sup>31</sup> In this way, we can see that the status of the Church in the USA may look similar to the status it had prior to 313 CE. The desert teachers

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<sup>30</sup> Jim Davis, *Great Dechurching: Who's leaving, why are they going, and what will it take to bring them back?* (Zondervan, 2023).

<sup>31</sup> Richard Alba, *Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, minority, and the expanding American mainstream* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

lived through the transition from one position in society to another, and the current Western Church might benefit from learning how to live through a similar transition.

Finally, in times of great change it is tempting to withdraw from society and build an alternative *Christian* culture. This is the argument made in the book *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* by Rod Dreher.<sup>32</sup> Dreher and contributors in publications such as *The American Conservative* and *First Things* are responding to the anxiety of losing position and privilege in the society. This approach argues that the most appropriate response for Christians' engagement with an increasingly secular society is to limit participation in projects of the common good. This includes things such as withdrawing children from public schools and even downplaying participation in the political arena. Disengagement with larger society is not limited to conservative ideology, but is present in all spheres of American life. Social scientist Bill Bishop makes this case in the book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*.<sup>33</sup> For the past several decades, Americans have been physically moving toward and associating primarily with people who share their political, social, and lifestyle preferences. While Dreher advocates for a type of withdrawal from society in order to protect a set of values, Americans of all types seem to be choosing to move away from others believed to be less desirable in favor of living with others who are more like themselves.

The monks of the deserts also withdrew, but did so with a much different motivation. Fundamentally, it was not to escape corruption, but to run toward it. It was thought that the desert was where the demons of the world lived.<sup>34</sup> To live in the desert meant that one chose to engage

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<sup>32</sup> Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York, NY: Sentinel, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Bill Bishop and Robert G. Cushing, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing US Apart* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> The works of John Chryssavgis and Benedicta Ward listed in the resources explore more on the theological practices of Desert Mothers and Fathers.



with the most undesirable of all. Taking guidance from scripture where Jesus is tempted in the desert, these early monks understood that it was in the desert where one is tempted by the demons as well as tended to by the angels (Matthew 4:11). As Abba Antony said, “Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>35</sup> Whereas today withdrawing is a strategy to build communities of likeness, the desert teachers practiced withdrawing to live, work, and be at peace in communities of difference. Creating communities of difference is reflected in the *Sayings* to which we soon turn our attention.

These similarities between the fourth and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries do not reflect all the ways these times are in parallel to one another, but it is enough to show some of the fundamental similarities between these two times.

### **Sources of Different Leadership Model – The *Sayings***

The different teachings, or *Sayings*, of the desert monks are limited to only those that survived the challenges of memory, impact, and time. Originally shared verbally, the *Sayings* that people remember were often those that originated from a teacher who had a significant impact. Over centuries, these Desert Mothers and Fathers have gone by many names, such as the Abbas and Ammas, Desert Fathers and Mothers, and Desert Ascetics. In an effort to be as inclusive as one can be, this project recognizes and utilizes all the names interchangeably.

Late Antiquity was a patriarchal society, which contributes to the reality that there are fewer *Sayings* from the Ammas than from the Abbas. However, the surviving *Sayings* attributed to the Desert Mothers and Fathers were gathered and, over time, categorized by editors. Often these short stories are in the form of an exchange between a student and a teacher (Abba or Amma).

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<sup>35</sup> Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2004), 2.

First attempts to organize these stories and teaching relied on the name of the Abba or Amma featured in the story. The name of the Abba or Amma in the story was then used to alphabetize each of the stories into a collection. This collection of alphabetized *Sayings* called the *Apophthegmata Patrum* contain 1,202 *Sayings* of twenty-seven Abbas and three Ammas. Over the centuries, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* has been translated into numerous languages for spiritual guidance around the world. The *Sayings* range from Egypt to Syria and cover the span of several centuries. While diverse, there are major themes around which these *Sayings* might be grouped in order to better understand what these desert ascetics valued and taught. John Wortley has done this work in his translation of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* called *The Book of the Elders: The Systematic Collection*.<sup>36</sup> Using the Wortley collection, one is able to see most clearly the values and priorities of these monks. It is not possible to reprint the entire *Apophthegmata Patrum*, but we can look at a number of *Sayings* to get a sense of what the Desert Mothers and Fathers taught. For the purposes of this project, I group the *Sayings* into five large categories: 1) Asceticism and Self Control, 2) Prayer and Work, 3) Virtues and Passions, 4) Community and Relationships, and 5) Spiritual Warfare and Temptation. Many *Sayings* may reside in one or more categories, and within each of these large categories, one could group *Sayings* together into common themes. What follows is an attempt to sketch the common themes of the desert Mothers and Fathers that span across the large categories.

## **Love**

Before reading any of the *Sayings*, one should understand what the desert Mothers and Fathers assume about the Christian life. Roberta Bondi writes, “Love as the goal of the Christian

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<sup>36</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*.

life is not referred to directly. Instead, it is taken for granted, and if the reader does not remember that love is the goal, he or she may find the literature very confusing.”<sup>37</sup> Love as a goal is not to be confused with love as a destination at which one arrives, like a place or a time. Rather love as a goal is something that shapes your behavior and actions. Regardless of how long she practices medicine, the doctor will never be able to say, “Now I am complete as a doctor.”<sup>38</sup> She has a goal of being a doctor and that goal shapes and informs her current behavior and decisions as an individual. Consider this puzzling story:

“At a meeting of the brothers in Scetis, they were eating dates. One of them, who was ill from excessive fasting, brought up some phlegm in a fit of coughing, and unintentionally it fell on another of the brothers. The brother was tempted by an evil thought and felt driven to say, ‘Be quiet, and do not spit on me.’ So to tame himself and restrain his own angry thought, he picked up what had been spat and put it in his mouth and swallowed it. Then he began to say to himself. ‘If you say to your brother what will sadden him, you will have to eat what nauseates you.’”<sup>39</sup>

In this story the word "love" does not even appear, and if we forget that love is the goal, then we might think this a disgusting story with little value to us and move on. However, with the goal of love in mind, the actions of the characters make more sense. It is embarrassing for anyone to accidentally spit on his brother. It is even more embarrassing that the reason for this coughing fit is due to an excessively pious fast. Fasting is the practice of gaining control or command over the functions of the body, and yet despite the fast, this disciple cannot control his cough. Perhaps he expected to be reprimanded for his excessive fasting or lack of bodily control. Maybe he expects to be judged as someone who is not learning the lessons of fasting. Alternatively, perhaps he wanted to prove he was a

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<sup>37</sup> Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>39</sup> John Chryssavgis and Zosimas, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: With a Translation of Abba Zosimas' Reflections* (Rev. ed. Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, Inc., 2008), 32.

superior monk with his excessive fasting and his cough exposes him as a fraud. And yet, the story takes an unexpected turn. The other monk realized that lashing out would be hurtful to the pious brother. Rather than lashing out, he treated the phlegm as a reminder to himself that chastising his brother would cause them both harm. Rather, the monk did not say anything about the excessive fasting, neither monk felt more or less embarrassed than the other, and both monks grew in loving understanding of themselves and each other.

Consider another:

Some brigands once came to the monastery of an elder and said to him, 'We have come to take everything in your cell.'

'Take whatever you please, my sons,' he said, so they took everything they found in the cell and went their way, but they missed a pouch that was hidden there. The elder picked it up and ran after them, calling out, "My sons, take this [pouch] that you overlooked in the cell." In their amazement at the forbearance of the elder, they restored everything to his cell and apologized, saying to each other, 'This is a man of God.'<sup>40</sup>

At first glance, this monk is naïve, and yet we can see the actions of the monk make more sense if we keep in mind that love is the goal. If this monk had another goal in mind, he might have had revenge on the robbers or maybe he would have cursed them as they left. However, the monk had the goal of love. In this case, the monk's love for his enemy gave him insight into the needs of the robbers. It is because the monk acted with the goal of love that the robbers repented and restored everything taken. This is a story of a monk who achieved the goal.

These stories are not an endorsement of reckless behavior like causing personal illness or accepting thievery. These stories are hyperbolic to make the lessons easier for the reader to learn. The exaggerated nature of these stories function like many of Jesus' parables—the exaggerations

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<sup>40</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 294.

are aids to help us see more clearly. We do these stories a great disrespect if we only read them literally. For instance, consider the story of Abba Antony, who once had a novice purchase meat and wear the meat as clothes. When the man did this, birds and dogs chased him and clawed at the meat. When the novice returned to Abba Antony, the Abba told the man that any monk who still desired money would be “cut up like this by the demons.”<sup>41</sup> Abba Antony helped this man see the total cost that comes with being a monk. By providing the novice a memorable experience, Abba Antony ensured that the novice had to determine whether he wanted to let go of all things or live a life tormented by the demons. Antony had a love for this novice, knowing that the body can heal more easily than the scars and wounds that come from trying to serve opposite causes. When love is the goal, then more of these seemingly mysterious behaviors make more sense.

### **The Passions**

Simply put, anything that distracts, perverts, or destroys the goal of love is a “passion.” Passions could be things that we consider sins, such as lust or greed. However, passions are not limited to sinful behavior. For instance, forgetfulness is a passion.<sup>42</sup> When we forget who we are we often engage in thoughtless behavior. A passion is often a strong emotion, but not all strong emotions are passions. Anger or fear are strong emotions considered passions because they pervert love. Mercy or remorse are strong emotions, but are not considered passion because they foster love.

There is debate among the *Sayings* regarding where these passions originate. Some *Sayings* suggest the passions are external to the subject and they infect one like a disease. Thus, the passions

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>42</sup> Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 58.

should be eliminated from one's life. For instance, Amma Synkletike said, "Just as the most bitter medicines put poisonous animals to flight, so prayer with fasting expels a sordid thought."<sup>43</sup> Still others taught that passions are intrinsically objective and it is contingent on the monk to discern if they are too harmful or helpful. For instance, Abba John asked Abba Poemen what he should do because he had "no battle to fight." Poemen said to him, "Go and beseech God for the battle to come upon you, for it is by [fighting] battles that the soul makes progress."<sup>44</sup> Still others taught that the passions were gifts from God, but they have become regarded as evil because of how the passions are used. For instance, Abba Isaiah suggested that the passion of anger is for the monk to be angry at injustice, or the passion of envy is for the monk to emulate the virtues of saints.<sup>45</sup> The difference of opinions regarding something as essential as the passions suggests that the goal of love is still operating based upon these conflicting *Sayings*. The wisdom of the desert does not eliminate contradiction, but embraces it for the sake of loving others who may see the passions differently. If one attempts to eliminate, tolerate, or redeem the passions, there is guidance in the *Sayings*.

### **Discretion/Discernment**

If love is the goal, and the passions distract the monk from the goal, then how does one know what one should do in order to reach the goal and address the passions? One of the largest themes in the *Sayings* is διακριτικός (*diakritikós*), which means to divide or to weigh rightly. Most often *diakritikós* is translated to English as either "discernment" or "discretion." The general population used *diakritikós* as a way to describe someone making a choice between alternatives,

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<sup>43</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>45</sup> Isaiah, John Chryssavgis, and Pachomios Penkett. *Abba Isaiah of Scetis Ascetic Discourses* [Ascetic discourses], Vol. 150 (Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Publications, 2002), 26-28.

as well as the ability to distinguish matters so as to come to a greater understanding of them.<sup>46</sup> In desert spirituality, *diakritikós* is refined even more. Evagrius makes the case that a monk is to use discretion in their daily life on matters such as what to do or where to go. Discretion is not isolated to one activity—such as making an important choice. Rather discernment is the means, the way, by which all of life is lived. Additionally, discretion is to be employed when reading the works of Evagrius or other Christian theologians. Discretion is the way to the heart of God, and one develops discretion through the practice of humility and obedience (more on these in the next section). For instance, discretion is used in all aspects of life such as speaking,<sup>47</sup> approaching others,<sup>48</sup> and even in reading scripture.<sup>49</sup> Origen, and later Evagrius, taught that discretion is “at the center of human existence in the highest spiritual and intellectual level of being which reflects God’s image.”<sup>50</sup> In this way, discretion is a spiritual gift that one develops. Perhaps a helpful metaphor to understand how to use discretion is to think of an artisan. While the gifts of the artist come from beyond the artist, the artist must develop a skill set in order to express and display the given gift of artistic insight and beauty. A story about Abba Achilles highlights the role of discretion in word and action:

Three elders, one of whom had a bad reputation, once visited Abba Achilles, and one of the elders said to him, ‘Abba, make me a net, ’but he said, ‘I will not. ’The other said to him, ‘Of your charity, make us a net so we can have a souvenir of you at the monastery, ’ but he said, ‘I haven’t time. ’The brother with the bad reputation said to him, ‘Make a net for me so I can have something from your hands, Abba, ’and in answer he said without hesitation, ‘I will make one for you. ’The [other] two elders said to him in private, ‘How is it that when we asked you, you refused to make [a net] for us, and you say to this one,

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<sup>46</sup> Antony Rich and Benedicta Ward, "Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism," in *Studies in Christian History and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), xiii-xxiii.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 189.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 232.

'I will make [one] for you?' He said, 'I said to you, 'I will not make [one], 'and you were not dismayed, [thinking] I hadn't the time. But if I do not make one for this [brother], he will say, 'The elder refused to make me [one] because he had heard of my sin, 'and straightaway we would have been cutting the connection [with him]. But I raised up his soul to prevent somebody like him from drowning in sorrow.<sup>51</sup>

Abba Achilles 'skilled use of discretion guides him to respond to each elder. Notice also his brilliance in using discretion to keep the goal of love in mind. It is also notable that the two elders used discretion when confronting Achilles in private so that the elder with a bad reputation is spared from embarrassment. It took years of work to know the most faithful action to take in this situation. A lesser-skilled monk may have made a net for the two while rejecting the third, and there is a logic to this course of action. However, the goal of the desert tradition required a different type of logic, which may seem illogical. This logic echoes such scripture as, "Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise," (1 Corinthians 3.18-19) and "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8). Discretion "is not a legalistic tool in which we determine what rule applies in a situation, but rather it is an intuitive sense of how to behave appropriately."<sup>52</sup> The Desert Mothers and Fathers cultivated their intuitive sense of discretion through the practices of humility and obedience.

### **Humility and Obedience**

According to the Abbas and Ammas, humility and obedience were in a dialectic relationship with one another. They were each distinct from and yet interconnected with the other. This story of Abba Antony highlights this dialectic. "Abba Antony said, "I have seen all the snares of the devil set out on earth. Who can pass through these? 'I said with a sigh; and I heard a voice

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<sup>51</sup>Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 147.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 91.



that said, 'Humble-mindedness.'"<sup>53</sup> Overcoming the snares required humility, and practicing humility would indicate obedience to the *voice* giving the guidance. This highlights the dialect relationship—one is humble because they are obedient and/or one is obedient because they are humble. As noted above, Abbas and Ammas believed the desert was home to angels and demons. To hear and obey a *voice* requires discretion; otherwise, the monk may follow the demons. Antony cultivates his discretion as he engages with this voice and practices humility and obedience. Later in his life, Abba Antony's practice of humility and obedience gives him the reputation of being able to discern between demonic or angelic visions:

Some brothers visited Abba Antony to report to him some visions they were seeing and to learn from him whether they were genuine or from demons. They had an ass, but it died along the way. When they came to the elder, he anticipated them, saying to them, 'How came it about that the little ass died on the way?' 'How do you know that, Abba?' they said to him, and he said to them, 'The demons showed me, 'and they said to him, 'And we came to ask you about this: we are seeing visions, and they are often genuine, but maybe we are being led astray. 'Using the example of the ass, the elder convinced them that [visions] are from demons.<sup>54</sup>

Even as humility and obedience are related, how did the desert ascetics understand humility? "An elder was asked, 'What is humility?' He said, 'It is if your brother offends against you and you forgive him before he asks your forgiveness.'"<sup>55</sup> Today we encounter a lot of *false humility*, which is some combination of feeling guilty, low self-esteem, or even manipulative self-sacrifice. In the *Saying* above, we can see that the Abbas and Ammas understood humility as always in relationship with others. Humility is living out the conviction that every human being is a beloved child of God. Genuine humility "accepts our human vulnerabilities and the fact that we

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 266.

sin” while simultaneously refusing to be so overwhelmed that it leaves one paralyzed with thoughts of inadequacy.<sup>56</sup>

Humility meant the monk was to abandon the sense of self as hero or being above reproach. Humility requires repentance and forgiveness. While discretion requires some sort of judgment, humility avoids judgmentalism. Even more revolutionary than rejecting judgmentalism, the Abbots and Ammas thought humility required one to protect others from the consequences of their sin. Again, this may sound archaic if we forget that the goal is love. It was the expectation that such love for another would affect others such that their heart would turn toward God. A brother asked Abba Poemen, “If I see a fault in my brother, is it good to cover it up?” The elder said, “Whenever we cover up our brother’s fault, God covers up ours, and whenever we reveal the brother’s, God reveals ours.”<sup>57</sup> This may unsettle the modern reader who feels it is irresponsible to allow one to avoid accountability for their sin. The desert ascetics left the work of accountability to God as expressed in scripture such Romans 14:10-12, Matthew 7:1-2, and James 4:11-12. All of these scripture references point to God as the one who is to judge and hold humanity to account.

One may see how humility and obedience are related. If God is the ultimate judge of our lives, then Christians are to practice obedience to God. The most common way to practice obedience was to submit to the authority of another teacher. Sometimes the elder would test the obedience of the monk to break the monk’s sense that they knew best:

They used to say of Abba John Colobos that having taken refuge with an elder from Thebes at Scete, he was living in the desert. His abba took some dry wood, planted it, and said to him, ‘Irrigate it every day with a bottle of water until it bears fruit. ‘Water was a long way from them, so one had to go in the evening and return at dawn. After three years [the wood] bore fruit. Taking the fruit, his elder brought it to the church, saying to the brothers, ‘Take and eat the fruit of obedience.’<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 45.

<sup>57</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 135.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 234.

Here we see how John submitted to the authority of another unnamed elder. John performed this task as one who trusted the authority of the elder. In time, John became an Abba himself. John's status as an Abba is the *fruit* of obedience that other monks could aspire to. Obedience is not a practice to infantilize monks, but a way of fostering a relationship with God. Abba Moses said, "Obedience begets obedience; if someone obeys God, God listens to him."<sup>59</sup> If the monks were to fight the demons on behalf of humanity, they were going to need God's help through the practice of obedience and humility.

### **Hesychia and Prayer**

"O hesychia! The advancement of those who dwell alone. O hesychia! The ladder to heaven. O hesychia! The way to the kingdom of heaven."<sup>60</sup> These are the opening lines of a poem praising hesychia. Hesychia is an interior silence, which Abba Mark described as providing "profound calm and great peace within."<sup>61</sup> One elder called hesychia the "mother of all virtues."<sup>62</sup> Monks would teach others how to attain this inner peace by being alone or staying in a cell. However, one could have this inner peace even among a crowd. Amma Synkletite said hesychia was possible "while in the company of many and also to have one's thoughts with crowds even when one is alone."<sup>63</sup> Dwelling in the cell was not only a direct way to learn hesychia, but it also was essential for seasoned ascetics to mature in God. As Abba Moses said, "Go and stay in your cell; your cell will teach you everything."<sup>64</sup> While it was important to spend as much time in one's

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 19.

cell as possible, Abba Antony said, “Just as fish die if they are on dry land for some time, so do monks who loiter outside their cells...”<sup>65</sup> These Abbas and Ammas were not anchorites. Anchorites were individuals who lived in rooms or cells attached to a local church. People would visit the anchorite but the anchorite was unable to leave the cell because of the construction of their cells. These anchorites lived alone and were often solitary. Of course, many Abbas and Ammas lived alone and in a cell, but these cells were not attached to a church. However, more often than not, the Abbas and Ammas lived in community together, at least walking distance to a town for supplies and water. Whereas the anchorite depended on others to come to them, the Abbas and Ammas were able to enter into the towns or markets. Engagement with crowds and with the busy markets made the practice of hesychia and prayer all the more important and challenging.

The *Sayings* have a number of directives on how to live in hesychia regardless of where one finds themselves. For instance, Abba Isaiah listed three things one needs to live in hesychia: to fear of God without ceasing, to intercede with patient endurance, and for one’s heart to always be mindful of God.<sup>66</sup> The fear of God is the understanding that one will die or that one is mortal. Patient endurance is a shorthand way of talking about the characteristics of love found in 1 Corinthians 13. Finally, monks kept the passions in check by always being mindful of God. These three essentials make it clear why most monks needed to be alone in their cell to attain the inner peace of hesychia. The practice of hesychia is not a daily practice or even any hourly practice. It is a posture or a way of engaging with the self and with the world. This posture, unmoved by the passions, allowed the monk to see more clearly. Consider this story of two monks engaged in an “affliction” who visited a hermit to help them see clearly:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 19.

They told the hermit of their affliction, begging him to tell them what he had successfully accomplished. After a brief silence, he poured water into a bowl and said to them, 'Look carefully at the water, 'for it was disturbed. Then, after a little while, he said to them again, 'Now look carefully [and see] how the water is stilled, 'and as they looked at the water, they saw their faces as in a mirror. Then he said to them, 'It is like that too for somebody amidst people; he cannot see his own sins for the tumult; but when he practices hesychia, especially in the desert, then he sees his own shortcomings.<sup>67</sup>

Hesychia not only provided inner silence and clarity, but also provided the Abba and Amma space to solve complicated problems. For instance, let us revisit the story of Abba Antony telling a would-be-monk to go to the market and buy meat. Abba Antony's hesychia allowed him to solve the question of who was serious and who was not serious. If the would-be-monk was able to buy the meat, then it showed they had not renounced everything. If the would-be-monk was unable to afford the meat then it suggested this one may be ready to become a "brother." Alternatively, we can consider a difficult directive from 1 Thessalonians 5:16 which says that one should "pray without ceasing." Taken at a literal level, this is impossible, because one's prayers cease when asleep. By living in hesychia, Abba Lucius was able to discover a way to address the difficult directive:

I will show you that I pray without ceasing while working at my manual labor. I soak a few rushes for myself, then sitting down with God, I braid them into a rope, saying, 'Have mercy upon me, O God, after your great goodness; according to the multitude of your mercies, blot out my offenses'" [Ps 50:1], and he said to them, 'Is that not prayer?' 'Yes, ' they said, and the elder said, 'When I remain working and praying all day long, I make sixteen coins, more or less. I put two of them at the door and eat with the rest. He who takes the two coins prays for me when I eat and when I sleep, and by the grace of God it is fulfilled for me to 'pray without ceasing.<sup>68</sup>

Admittedly, my attempt to create categories and highlight major themes of the *Sayings* is limited and incomplete, but it serves to show how the *Sayings* of the desert Mothers and Fathers can be a source for contemporary UMC clergy to address the problem of leadership by suggesting

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 218.

another model. The work of John Wesley and the context and *Sayings* of the Desert Abbas/Ammas all provide a sort of shears for clergy overwhelmed by the abundance of leadership. By providing guidance, values, and practices, these shears cut away the overgrowth and expose an overlooked model of leadership. Exposing this model is the first step, but in order for this model to address the problem of abundance, it is essential for clergy to engage with the model. By doing so clergy discover language, practices, values, and direction. The clergy that are more comfortable with this model are the clergy who will experience liberation from the paralysis and anxiety that flows from the problem of leadership abundance. It is also essential that clergy have a working understanding of the Orthocardic clergy leadership model so that clergy are able to teach it to the congregations they serve. Unless clergy and laity work together to develop and live out Orthocardic leadership, the models of Evangelist, Servant Leader, and CEO will continue to guide clergy and local churches to their detriment. Considering the sources of John Wesley, the context, and the *Sayings* of the Desert Ascetics, we can begin to see some of the characteristics that differentiate the Orthocardic clergy leadership model from other models.

### **A Sketch: The Orthocardic Model**

To reiterate, the UMC's problem of leadership has been wrongly diagnosed as a problem of deficiency that needs to be filled. Efforts to grow leadership in the CTC have only contributed to an abundant overgrowth by adding more educational requirements and trainings, realigning denominational resources, and even offering a new model of clergy leadership inspired by the corporate position of the CEO. This new CEO model not only betrays previous models of leadership, but it is also a categorical mismatch of language and values. Rather than being a solution, the CEO model fails clergy leaders and churches. The CEO model is unable to address the issue of leadership because it is a model built to add more to the problem of abundance. The

failure of this model, and the misdiagnosis of the larger problem, has accelerated an erosion of trust and morale within the CTC. Clergy should cease operating under the assumption that there is a leadership lack and seek an additional model of clergy leadership. Clergy in the CTC should reconsider those who inspired John Wesley as a viable source of wisdom. Through these proto-monastic's lives, *Sayings*, and values, we can cut away the abundant overgrowth and rediscover an obscured model for clergy leadership: a model we might call Orthocardic Leadership.

The Orthocardic leader does not aim *to convert* like the Evangelist model, nor do they aim *to serve* like the Servant Leader model, or *to make* like the CEO model. The Orthocardic Leader knows that these all may be important, but always responds to the more significant aim "to purify hearts."<sup>69</sup> John Cassian teaches that purity of heart is what the Apostle Paul described as conforming to Christ in his letter to the Philippians.<sup>70</sup> We can also equate the idea of purity of heart to the process of sanctification, which is something that the Holy Spirit does in the disciple who welcomes the Spirit into their heart through disciplines and spiritual practices.

Elevating purity of heart rather than converting, serving, and making as the aim of the Orthocardic leader is a matter of sequence in the life of the disciple. It is not that the Orthocardic leader rejects converting, serving, or making, but he or she affirms that these are only possible as fruit of purity of heart. Orthocardic leadership asks: can one convert others to something to which they themselves have not first been converted? Can one serve in the name of Christ without knowing how Christ would serve? Can one make a disciple without first obtaining the heart of

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<sup>69</sup> Cassian, Luibhéid, and Pichery, *Conferences*, 11.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

discipleship?<sup>71</sup> The desert tradition understood that one must first undergo an inward change before they are capable to take on the difficult work of leading others in the same process. As Abba Poemen said, “A person who teaches but does not do what he teaches is like a spring that waters and washes everybody but is unable to cleanse itself: all [kinds of] filth and uncleanness lurk within it.”<sup>72</sup> One must first be converted to the heart of Christ through renouncing their old ways. Renouncing and repentance become the seedbed for new practices to take root. Over time, these practices produce virtue, and an abundance of virtue is the love of Christ.<sup>73</sup>

The purity of heart *skopos* is different not just in the sequence, but also in its direction. The locus of action when converting, serving, and making is primarily toward an *other*. The locus of action to purify hearts is primarily inward (*hesychia*). That is to say, the leader's *skopos* is the purification of one's own heart by the grace of God. The writings of 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart also recognized this truth. He is attributed to have said, “The outer work can never be small if the inner work is great. And the outer work can never be great if the inner work is small.”<sup>74</sup> For the Wesleyan tradition, one of the most iconic stories of John Wesley is his Aldersgate experience in which his heart was strangely warmed. As significant as that story is, this paper is attempting to focus on some Mr. Wesley's sources found in the desert and not just the experiences of Mr. Wesley himself. It sufficient to say the centrality of the heart has been present since the beginning of the Methodist movement.

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<sup>71</sup> John Wesley once asked himself a similar question after his failed ministry in Georgia among the Native Americans: “I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! Who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief?” - John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Percy Livingstone Parker (Chicago: Moody Publishers, January 1951), 53.

<sup>72</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 161.

<sup>73</sup> Philip Turner, “John Cassian and the Desert Fathers: Sources for Christian Spirituality?,” in *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 13, no. 4 (November 2004), 479.

<sup>74</sup> Matthew Fox, *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood for our Time* (1st ed. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1994).



Consequently, the Orthocardic leader does not privilege speaking, action, or having a vision, but *humility*. Humility in the desert tradition means several things, but it includes practices such as shunning fame and notability, refusing to take credit, resisting ecclesial titles, and thinking others better than oneself. This understanding of humility informed Evagrius, Basil, John Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nazianzus, who rejected ecclesial leadership but ultimately were ordained by force.<sup>75</sup> These same practices of humility can guide the Orthocardic leader today. For instance, the Abbas and Ammas practiced speaking the words of others, not just to give credit or to give an impression of superior mental capacity, but as a practice of being under the authority of another (obedience). This is why many of the *Sayings* begin with “Abba 'X' said that Abba 'Y' said...” Taking credit for others' work, signaling mental superiority, or the practice of lording power over others, have been temptations for many people throughout time. This has become more challenging in contemporary leadership as leaders try to differentiate themselves by drawing attention to one's novel ideas or teachings. Because the practices, values, and priorities of the Orthocardic leader are different (and in many cases antithetical to) other models, Orthocardic leaders must confront the problem of foolishness. Abba Antony said:

Behold a time will come to the children of men when they will become silly, and they will turn aside and depart from the fear of God, and if they see a man who is neither mad or as silly as they are, they will rise up against him, saying ‘you are both mad and silly, ’because he is not like them.<sup>76</sup>

Antony's warning is one that the Orthocardic leader must consider. Anytime the leader of an organization does not meet the expectations of the organization, that leader is subject to being labeled foolish, silly, crazy, or mad in the eyes of others. This reinforces the reality that if a new

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<sup>75</sup> For these and other stories see: William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford University Press); John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 1; and John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Routledge).

<sup>76</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 180.

clergy leadership model is to take hold in a local church, then the local church and clergy leader must work together. Without this partnership, the clergy and church do not see wisdom but only foolishness.

In an attempt to clarify while not overly reductionist, this matrix (Figure 2) visualizes the four leadership models sketch above:

	<b>Evangelist</b>	<b>Servant Leader</b>	<b>CEO</b>	<b>Orthocardic</b>
<b>Telos (ends)</b>	To help actualize the reign of God			
<b>Skopos (purpose/aim)</b>	To Convert	To Serve	To Make (meeting market needs)	To Purify Heart
<b>Privileged</b>	Speech	Action	Vision	Humility
<b>Ortho</b>	Doxy (teaching)	Praxy (action)	<i>Ophthalmoi</i> (eyes)	Cardia (heart)
<b>Problematic aspect</b>	Conformity to culture	Does not require Christ	Following the desires of the market	Foolishness

*Figure 2*

Considering the Desert Ascetics, one can begin to see some basic outlines of the Orthocardic clergy leadership model as distinct and unique from other clergy leadership models. It may also be possible to see how a model that privileges matters such as the heart and humility has a difficult time finding advocates to promote and pass this model to others. The abundance of leadership means that a re-discovery of an Orthocardic clergy leadership model needs additional advocates to prune away the leadership overgrowth.

## Chapter 3 – Rediscovering Orthocardic Clergy Leadership

At this point, the reader should have a basic sense of what Orthocardic clergy leadership model may look like. The reader may also see that any Central Texas Conference (CTC) clergyperson is only able to offer up a basic sketch of Orthocardic clergy leadership because of two factors. The first is the *context* of the CTC clergy and the second is the *substance* of Orthocardic clergy leadership. The context of the CTC, as noted above, has an abundance of leadership (models, expectations, trainings, resources, etc.), which is overwhelming for any one person to address in isolation. More important is the fact that the substance of the Orthocardic clergy leadership model recognizes the role community and relationships have in the original creation of this model. The Desert Mothers and Fathers often engaged in the communities they lived near and built up communities in the desert. These communities were networks of relationships that worked together to originally establish the purity of heart *skopos*. It would betray the model to attempt to rediscover it devoid of community engagement. Orthocardic clergy leadership understands the limits of the individual and confesses the need for help. Communities originally discovered Orthocardic leadership, and it will take communities to rediscover it. In the CTC this means identifying other clergy who would participate in a multi-month focus group. What follows is an overview of this focus group, the framework for the group, and an analysis of each of the sessions.

### Focus Group Overview

Focus group recruitment began in the fall of 2022 through a series of email invitations to all Local Pastors and ordained elders in full connection within the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church. There are other clergy within the CTC, such as deacons. The work

of the deacon in the UMC is specialized in ways that often, but not always, remove the deacon from the work of the local church and into other industries, fields, and arenas. Many retired elders are no longer serving in an official capacity in the CTC, and so, like deacons, retired elders were not considered as candidates for the focus group. Finally, many elders had disaffiliated from the UMC, but finalizing paperwork was still in process at the recruitment stage, and disaffiliated elders received an invitation to the focus group.

In total, the pool of clergy in the CTC at that time was approximately 450 people. After accounting for the above criteria, that final potential pool was 155 clergy. Of this, nine elders submitted applications to participate in the focus group. Considering age, gender, geography, and future status with the UMC, seven individuals accepted the invitation to the group. The average age of the group was 47 (median was 41). There were five self-identified females and two self-identified males. Two individuals work in campus ministry, two work as associate pastors, two work as lead pastors, and one works for the Conference Office. Members received three meeting dates in the first quarter of 2023 as well as the questions used to guide each meeting. Members were also given a copy of the book *To Love As God Loves* by Roberta Bondi and asked to be prepared to discuss the contents of it at the second meeting. Members were offered fifty dollars to offset travel expenses to attend each meeting.

### **Focus Group Framework – Session One**

The initial meeting on January 11, 2023 explored the following questions:

- What is leadership? How do you define it?
- What is leadership to you now?
- What practices or characteristics mark a leader?
- What is clergy leadership? How do you define it?
- What practices or characteristics mark a clergy leader?
- How does the CTC define or understand clergy leadership?
- What is the role and function of the clergy leader in a local church?

Through these questions, the hope was for the group to distinguish leadership generally and clergy leadership specifically in both concept and practice. Then the group considered how the Conference and local church each define and practice clergy leadership. The overall goal was to assess whether my diagnosis of the problem of leadership was accurate. If the problem of leadership was abundance, then one would expect to either hear a number of divergent thoughts or experience thought paralysis within the group. As anticipated, there was some thought paralysis within the group. When asked their definition of leadership, two members said things like, "I have not thought about this," while another two members remained silent even after being pressed. Other members did not respond to the question directly, but used the question as a chance to comment on their feelings about the Conference or express a disappointment. For instance, one person spoke of the legacy of patriarchy that limits their ability to participate in leadership. As valid as these critiques and disappointments may be, by not addressing the question directly it reflected a sense that group members had unexamined embedded leadership philosophies.

After some time, the group was able to articulate some of their embedded understandings of leadership. I expected a diversity of responses assuming that people come with their own embedded leadership philosophies. This expectation was inaccurate. Group members did have embedded leadership philosophies, but surprisingly there was convergence in their understanding of the concept of leadership. This seems to suggest that the diagnosis of a leadership abundance is not as strong as originally assumed, and yet the group verified something even more interesting – a lack of leadership imagination. More specifically, the group associated the CEO model of leadership with the very definition of leadership. Members of the group said leadership is, "helping a group achieve a goal," "casting a vision," "one who produces things," and even "being effective

and efficient.” The monopoly of the CEO model of leadership suggests that there is an abundance of diversity but a lack of divergence when it comes to expressing the concept of leadership. This would be as if one asked a group of people to name colors of the rainbow and in response, the group named twenty different shades of blue. There is diversity but little divergence. Within the group, the CEO model was so abundant that it left little room for any other models. One member said, “Good leadership is good leadership is good leadership. Perhaps the practices look a bit different but good leaders do the same things.” In this response, we hear the lack of imagination most completely articulated. Taken to its conclusion, one might think that good leaders are interchangeable. If this were the case then one might assume that someone like Jack Welch would be a good leader for a church or that Martin Luther King Jr. would be a good leader for General Electric. One person said, “Leadership is a system that guides people, cultivates and grows the greatest strengths of those people.” This response suggests that leadership is somehow a relationship (system) and that the work of the leader is to help others inwardly grow. Two responses voiced a slight suspicion of leadership: “I experienced leadership as manipulating people to get on board with the vision created by the leader.” Another echoed, “Leadership is control but a good leader leads in the place of manipulation.” The group struggled to distinguish the difference between *leading* and *manipulating*, which again suggests a lack of imagination. The embedded leadership of this group suggests that the CEO model is alive and well. It also highlights that perhaps there is not an abundance of leadership in the CTC, but an abundance of *one type* of leadership in the CTC. The dominance of this one type of leader makes little space for alternate models or practices.

This group may be different from other CTC clergy by having time to examine their embedded leadership philosophies even for a short while. In doing so, the group attempted to articulate how

they understand leadership now after years of being leaders themselves. Even with this examination, we can see the omnipresence and imprint of the CEO model. The group focused in on the power dynamics of the leader and follower by attempting to highlight that “leaders empowers others,” and that today leadership is about “empowering, inspiring, encouraging and influencing others.” John C. Maxwell wrote, “He that thinketh he leadeth when no one is following, is merely taking a walk.”<sup>77</sup> If Maxwell’s image invokes a leader with followers behind, then one focus group member challenged this idea by shifting the position of the leader as “alongside” so others “can be their whole selves.”

It was at this point the group introduced the divine by saying that leadership to them today means to “joining what God is already doing.” It is subtle, but this is an important break from the CEO model. Rather than the primary mover, this person suggested that leading is about “joining” another. This is a break from the CEO model because the CEO model resists following and especially resists things that pull the CEO away from their vision. The CEO model gains authority and power by promoting fidelity to the CEO’s vision. The work of God is broad and not limited to just one vision. The reign of God is comprehensive, exhaustive, and complete. If the leader is the one who joins what God is doing, then the leader does not need to set vision. In fact, the nature of joining means one sets aside one’s own vision in order to join in actualizing the vision of another.

One focus group member challenged the role of the leader as empowering others: “Empowering others assumes that I have power to give.” While it is true that clergy are granted authority to pastor a local church, that authority does not automatically come with power. Many female clergy can give witness to having the authority of the pulpit but experience the power residing in the hands of a few people (i.e. males). Authority can be granted, but the congregation

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<sup>77</sup> John C. Maxwell, *Be A People Person: Effective Leadership Through Effective Relationships* (2013), 78.



must bestow power. This gives us insight into the paradoxical impotency of the different leadership models. In many congregations, the power rests with those in the pews as clergy attempt to juggle uphold their authority while tending to the power brokers in the local church who can withhold giving or even file complaints to the bishop. This same focus group member continued, "I am interested in the work of unveiling who the church is in God outside of whoever the clergy is." In this, we can hear echoes of the desert idea that "pride is not the ultimate sin; forgetfulness of who we are is the ultimate tragedy."<sup>78</sup> With just a few questions, the group was able to begin to break away from the stronghold of the CEO model and begin to articulate different values, hopes, and priorities.

The next question for the group was, "What are practices that mark a leader?" The group offered practices such as vulnerability, creating places to listen, boundary setting, respecting others, and integrity. Discussion about practices was sluggish and full of silence. Perhaps this reflects the emphasis on the theoretical over the practical application of ministry. The education process that United Methodist elders go through puts a premium on ideas more than practice. All elders in full connection in the UMC are required to have a Master's degree with extra hours in Methodist history, polity, doctrine, evangelism, and missiology. Elders in the Central Texas Conference are also required to have additional certification obtained by completing Licensing School. Post ordination, elders are required to meet continuing education requirements, which are often academic in nature. For example, it might be more common to hear a clergyperson articulate a theology of fasting than articulate their individual fasting practice. Regardless of the reasons, the group struggled to articulate practices unique to leadership.

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<sup>78</sup> Chryssavgis and Zosimas, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 47.

The practices the group did share are also practices that are essential to a healthy friendship or marriage. Healthy relationships have boundaries and respect. Perhaps these responses reflect the relational aspect of leadership, but these practices lacked nuance. Is it always good for a leader to be vulnerable? Does the leader set boundaries for him/herself or for another? Respecting others and living with integrity are also practices of a good follower. The group did not articulate any practices that distinguish a leader from a follower, such as being a model to imitate or the leader taking responsibility for decisions. Clergy are less developed when it comes to practices of leadership or even distinguishing a leader from a follower. This could be evidence that the problem of clergy leadership is a lack of training, but could also be evidence of the CEO model working at its most optimal.

The CEO leadership model has a co-dependent relationship with the followers. The leader, despite being responsible for casting a vision, has to be as responsive to the followers as possible; otherwise, the leader loses power and position. The only reason the leader is the leader, according to the CEO model, is because they are providing results the followers' desire. The CEO is accountable to the people who have the ultimate power to dismiss the CEO. If the CEO were to perform practices that followers do not like or value, the followers would dismiss the CEO. The practices of the CEO leader have to be similar to those of the followers because they are the ones who determine who the leader is. The CEO leader mimics the followers' practices, but perhaps has to do them in a more intense or even performative way than followers do. If the group wants boundaries in the organization, then the leader must have numerous boundaries reflected in policies, procedures, and practices. It is unclear why the group was unable to articulate practices distinguished from a follower, but it is curious and suggests possibilities for future reflection. It was time to explore what practices mark a *clergy* leader.

Clergy leadership is different from general leadership. This is not an opinion but a fact of how language works. The word “clergy” qualifies the following word “leadership” in the same way that a nation’s name qualifies the word citizen—such as American citizen or Chilean citizen. However, at this point in the focus group, general leadership and clergy leadership lacked clear differentiation. Much of the conversation around unique practices of the clergy leader was an exercise in making distinction without a difference. For instance, one member said that clergy leadership “needs to know their why,” which echoes Simon Sinek’s popular book *Start with Why*<sup>79</sup>. However, one member was quick to state, “the difference between leadership and clergy leadership is that while leadership may take bits from Christianity, the clergy leader puts Jesus as the central tenet—the difference is the foundation of the leader.” To punctuate the point, another responded that our “why is rooted in the work and mission of Jesus.” The group agreed that the leader is one who is working on provoking some action or change in the follower, and the clergy leader is working to promote change in the follower through the process of discipleship. However, as one participant put it, “the difference in clergy leadership is that clergy know that discipleship begins first and foremost with the clergyperson.” This is a notable break from other leadership models.

In other models, the leader may prioritize self-actualization, but this statement from the group suggests something different. The work of self-actualization, while noble, is not the same as discipleship. Discipleship of Christ is a path of descent rather than a path of ascent. Or, as Father Richard Rohr points out, “the way up is the way down. Or if you prefer, the way down is the way up.”<sup>80</sup> Discipleship is not so much working on ascending into greater self-actualization, but rather that Christ is working on the clergy leader to become like a grain of wheat that falls to the earth and dies (John 12:24). One key difference between leaders and clergy leaders is that clergy leaders

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<sup>79</sup> Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2012), iii.

are subject to the work of Christ on them whereas non-clergy leaders can refuse this work of Christ. This group was hinting that because clergy leadership is different, the current model of leadership is failing.

One of the members identified that the clergy leaders experience a different gaze. The clergy leader experiences the “gaze to see the *imago Dei* of the other.” Other leadership models also have to contend with a particular gaze. Some models experience the gaze of an imaginary audience or other models contend with the gaze of the market, but clergy leaders live with the gaze of the image of God within and around them. Perhaps it is a way of saying that the clergy leaders cannot objectify a person but must relate to others as subjects. Martin Buber famously articulated this as establishing an I–Thou relationship with others rather than an I–It relationship.

Considering these comments, there are some practices of clergy leadership that differ from those practices of general leadership. What is of note is that at least one of the stated practices of the focus group echoes the teachings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. Clergy leaders must practice the type of humility that sees every human being as a beloved child of God. However, the current Conference incentives and measures discourage this expression of humility. Clergy are encouraged to grow local churches to be so large it is not possible for the clergy to see individuals as children of God but as people in a category: prospect, affiliate, member, etc. To see someone as a child of God means, at the very least, to see them as a *Thou* and not an *It*. Clergy leaders striving to live into this expression of humility must do everything they can to learn and use individual’s names.

Once the focus group began to recall the centrality of Christ in clergy leadership, a completely new set of practices were shared. These practices included things like praying together, knowing when to step aside and be a follower, engaging in a rule of life, being responsible, working

with the marginalized, and addressing maladaptive behavior without using the tools of condemnation. The sheer number of practices that the focus group was able to generate not only speaks of their familiarity with the role of clergy leader, but also suggests the problem of leadership abundance. While there are a number of practices stated, each focus group member shared a different practice and no two members expressed the same practice. The non-repetitive nature of this part of the conversation hints at the problem of leadership abundance. It would be as if one asked the group to name the colors of a rainbow, but the group named some colors of the rainbow but also named colors like black and grey. In order to see the rainbow, some colors need to be removed while others need to be highlighted. In a similar way, the group named practices of clergy leadership and practices that are outside of clergy leadership. In order to rediscover Orthocardic leadership, some of these leadership practices need to be removed while others need to be highlighted. Among the stated practices that bring Orthocardic leadership to light are the practices of prayer and resisting judgmentalism. The focus group used the final hour to discuss how the Central Texas Conference defines or understands clergy leadership. The conversation reflected the context of the Conference described in chapter one. The group's voluntary observations did not simply validate the description of the Conference, but also articulated other concerns not already mentioned.

The group began to address the Conference's definition or understanding of leadership. The focus group did have one person employed by the Conference office and they noted there is not a working definition of such a thing to their knowledge. Without a formal definition or statement from the Conference, the group could only surmise how the Conference defines clergy leadership from their lived experience. Participants shared their observations of which clergy are elevated or overlooked. Participants also expressed the ways the Conference indirectly reinforces a set of

values by promoting different sermons, lectures, and trainings. Focus group members agreed in concern for the ways that the Conference elevates and lauds metrics. One participant said, “the WIG [Wildly Important Goal] was clear that Conference leaders were about those metrics.” All of this validated concerns laid out in the sections above, however, the amount of time spent on this was minimal. It seemed as though these critiques were so obvious and universal that the group just presumed everyone knew them. The group seemed to agree that the Conference defined leadership in the ways that corporations define the office of the CEO. In short order, the group members turned their attention to other experiences that shed light on how the Conference understands clergy leadership.

One of the two males in the group was the first to highlight that he is not sure how the Conference defines clergy leadership, but as a male, he has felt valued in ways that his female counterparts do not. One of the females of the group affirmed those feelings and shared how historically the Conference norm felt “sexist, racist, and lacking integrity.” They were quick to point out that they have experienced a notable and significant change in the past few years. She continued by saying that the Conference “now feels that adaptability and diversity of voice is valued.” The group shared a sense of hopefulness and optimism in the Conference with the arrival of a new bishop. It stated that the Conference seems to reflect the values and language of the bishop in ways that is difficult to see until there is a change of bishops. This is often the case when an outsider enters the group. The outsider is able to see things that insiders are unable to see. The group had not had many interactions with the new bishop at the time of these focus group conversations, but they did share that it feels like things are changing. For instance, one of the participants pointed out that previously the Conference seemed to value clergy who would be “the boss in the corner office calling the shots with a big paycheck.” Additionally, clergy that were

elevated were clergy that would “divest things they don’t want to do in order to do what they want to do.” At this point in the focus group, the new bishop had only been in the Conference for seven months, and yet focus group members pointed out that the Conference seemed to be shifting on how it understands clergy leadership.

One of the ways it is changing is in the Conference’s view of clergy power. One member of the group addressed the fading value of compliance by highlighting their own age:

Historically, there was a fear of retribution if you ‘stepped out of line.’ The expectation was to get in line. I was always at odds in my soul with the Conference leadership, and if I were not at this stage of my career then I am not sure that I would have been able to speak my truth as I saw it.

Later in the conversation, this same person said, “Historically clergy leadership is about power hoarding; now it feels like power sharing.” How a clergy leader uses power is an important part of leadership and here one begins to see the focus group share how the Conference is migrating away from centralized power to diffused power. Finally, one member of the group who had not shared anything until near the end of this question summarized the group’s conversation:

For so long the Conference seemed to define clergy leadership on their ability to preach. So much so that those deemed ‘good clergy’ would outsource other responsibilities such as pastoral care. I am not sure that sitting in the office and drawing a paycheck is going to be the mark of clergy leadership going forward, but this feels like we are in transition at this point. There is a sense of abundance in this new day. This new bishop feels like a head wind change, toward enough and even abundance. It will not be easy but we will do this together.

This suggests that Central Texas Conference’s understanding of clergy leadership is like magnetism. One can only indirectly see magnetism through how it pulls. Historically, the pull for clergy leadership was some combination of the Evangelist and the CEO model. With a new bishop, the Conference is experiencing a metaphorical switching of the magnetic poles. This creates new and uncertain pulls for the future. The group remains hopeful the future of clergy leadership might pull the Conference in a new direction.

Finally, it was time to turn to the local church and consider the question, “What is the role and function of the clergyperson in a local church?” The diversity of responses and the lack of consensus among the group once more suggests there is an abundance of leadership models and there are too many choices for clergy to know what to do. Consider all these roles and functions of the clergyperson each focus group member expressed:

“There is not just one universal role for all people. It is about equipping people to do the mission of the church.”

“Your role is to love people and you cannot do that while sitting in your office.”

“Companion and come alongside with others as they do ministry in their context.”

“If the church does not have a communal identity then to help them identify their identity in God’s love.”

“The role of the clergyperson is to lead the church.”

“To care deeply about people, to inspire, equip, and encourage together to go where God is leading us.”

One can imagine focus group participants are reflecting back the expectations of their local setting. The local expectations of a clergy leader are important to keep in mind if any clergyperson desires to modify or change their leadership model. The clergy leader may very well fail in their efforts to change, if the members of the local context are not also brought along. As one of the focus group members said of making a change, one “cannot do this while sitting in your office.” Orthocentric clergy leadership must consider the need to be in the cell and with the community. At the conclusion of the first focus group, members were asked to read *To Love As God Loves* by Roberta Bondi.

### **Excursus – Roberta Bondi and *To Love As God Loves***

Roberta Bondi (b. 1941) is a well-known historian of the Desert Mothers and Fathers and scholar of Christian spirituality. In her book, *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early*



*Church*, Bondi introduces the reader to several concepts of the Desert Ascetics. Some of these concepts include the *telos* of the desert tradition, how the ancients understood and practiced humility, the passions, and prayer. Bondi also helps introduce the reader to the monk Dorotheus of Gaza, to whom she returns throughout the book. This book was selected for two reasons. The first was to introduce the Desert Mothers and Fathers in a succinct manner. Bondi's book is roughly 100 pages and does not take very long to read. The second was to evaluate the effectiveness of Bondi's book as a resource to help clergy identify and cultivate Orthocardic leadership. Consider the opening two sentences:

Many of us who call ourselves Christian long to be what we call ourselves, but we cannot see how to do it, granted our culture's basic assumptions about what it means to be a human being. If we assume with our culture that the goal of human life is individual self-development, how does this goal leave space for love that might thwart development?<sup>81</sup>

Bondi raises the same question of this project in a different way. How can a subject aim for one goal when the culture expects a different goal? This is a universal question asked by all people in all places. A child assumes that the goal of a parent is to always be available to the child, but how does that goal allow space for the parent to stay connected to their spouse? Alternatively, a church may think the goal of the clergy is to grow the membership, but how does such a goal leave space for the difficult sayings of Jesus? Bondi helps the reader see that Christianity is guided by a different *telos* and *skopos* than the surrounding culture. However, if the Christian *telos* and *skopos* are unexamined, then Christians will assume the cultural goal of what Bondi identifies as personal self-development<sup>82</sup>. Bondi is assisting the reader to examine their embedded philosophy of life and its purpose. For instance, in the United States the culture prioritizes the personal over the collective, while Jesus prioritized the collective over the personal. The American culture

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<sup>81</sup> Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

prioritizes development, whereas Christianity prioritizes transformation. This is more than just semantics. Bondi is pointing out the tension between the cultural *telos* and *skopos* and the Christian *telos* and *skopos*. To echo the Bondi line above, clergy “long to be” faithful leaders with a Christian, not cultural, *telos* and *skopos* and yet “we cannot see how to do it.” *To Love As God Loves* is a resource that might be able to help clergy leaders see how we can become what we long to be.

The book itself is structured into six chapters and is laced with *Sayings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers*. Bondi explains that the Desert Mothers and Fathers thought the goal of the Christian life was love.<sup>83</sup> To help the reader understand how to live into this love, Bondi utilizes an image from Dorotheus of Gaza, a circle:

Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings ... Let us assume for the sake of the analogy that to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.<sup>84</sup>

This simple analogy provides a rubric for a clergy leader to discover Orthocardic leadership: Is a particular action/belief/statement moving me closer to God as evidenced by drawing closer to people? If so, then the considered action/belief/statement is worth discerning further. If not, then the action/belief/statement can be set aside or discarded. Of course, life is more complicated than a binary choice, but the Desert Mothers and Fathers understood that it is essential to grasp the basics before reaching for the more complex. Bondi relays this saying:

A brother said to Abba Antony, ‘Pray for me. ’The old man said to him, ‘I will have no mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God.’<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 36.

At first glance, refusing to pray for someone sounds rather harsh. However, Abba Antony does not refuse to pray for the brother, but expects the brother to be able to do the basics of prayer for himself. If Antony prayed for the brother without the brother learning to pray, then Antony would hinder the brother's ability to move toward God. If clergy leaders are unable master the basic practice of knowing what actions move people toward or away from God/neighbor, then other Orthocardic practices will be too demanding to consider. If clergy leaders today can rediscover that love is the goal of Orthocardic leadership, then it becomes easier to discover what the clergy should do, where they should invest their energy, and what they can release. As Abba Antony said, "He who beats a piece of iron considers in his [thoughts] what he is going to make: a scythe, a sword, or an axe. So ought we to consider what kind of virtue we are seeking to acquire, so that we do not labor in vain."<sup>86</sup> The amount of clergy burnout and fatigue suggests that clergy leaders have been laboring in vain for too long. The Desert Mothers and Fathers had a saying about one who labors with little return and one who labors little with a great return:

Abba Poemen also said, 'There is a person carrying an axe who chops away the whole day long and does not succeed in getting the tree down. There is another person, experienced in felling, who brings the tree down with a few cuts.' He said that the axe is discretion.<sup>87</sup>

While there is not a dedicated chapter to discretion (*diakritikós*), the practice of discretion is assumed throughout Bondi's introduction of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. One might safely assume that if the practice of discretion helped the desert tradition through the difficult centuries, it can help the clergy leader today.

## **Focus Group Framework - Session Two**

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<sup>86</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 189.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 106-164.

The focus group convened for the second of three sessions on February 15, 2023. The group had each stated they read the book and were ready to discuss the provided questions:

- According to Bondi's reading of the desert tradition, what is the *telos* of the faith? What do you think the *telos* of the faith is? What does the CTC promote as the *telos* of the faith?
- What practices of the desert tradition did you gather were important? Alternatively, what did they hold on to as essential?
- What practices of the desert tradition did you gather were not important? To put it another way, what did they let go?

These questions attempted to accomplish two things within the group. The first was to determine whether the members of the group had actually read the material. Research shows that self-reporting is among the least reliable data because individuals are prone to different biases and pressures. In a group of peers, there is the pressure to look and sound a particular way known as social desirability bias.<sup>88</sup> This bias might influence participants to state they read the book without doing so in order to manage a reputation. Individuals in a group are also prone to the conformity bias, which is when individuals adjust actions, responses, and beliefs in order to conform to the group.<sup>89</sup> One of the ways to address these common biases is to ask questions that require knowledge of the book in order to formulate a response.

However, reading the book was insufficient for this focus group. If individuals did not understand, analyze, and synthesize the information, then it would be difficult to have a meaningful focus group. These questions were designed to establish a fundamental understanding of the thesis and arguments. There are not perfect questions to address the concern of bias and comprehension; however, the above questions were sufficient to suggest participants did have a knowledge and understanding of Bondi's thesis and arguments.

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<sup>88</sup> Clive Nancarrow and Ian Brace. "Saying the 'Right Thing': Coping with Social Desirability Bias in Marketing Research," in *Bristol Business School Teaching and Research Review* 3, no. 11 (2000).

<sup>89</sup> David McRaney, *You are Not so Smart: Why You have Too Many Friends on Facebook, Why Your Memory is mostly Fiction, and 46 Other Ways You're Deluding Yourself* (New York: Gotham Books/Penguin Group, 2011), 197.

Individuals in the focus group were able to articulate Bondi's core claim that the Desert Mothers and Fathers understood that the *telos* of the Christian life is love. One member of the group shared a clever metaphor describing their understanding of the *telos* and *skopos*. They shared that the United States armed forces teach all recruits how to become qualified to use a rifle (*telos*). However, what counts as qualified differs among the separate branches. This person's spouse is in the armed forces and they stated, "The Army teaches you how to shoot differently from how Marines teach you to shoot." The *telos* is the same but the *skopos* differs. The armed forces expects the same *telos*, but respects the diversity of each branch to achieve it. This is similar to what Bondi says about how the Desert Teachers understood the diversity of humanity and the common *telos* of the Christian life:

Even more important, however, was the conviction of these men and women that, while Christians share a common goal, and in many respects a common way of life, there is no one single right route everyone must follow to get there. People are different from each other; what keeps me from being able to love is probably very different from what hinders you. What corrects my lack of love may only make your situation worse.<sup>90</sup>

The group's grasp and understanding of Bondi suggests this book is reasonably accessible and understandable to help clergy explore the fundamentals of Orthocardic leadership.

The focus group understood the *telos* of the desert; the question next was, could the group articulate the *telos* of the Central Texas Conference? The group did not agree on a single Conference *telos*, but attempted to list what they thought it might be. Most of the responses were different expressions of institutional viability. One participant bluntly stated what they saw the Conference *telos* as: "Butts in pews to keep doors open. To prop up the institution." Still another stated, The Conference presents Matthew 28 (the Great Commission) as the *telos*, but underlying

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<sup>90</sup> Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 11.

that is a notion of numeric growth and then the theology is behind that.” Other responses were a bit more forgiving of the Conference. One participant stated, “Most of my time [in clergy leadership] has been in a crisis of impending doom, which may be why there is an emphasis to keep the institution alive. Not in a negative sense because we love this thing called the church.

Perhaps the response that hits on the need to consider Orthocardic leadership practices can be heard in this response: “Most clergy think their *telos* is love, but the Conference sees love as a practice, not the *telos*. The *telos* is something else here: the growth or making more disciples. Love is a tool but not the end goal.” This participant hits at a fundamental critique this project is seeking to explore. Love is not the means to a separate end. Love is the end that the clergy leader should be aiming for. Love is not a strategy, tool, or even something that we do, but something that we aim for. The clergy leader knows that even the best of intentions can miss the target of love no matter how nice or kind an action may seem. For instance, some may argue that it is an act of love to point out the faults of others in order to call the LGBTQIA+ to repentance and change. The desert tradition has more than a few stories that teach us that to point out the faults of another is not loving, but an act of judgement. Rather than pointing out the faults of another, the Orthocardic leader is one who keeps their own faults in front of them so they are more inclined to extend mercy. One is more likely to hit the target of love through mercy than judgement.

Once there was a council at Scete, and the fathers were talking about a brother who slipped up; but Abba Pior remained silent. Later on he got up and went out. He took a sack and, filling it with sand, carried it behind him. He took a small basket, put some sand in it, and carried it in front of him. When he was asked by the fathers what this was meant to be, he said, “This sack, the one with a lot of sand in it, is my transgressions (and many they are) that I have left behind—because I do not trouble to weep over them. And here this little basket in front of me is my brother’s transgressions; by meditating on them, I am passing judgment on my brother. I should not act so but rather carry my own sins before me and care about them, beseeching God to forgive me them.” When they heard this, the fathers said, “Truly, that is the way of salvation.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 137.

Several members came back to the United Methodist Church's mission statement, "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" as a possible Conference *telos*. However, this only raised new sets of questions, such as, "Isn't God the one who makes disciples?" "Isn't there is a circular logic where we make disciples by loving; in loving them you make them into a disciple?" "What would it look like to use this book as the *telos* of the Conference: the *telos* would be to love as God loves?" The numerous questions and amount of conversation within the group attempting to state the *telos* of the Conference again is evidence that clergy cannot consider important philosophies and theologies because of the problem of abundance.

If the problem were a lack, as the denomination assumes, then one would expect little to no responses to these questions, because there would be a "lack" of leadership. Rather, there is such an abundance of responses and questions that it becomes more essential that Orthocardic clergy leadership find ways to prune away the abundance. Indiscriminate pruning would not align with the Orthocardic model. As explored above, the Ammas and Abbas considered discretion/discernment as a primary practice. If clergy can rediscover Orthocardic clergy leadership, then clergy need to be able to articulate or even imagine different practices of the desert that were important or essential.

Even this far into the conversation, the group found it difficult to disentangle the question at hand and their lived experience. For instance, the group identified the desert practice of withdrawing. Silence is a key practice of Orthocardic clergy leadership because silence is often how God communicates. If people expect the clergy leader to discern God's desires, then the clergyperson must be fluent in God's language or there may be a misunderstanding. John

Chryssavgis wrote, “If silence is the language of God, the language they speak in Heaven, then is it any wonder that we make so many mistakes in interpreting this language?”<sup>92</sup>

Even as the group agreed on the need to withdraw, members of the group were quick to point out resistance in many local settings. For instance, one focus group member stated that their local church has a clergy leave policy that mirrors a clergy leave policy in the Book of Discipline, and there is an “expectation that the clergyperson would say ‘This is what I did on the sabbatical.’” The motivation behind the request to know what clergy do on their sabbatical was unclear. Is it because the church desires to pray over and celebrate the work God did in that clergyperson? Is it an expectation that the clergyperson still be producing or making something even while on a break? Is it that the church is holding the clergyperson accountable so the clergyperson does not become distracted in the sabbatical? Considering the ministry context of the Conference, and the assumption that the CEO model and clergy leadership are synonymous, it makes sense the focus group participant would be suspicious of the policy’s demands. This highlights once again a caution for any clergyperson adopting the Orthocardic clergy leadership model without the partnership of the local church.

Another essential practice of the desert identified by the group was spiritual direction. It is not that the Conference does not value spiritual direction, but that it reduces it to something expected for new, but not established clergy. One participant highlighted that the Conference requires ordains to be in an assigned mentor/mentee relationship with an ordained clergyperson, “The residency program has mentors assigned, but we do not do this post-ordination. After ordination, you are required to find your own group and mentor.” The desert practice of being obedient to a teacher is not the same as the Conference requirement acknowledged here, but the

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<sup>92</sup> Chryssavgis and Zosimas, *In the Heart of the Desert*, 47.



Conference seems to understand the value of such mentoring and direction. This highlights an Orthocardic practice—spiritual direction instigated by the student. In the desert, individuals sought out an Amma or Abba; they were not assigned by an organization or denomination. There was an expectation that these monks would have a guide, but it was the responsibility of the monk to find their own teacher and learn from them. This distinction helps one see that the Orthocardic practice is not limited to having a spiritual director, but includes being responsible to find and follow one.

The focus group identified the desert practice of humility. One of the participants appreciated the way these spiritual ancestors understood and taught about humility. One group participant hinted at this different understanding of humility compared to their experience in ministry:

Humility does not mean that you have to give up your whole identity to raise a family or lead a church, but being humble means that we remember that we are a child of God. A church's notion of humility means that pastors should have the worst car, house, or things, or that they should be in poverty.

The Desert Ascetics lived a life of renouncing all allegiances, values, and even possessions for the sake of the *telos*. Part of the reason they practiced releasing their possessions was to learn that the “basic attitude of humility recognizes that no person loves or does any good with the help of God.”<sup>93</sup> Early in their practice, the Abbas and Ammas first had to “abandon the heroic image of the self” and embrace that even they were vulnerable and weak.<sup>94</sup> If a person needed help to do something basic such as acquire food, it accelerated the dismantling of the heroic self and ushered in the attitude of humility.

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<sup>93</sup> Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 43.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

One of the many differences between today's clergy and the monks of the desert is that most clergy in the Conference are providers for dependents and family members. Today we may question the ethics of Abba Antony, who chose to place his sister with a group of Christian women so that he may become the ascetic known today.<sup>95</sup> The UMC does not expect or require a clergyperson to place dependents in the care of another for the sake of their vocation. Clergy are not expected or required to take a vow of poverty in the United Methodist Church, but as the focus group member suggested, many people associate humility with being impoverished.

The just compensation for clergy leaders is often a source of tension within a local church and it is possible this tension is the fruit of the CEO leadership model adopted by clergy and local churches. In a for-profit corporate setting, the shareholders demand lower costs and greater return. One way to lower costs is to keep compensation as low as possible. The CEO on the board is motivated to make it clear to shareholders that their position is unique and if the board wants quality leadership then they need to compensate the CEO at or above market value. Since the late 1970's, CEO compensation has grown 1,322%.<sup>96</sup> During a similar time, the average worker has seen wage stagnation.<sup>97</sup> The General Board of Higher Education conducted the closest research on American UMC clergy compensation in 2010. The committee analyzed the periods of 1997 and 2008 and concluded, "Average pastor salaries have increased substantially over this period of time, exceeding the general rate of inflation by approximately two percent per year, resulting in a twenty percent total increase over the past decade."<sup>98</sup> What these reports suggest is that UMC clergy are

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<sup>95</sup> Saint Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria and Robert C. Gregg. *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 31.

<sup>96</sup> Lawrence Mishel and Jori Kandra, "CEO Pay Has Skyrocketed 1,322% Since 1978; Economic Policy Institute," (2021).

<sup>97</sup> Lawrence Mishel, Elise Gould, and Josh Bivens, "Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts; Economic Policy Institute," (2015).

<sup>98</sup> HiRho Y. Park, *Salaries for United Methodist Clergy in the U.S. Context*; Division of Ordained Ministry General Board of Higher Education and Ministry The United Methodist Church, (2010).

not growing at the same levels of the for-profit CEO, but clergy compensation has not stagnated. Orthocardic clergy leadership suggests that clergy compensation should neither outpace nor lag behind inflation. Just as clergy do not expect to live in poverty, clergy should also not expect compensation to keep pace with other more lucrative professions that require post-graduate degrees, such as doctors and lawyers. The Orthocardic leader's relationship with compensation starts by considering that a compensation that outpaces inflation hinders one's attitude of humility. If the clergyperson can provide for every whim and desire, then the clergyperson struggles to renounce the heroic self. Even the most pious and devout monk was helpless without the grace of God working in their lives.

After listing off these different practices, it became clear that a defining feature of Orthocardic clergy leadership is not in what it *adds*, but what it *removes*. The group was asked to consider what practices the Desert Mothers and Fathers refrained from. Since the group had already established that the Conference and the Abbas and Ammas have different aims, the group pointed out that there may be a number of practices that are different. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the group quickly noted that the Desert Mothers and Fathers “did not do any evangelism as we understand it today.” Evangelism is often understood in the Conference as the ministries that make disciples and numerically grow a local church. There is a kernel of truth in that the Abbas and Ammas did not create events that drew a crowd, and then extend an invitation to join the local monastery. However, according to Athanasius's *Life of Saint Antony*, there were many who did join the monastic efforts, saying “the desert was colonized by monks.”<sup>99</sup> Even if the account of Athanasius is inflated, as hagiographies often are, clearly something was attractive about the monastic life that converted people to the monastic values, even if they were not in the desert.

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<sup>99</sup> Athanasius and Gregg, *The Life of Antony*, 13.

It was once revealed to Abba Antony in the desert, 'There is somebody in the city like you, a physician by profession, who provides those in need with his superfluous income and is singing [the Sanctus] with the angels of God all day long.<sup>100</sup>

This suggests that there is room for evangelism as numeric growth in Orthocardia. The Orthocardic leader should discern number growth because not all growth was valued in the desert. There are several stories of Abbas/Ammas refusing to engage with individuals who desired to learn from these teachers.

They said of Abba Arsenius and of Abba Theodore of Pherme that they hated the glory of men above all shortcomings and that, while Abba Arsenius would not readily meet anybody, Abba Theodore would meet [a person], but he was like a sword.<sup>101</sup>

Refusing to meet with anyone or being as sharp as a sword with someone is not the Conference understanding of evangelism. However, if evangelism is not limited to numeric growth but extended to a process of maturation, we can see evangelism in the desert even when an Abba refused to meet with someone. Abba Moses helped someone mature, even without meeting with them:

A ruler once heard of Abba Moses, and off he went to Scete to see him. When some folk reported the matter to the elder, he got up to run away into the marsh; but the ruler met him and said, 'Tell us, elder, where is Abba Moses 'cell?' 'What do you want with him?' he said to them; 'he is a crazy fellow and a heretic.' 'When the ruler came into the church, he said to the clergy, 'I have heard about Abba Moses and have come to see him, and here an elder who was going into Egypt met us. We said to him, 'Where is Abba Moses 'cell?' and he said to us, 'What do you want with him? He is crazy and a heretic.'" The clergy were sad when they heard this; they said to him, 'What sort of a person was this elder who said these things against the holy one?' 'He was a tall elder and dark, wearing old clothes,' they said, and the clergy said, 'That is Abba Moses! He said those things against himself because he does not want to meet you,' and the ruler went his way having reaped great benefit.<sup>102</sup>

Abba Moses helped this ruler reap a "great benefit" even without adding the ruler to the local monastery, because the process of evangelism as maturation was a practice of the desert. The

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<sup>100</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 310.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 126.

Orthocardic clergy leader may need to give up the pursuit of numeric growth for the sake of maturation.

Another practice of the desert that the focus group highlighted was the practice of letting go of *loyalties and participation in politics*. Like evangelism, the focus group is identifying a kernel of truth but missing something. The Desert Ascetics did not abandon the political, but engaged with it differently. The fact that there were monastic communities with different offices, such as “Abba,” “Amma,” “elder,” and “brother” suggests there was a political structure to these communities. They established a network of connections and communication among the communities. Structures needed for the common good and the community were established and kept, but what seemed to be missing in the desert was a political identity. The Desert Ascetics did have a primary identity, as a sinner. Abbas Matoes and Isaiah had something to say about this:

Abba Matoes said, “The nearer a person gets to God, the more he sees himself as a sinner; for when the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord, he began to declare himself wretched and impure” said, Isaiah Abba <sup>103</sup>“If a [thought] comes to you to pass judgment on your neighbor for some sin, first bear in mind that you are more of a sinner than he is. Do not believe the good you think you are doing pleased God, and you will not dare to pass judgment on your neighbor.”<sup>104</sup>

The Orthocardic clergy can only engage with the politics of the world primarily through the identity of a sinner. Identifying first as a sinner does not mean one is worthless; this is the heaviness of false humility. Rather, identifying as a sinner liberates the heart to know that God is present and active in one’s life. Luke 5:31-32 recalls Jesus saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician.” Orthocardic practices also understand that adding more noise to the cacophony of political rhetoric is not going to bring the healing that is needed:

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 133.

Abba Poemen used to say of Abba Nisteros, “Just as with the case of the brazen serpent in the wilderness—anyone of the people who looked at it was healed [see Num 21:9]—so it was with the elder. Possessing all virtue and keeping silence, he would heal everybody.”<sup>105</sup>

Orthocardic leaders understand the healing that can happen in disengagement and silence.

Alternatively, Orthocardic leaders know how futile speaking can be:

Abba Theophilus the archbishop once visited Scete. When the brothers were assembled, they said to Abba Pambo, “Utter one saying for the Pope so he might reap benefit in this place.” Said the elder to them, “If he reaps no benefit from my silence, neither will he benefit from my word.”<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps the most striking point of the focus group was their conversation about love and justice. The conversation was not that these are in opposition; rather it focused on directionality. The group expressed a felt concern that in our time, there is a sense that love follows justice. Different members of the group expressed things such as the impossibility to love unless justice comes first. One group member brought to light that perhaps the Desert Ascetics would disagree with this ordering:

God's justice compared with God's mercy is like a grain of sand balanced against a load of gold: even God's justice takes second place to God's own love for God's creatures. How often do we injure another person in small or great ways because, remembering that it is important to be truthful, we forget that truthfulness is only a virtue on the road to love, not an end in itself?<sup>107</sup>

To suggest that justice follows love can be very difficult to embrace. There are very difficult

*Sayings* that are a challenge for any Orthocardic leader:

Abba Alonius said to Abba Agathon: "Suppose two men committed murder in your presence and one of them fled to your cell. When the police, coming in search of him, ask you, 'Is the murderer with you?' unless you lie, you hand him over to execution."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 262.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>108</sup> Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*, 49.

This saying reminds us of the opening question of Bondi's book, "How does this goal leave space for love that might thwart development?" The instruction is to lie to the officials for the sake of saving the life of the murderer. This is not to excuse or validate murder, but rather to claim that all things, including the law and truthfulness, are in *service to love*. This radical notion that justice *follows* love only makes sense if one believes that God will judge everyone. If however, one does not affirm that there will be a judgement of any sort, then it makes sense to prioritize justice before love. The Orthocardic leader must grapple with these ideas and use the gift of discretion/discernment to know what to do.

The radical nature of love that the Desert Mothers and Fathers sought is one that is divisive. This love has the paradoxical ability to both soften and harden the hearts of those who experience it. How can love soften or harden a heart? Origen of Alexandria wrote:

...the sun, by one and the same power of its heat, melts wax indeed, but dries up and hardens mud not that its power operates one way upon mud, and in another way upon wax; but that the qualities of mud and wax are different, although according to nature they are one thing, both being from the earth.<sup>109</sup>

The goal of the desert was not something for the faint of heart. It is something that human beings are incapable of accomplishing on our own, but may only by the grace of God. The Orthocardic leader is open to the grace that gives courage and strength to purify hearts so they may soften and the fruit of love may abound.

At the conclusion of the guided conversation, focus group members were encouraged to reflect on the conversation, Bondi's book, and their own understanding of Orthocardic leadership. The final focus group meeting would aim at identifying practices of Orthocardic clergy leadership inspired by the desert tradition and distinguished from other leadership models.

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<sup>109</sup> Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Cleveland Coxe A., eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 4*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885), section 1.11.

## Focus Group Framework – Session Three

The final focus group meeting was March 22, 2023 and attempted to unpack these questions:

- What is the *telos* of the Orthocardic leader?
- Are you able to make any suggestions in light of your reading of Bondi's work?
- Are you able to see anything that the desert tradition might reveal to clergy leaders today?

The group struggled with what the *telos* of an Orthocardic leader might be. The group identified the potential straw man argument in saying that the *telos* of Orthocardic leadership is love while the other models have a different *telos*. Group members gave other clergy the benefit of the doubt. The group chose to assume that clergy leaders in the Conference were operating in good faith, and regardless of their leadership model, that every clergyperson believes in the pursuit of love. As one person said, “Everyone is the hero of their own story and I doubt any clergy wakes up thinking they are un-loving.” Reflecting back on previous conversations about the other common leadership models, the group agreed that they all have the same *telos*—to help actualize the reign of God—but each understands the reign of God differently. Attempts to articulate these differences included one saying, “Some may believe that reign of God is here while others believe it to be the hereafter.” A different group member said, “Many may think the goal is to save souls; while that may not be the reign of God, it is defined that way.” One member had an interesting take in trying to differentiate Orthocardic clergy leadership while honoring a consistent *telos* across the models: “The Orthocardic leader may say that the *telos* is the reign of the love of God.” However, the problem of definitions remained. What does the love of God look like? One member said, “Some clergy think that to love someone would be to save their soul, while another see it as some of social activism [*sic*]. They are different but both think they are sharing God’s love.” This part of the conversation reflects the Desert Mothers' and Fathers' embracing of diversity, and even contradiction, while still upholding a common goal.



As in previous group meetings, the participants were quick to draw upon lived experience that could inform the conversation. One member of the group recently spent time in a formal education setting and engaged with generational studies. This member drew on their research to point out how generations X and Z respond to the corporate model of church leadership by saying, “Gen X seems more comfortable with the idea of a CEO Pastor, who leads a mega church. The mega church is dead and the micro-church is on the rise. If we don’t set down these older models then we will be unable to pastor Gen Z well.” The participant suggested that the skillset needed to lead a large organization is not the same as leading a smaller organization. The topics of generational studies, the decline of the mega church, and the emerging micro church are topics of interest for many clergy leaders, but these areas are also outside the scope of this particular project. However, the comments point to the reoccurring theme that clergy need a different skillset. Even if every clergyperson knows this to be true, clergy cannot adopt a different skillset on their own. In fact, one member highlighted that the Conference recently created space for displaced members of a United Methodist Church where the local church voted to disaffiliate. These displaced United Methodists began to meet in a school for a few weeks and into the third week of meeting; this group began to discuss what a new church might look like. Around that time, these individuals asked the Conference leadership for a building of their own rather than being in a rental space at a local school. The new church wants to have a fresh start and a new opportunity, and so it makes sense they desire a new and different building. However, when discussing the traits and skills they thought this new church would need in a clergy leader, the people expressed a desire for a clergy leader to have all the traits and skills that this focus group identified as needing to change. Once again, it will take laity and clergy working in tandem to overcome the most common leadership models and adopt Orthocardic clergy leadership.

One participant said that in their setting, younger members are not looking to the clergy person to be “the sage on the stage, but someone who can be in the mud with them.” This raised a new set of practices that need reconsideration in the Conference. For as long as anyone in the focus group could recall, clergy have been trained in setting strong boundaries between the clergy and the laity extending to even after the clergy person moves from that local church.

The focus group continued to hint around the idea that the Orthocardic leader is in a mutual relationship with the laity. However, this overlooks the power dynamics that are within the clergy and laity positions. No matter how *in the mud* the clergy person gets with the laity, that clergy person is always a clergy person the same way that a mother is always a mother in her child’s eyes. This power dynamic will influence and define behavior in ways that are difficult to overcome even when outside the local church setting. Consider the countless times clergy encounter a member at the grocery store and the member apologizes and then lists off the many reasons they have not attended worship in months. Even when the clergy person is in the public square, the clergy person stands out as an authority with some sort of power over members. Paradoxically, within many local churches, the clergy is not the one with power over the membership, but the inverse. Most clergy are dependent upon the membership for financial compensation, which gives the membership power over the clergy. This only reinforces the dynamics that permit church members to treat the clergy person differently while also ensuring the clergy person interacts with members differently.

The different leadership models address the location of the clergy person in their own ways. The Evangelist model reinforces the clergy as being on a different level, usually being elevated above the laity. The Servant Leader model reinforces the clergy also as being on a different level, but that of being below the people as a servant. The CEO model reinforces that the pastor works

among the congregation responding to their needs and desires. The Orthocardic clergy leader locates themselves in a different space than the laity: differentiated but connected. How this looks is that the Orthocardic clergy leader must take seriously that Christ is the mediator in all things. This means that Christ stands between the clergyperson and the layperson. The Orthocardic clergy leader can only indirectly interact with another. Consider these examples of the Abbases and Ammas:

Abba Hilarion from Palestine visited Abba Antony at the mountain, and Abba Antony said to him, 'Welcome, star of the morning rising at dawn.' 'Peace be with you, pillar of light upholding the world,' said Abba Hilarion in reply to him.<sup>110</sup>

Each Abba greeted the other by using titles and images of Christ. The Abbases greeted the Christ that mediated their relationship. Which means the Abbases indirectly interacted with the other by directly interacting with Christ. This is how one remains differentiated but connected with another. Alternatively, consider Abba Antony who said, "Life and death depend on our neighbor, for if we win over the brother, we win over God, but if we offend the brother, we sin against Christ."<sup>111</sup> Christ as the mediator between individuals means winning over or offending the neighbor is also winning over or offending Christ. Still another story that highlights the indirect way the Orthocardic leader might engage with others:

A brother asked an elder, 'How can a man receive the grace of loving God?' In answer he said, 'If someone sees his brother slipping up and calls on God for help on his behalf, then he acquires understanding of how one should love God.'<sup>112</sup>

If the Orthocardic leader sees someone slip up or sin, that leader should directly appeal to God. In doing so, that leader learns how one should love God and (according to Dorotheus of Gaza) when we move directly toward God, we indirectly move toward our neighbors. Dietrich Bonhoeffer also understood this Orthocardic practice of seeing Christ as the mediator (Hebrews

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<sup>110</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 300.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 307.

8:6; 9:15; 12:24, and 1 Timothy 2:5). He wrote, “Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them ... This means I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him [*sic*] with my love.”<sup>113</sup> Orthocardic clergy leadership has a different location in relationship with the local congregation. By honoring the mediating work of Christ, the clergy remains differentiated and connected to the congregation because Christ mediates and connects all things.

The focus group turned their attention to the final topic of the guided conversation: Are you able to see anything that the desert tradition might reveal to us as pastoral leaders today? At this point, the group had already touched on several practices and they did not want to be redundant in their sharing. The group asked that members list off already identified practices in order to help clarify their thinking. These identified practices include:

- Clarity of a *telos*
- Obedience and humility
- Praying
- Resisting judgmentalism
- Spiritual direction
- Reconsidering compensation
- Growth as maturation
- Disengagement and silence
- Discernment of justice in service of love

The interesting thing about this part of the conversation was how the group validated one another's responses, suggesting the group was able to coalesce around what Orthocardic leadership might look like. This was in contrast to the first group meetings when each member shared about the role and practices of a clergy leader. At that meeting, there were an abundance of responses to the role and practices of the clergy leader. The group was overwhelmed by the abundance and the group could not agree what a clergy model might look like. In this most recent sharing and with

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<sup>113</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together [Gemeinsames Leben.]* (New York: Harper, 1954), 22.

just a little reflection, the group moved from feeling overwhelmed by the abundance of leadership to a state of clarity of what Orthocardic clergy leadership might look like. This suggests that once one removes the abundant clutter of leadership, clergy are able to see and agree to the shape of Orthocardic leadership. Once the group established a working list of Orthocardic practices, the group then turned their attention to filling in some of the details of implementation.

The group strongly favored ongoing mentorship, but wrestled with what that relationship might look like. The Conference seems to know the value of ongoing mentoring and have invested resources into coaching for clergy. One member suggested that perhaps Orthocardic clergy leadership could embrace coaching because “Coaching is mutual; mentoring is more top down. Mentors can teach you how to do a process, but a coaching relationship allows you to come to the table. The coach asks the powerful questions and has an action plan.” A different person added another relationship to consider: “When I think coach I think business. They are the subject matter experts. Mentors are trainers.” The group considered what the differences might be between a coach, a mentor, and a trainer. Notice that these responses fit rather easily into the already established leadership models. The Evangelist leadership model might embrace a mentoring relationship, as that model is interested in teaching. The Servant Leader leadership model might be more comfortable with the trainer relationship because encouraging action is important to them. Finally, coaching is very common relationship for many CEOs in leadership. After some discussion, a group member suggested spiritual direction as a relationship that might align with Orthocardic leadership. Some, but not all, focus group members shared that they have had a spiritual director and their experience reflects the Abba/Amma stories. One member shared that their spiritual director told them to join the director and fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. While

spiritual direction was uncommon among the focus group, every focus group member claimed to have had a mentor, trainer, or a coach at some point in his or her ministry.

One member of the group shifted the conversation back toward what might be an Orthocardic practice by sharing the overwhelming presence of narrative and story within the *Sayings*. Most of the *Sayings* of Ammas and Ammas do not read like proverbs or imperatives, but like short stories. Most of the *Sayings* open with phrases such as, “An elder said ...” or “A brother asked ...” or “There was ...” From the shortest to the longest, most of the *Sayings* have a character and a plot. It is difficult to read the *Sayings* as a list of commandments that speak directly to us; rather these stories speak to us because they speak indirectly through the characters and plot. Consider this saying: “An elder was asked, ‘How do some people say, ‘We see visions of angels?’ ‘Blessed is he who always sees his own sins,’ he said in reply.’”<sup>114</sup> The reader is required to interpret what this saying teaches. One reader may hear that it is important to pray for the vision to see one’s own sin rather than see angels. Another reader may consider the question, “How do some people say, ‘We see visions of angels?’” Is this question asking about how *others* see angels, or is the voice suggesting that *he sees* angels and others are saying that about him? Is this a story inviting one to pay attention to one’s sin, to provide clarity on how others see angels, or as a warning against self-righteousness? The power of the saying is not in what it demands, but what it suggests and guides. Not what it says directly but indirectly. As stated above, the *Sayings* require discretion/discernment to understand them.

Some clergy may not think they are creative enough to create stories in order to guide the congregation. However, this is a misunderstanding of the use of stories by the Orthocardic clergy leader. This leader realizes they do not have to create or generate stories; there are enough stories

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<sup>114</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 273.

within Bible as well as the 1,202 *Sayings* (stories). The Orthocardic leader can also look to the lives of these twenty-seven Abbases and three Ammas for additional stories to tell and share. Rather than having to create new stories, the Orthocardic clergy leader befriends these stories first. Then through the practice of discretion/discernment, the leader knows what story is appropriate for a particular time. The Orthocardic leader knows the *Sayings*/stories will not directly address presenting issues of the day. For instance, there is not a saying that directly addresses the inclusion or exclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons. However, the *Sayings* do provide opportunity for the Orthocardic leader to practice love, humility, discretion/discernment, and prayer. The Orthocardic leader understands the wisdom of an elder who said, “Do not teach before it is time, otherwise you will be diminished in understanding the whole time.”<sup>115</sup>

While discussing the power of narrative and story, one focus group member raised a question, “What if everyone is holding the door open for the other, but no one walks through the door? The pursuit of love, humility, and extreme embracing of the other has to break down into non-action.” Perhaps without knowing it, this focus group member expressed an Orthocardic practice (open-ended story for discretion/discernment) while at the same time expressing reservations about Orthocardic leadership. First of all, the story of many people holding open the door without anyone walking through is a potent image. It conjures the Rublev's icon sometimes called the “Hospitality of Abraham” or even “the Trinity.” The icon visually depicts the ‘non-action’ that the focus group member suggests. In the icon, there are three figures around a table.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 271.

<sup>116</sup> Andrei Rublev, The Trinity, 1411, Tempera, Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow, accessed March 11, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity\\_\(Andrei\\_Rublev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_(Andrei_Rublev)).

Each of the figures is bowing their head to one another as if to suggest that each figure is more



important than they are. Presumably, if people are sitting at a table that has food on it, then the point of the gathering is to eat. Yet none of the three figures is eating. If one thinks the point of a gathering with food is to eat, then the three bowing figures exhibit an inaction. However, if one considers the point of a gathering with food to be extending love to another and honoring the *imago Dei* in the other, then this icon is action packed. Consider these two *Sayings*:<sup>117</sup>

Another elder visited one of the elders, who boiled a few lentils and said to [the visitor], 'Let us offer the little synaxis.' He recited the entire Psalter, then the other one repeated from memory the two great prophets. The visiting elder departed when dawn broke; they forgot about the food.

One of the elders visited another elder, and he said to his disciple, 'Cook a few lentils for us.' He did that and also moistened some [dried] bread. They went on talking about spiritual matters until the sixth hour of the next day, at which point the elder said to his disciple again, 'Cook a few lentils for us, my son,' and he said to him, 'I did it yesterday.' Then they got up and ate.

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<sup>117</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 51.



Here we see the most important thing is not the action of eating, but the action of being in relationship with the other. In suggesting that the point of holding the door open is to allow people to walk through, the focus group member may overlook other reasons that the door is being held open. The Orthocardic leader has a different measure of which action is the most important. It is not the eating nor the walking through the door, but being present with others. The Orthocardic leader knows that God will nourish even if one does not eat. It imagines that a door held open may be for God to walk through or for fresh air to come into the room.

The topic of worship design and leadership concluded the focus group's attention. Specifically, they discussed how the different leadership models understand the *telos* and *skopos* of worship. The group attempted to juxtapose the different leadership models through the lens of worship. In an effort to summarize this topic, one focus group member sent an email afterwards with what they thought they'd heard. They wrote: "The evangelist probably designs and leads worship toward a decision (specifically, a decision to invite Jesus into their hearts, be saved, and be baptized). Worship would be inspiring, energetic, and may even be a bit manipulative."

The emphasis on making or provoking a decision suggests that the Evangelist model places a premium on matters of the mind or thought. The participants wrote that this differs from the Servant Leader model, who "Likely designs and leads worship toward action (getting involved, outreach, mission) and emphasizes sacrificial living and servanthood." Again, one can see this model emphasizes the action of the hands and feet, which is not necessarily contingent on one being a Christian. Someone can do good works in the world without taking the more challenging aspects of Christianity seriously. The CEO leadership model has a complicated relationship with worship, which one can see in how this focus group member wrote about it:

The CEO leader likely designs and leads worship toward church growth and financial (and other) sustainability—from an institutional perspective. They might be more motivational (Leader makes them want to do X vs. the Holy Spirit speaks and sets the direction) and puts forth a specific plan, strategy, and formula for accomplishing the congregation's goals. If we do X, then Y will happen.

In the Evangelist or Servant Leader model, if the congregation fails to respond there is limited threat to the viability of the organization. Notice the number of competing interests the CEO leadership model needs to address. If the CEO leader fails in worship, then the “sustainability” of the institution is at stake. It puts pressure on the clergy leader to ensure that members of the congregation have a good return on their investment of money and time in order to validate asking for money and time. This approach to worship leaves little room for things like confession, repentance, silence, and prophetic preaching. It may even limit the number of voices permitted in worship because multiple voices may have contradictory messages. Finally, the focus group member attempted to sketch out an approach to worship for the Orthocardic leader. They wrote, “The Orthocardic leader would design and lead worship in a manner that makes space for God's voice to be the loudest. Maybe more silence, more unscripted space, and a willingness to ‘go off script.’”

Designing and leading this type of worship suggested by the member would take significant work from the clergy and congregation because of all the previously stated expectations and pressures. It also would require courage from the clergy leader. It takes courage not just to change the order of worship or even to shift music styles. It takes courage because being able to lead worship as suggested means the clergy must be secure in their identity in God. For instance, if silence is a practice of worship for the Orthocardic clergy leader, it takes courage for that leader to be silent.

At the end of the focus group, it became clear that one of the defining characteristics of Orthocardic clergy leadership is courage. There are many obstacles, passions, expectations, and demands for a Conference clergy leader. For many, these are overwhelming and can wound the very heart and soul of the clergyperson. If clergy are going to rediscover the Orthocardic model, clergy can take guidance from Abba Antony who began his monastic life with a number of obstacles, passions, expectations, and demands of his own.<sup>118</sup> Clergy today are in a much better position than Antony was in this work, because we only need to rediscover rather than create new.

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<sup>118</sup> Athanasius and Gregg, *The Life of Antony*, 33.

## Chapter 4 – Synthesis of Orthocardic Leadership

In the *Institutes*, John Cassian writes about a process to train and develop Christians. The first step in the training a subject in Christianity is the subject admitting they are in need, or what he calls the fear of God.<sup>119</sup> This study suggests that clergy leaders in the Central Texas Conference are in need. They know that the way things are working is not working but find it difficult to seriously reflect on embedded leadership philosophies to determine a better way forward. The problem of abundance contributes to unsustainable leadership practices and various forms of leadership paralysis. The most common leadership models (Evangelist, Servant Leader, and CEO) are no longer sufficient to help the local church actualize the reign of God (the *telos*).

Cassian instructs the subject, after admitting our need, to search for a new model. For several years, I have searched for a new model for clergy leadership, but this only added to the problem. Pursuing more leadership gurus or classes for the sake of discovering a new clergy leadership model only compounded the abundance of leadership. It was not until the work of Roberta Bondi that I came to see that looking for the new prevented me from considering what already existed. Through her writings and lectures on the Desert Mothers and Fathers, it became possible to see that these ancient teachers created a way of being a leader. I call it Orthocardic clergy leadership because, like the Desert Ascetics, this model aims for purity of heart in order to achieve the *telos*.

After one admits being in need, turning away from previous models and searching for a new model, Cassian says the subject is now a beginner. Cassian suggests that anyone who has made it this far in the process should embrace the posture of a student. He calls this posture the virtue of humility. This posture of becoming a student led me to enroll in a doctoral program not

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<sup>119</sup> Turner, "John Cassian and the Desert Fathers," 466-486.

only to learn from professional academics, but also to learn from peers. Ultimately, these opportunities eliminated my desire to be a clergyperson in the way the denomination and the Conference elevates. This “death of desire,” as Cassian identifies it, came by way of seeing other clergy peers who also felt a change was needed in the practice of clergy leadership. It was unclear what Orthocardic clergy leadership looked like, but Cassian says the only way that new virtues and practices grow is from the *seedbed* of the previously discarded desires and practices. The collective discarding of practices and desires of the Evangelist, Servant Leader, and CEO established rich soil for the healthy practices of the Desert Ascetics to bloom. In partnership with a focus group, themes and details that make up the Orthocardic clergy leadership model materialized.

Orthocardic clergy leadership is a model that is distinct from other models of clergy leadership because it privileges humility as a cornerstone practice and virtue. This is not to say that other models do not value humility, but it is not the essential practice. In other models, humility is a way that some leaders manage a reputation or manipulate social settings. In these models, humility is usually an expression of how the leader sees themselves. Orthocardic clergy leadership privileges humility because humility is an expression of how the leader sees others. The practice of humility is not to think less of oneself, but to see everyone as a child of God. This means that the Orthocardic leader takes humanity seriously and knows that each human is beloved by God, and that informs every interaction. The virtue of humility means that Christ is standing in the center between individuals. If the leader needs to engage with another, then the leader must move closer to Christ. Dorotheus of Gaza’s image of the wheel becomes more than an image to the Orthocardic clergy leader. The clergy engages with the congregation by the very means of moving closer to Christ. To put it another way, the clergy leader engages indirectly with individuals by engaging

directly with Christ. The leader does not circumvent Christ in interactions with others but understands that Christ is the mediator in all interactions.

Another characteristic of the Orthocardic leader is the practice of obedience. It is important to clarify the ways the desert tradition understood obedience from the ways that obedience is used to subjugate others. Many people, especially individuals in non-dominant populations, experience obedience as the moral or religious justification to continue their oppression by members of dominant populations. This is not how the desert tradition utilized or understood the practice of obedience. Obedience in the desert was always in service of the *telos* of the kingdom of God and the *skopos* of the purity of heart. It was not practiced or deployed in the service of oppressing another. Rather, the practice of obedience was similar to how an artist learns to paint. Creating a painting involves a number of decisions, such as the subject matter, the composition, and colors. The number of choices a new painter must make can overwhelm them and depress the spirit to paint. Classically, an oil paint artist would learn how to paint by recreating the paintings of the old master artists. Recreating the old master's painting removed the numerous decisions that can overwhelm budding artists. The old master chose the subject matter, the composition, and the colors long before the novice began. In following the decisions already made by the old master, the novice was able to learn a set of skills or techniques. Perhaps even more important, the novice's love of painting was free from the oppression of choices. Additionally, there was no expectation that the novice could fully recreate the original, and so to fail to do so was not evidence or proof that the novice could not paint. Perhaps paradoxically, the fruits of being obedient to the old master's paintings were freedom and grace. Once the novice learned the techniques of the old master, then the novice was encouraged and confident to use their crafted techniques and love of painting as a point of deviation and creativity. The desert use of obedience is far removed from the

colonial and patriarchal use of obedience as oppression and much closer to that of a master helping the novice fall in love with the art of being a follower of Christ.

For clergy in the UMC, our church polity creates many opportunities to practice obedience. The bishop appoints clergy to serve in ministry settings. District Superintendents set meetings that clergy are required to attend. The denomination sets doctrine and social principles. The liturgical calendar and lectionaries set a rhythm for worship and scripture reading. However, obedience and performing one's job are not the same. Obedience is an expression of the Orthocardic leader's practice of humility. Consider a bishop appointing two clergypersons to two different local churches. Pastor A thinks about what they are bringing as the pastor to the local church, perhaps their gifts in preaching or teaching. Pastor A might imagine all the good work they will be able to do with all the resources of the local church. Pastor B might imagine how their arrival affects the local church already doing ministry in the community. Pastor B considers that the saints in the local church have something to teach Pastor B about the Christian life. Both Pastor A and Pastor B go as they are sent, however Pastor B is obedient because Pastor B is willing to learn from the congregation. "An elder said, 'I would rather be taught than to teach.'"<sup>120</sup>

Regardless of future success or failures, the Orthocardic clergy leader does not abandon the virtue of humility or the purity of heart *skopos*. They remember the elder who said, "I prefer defeat with humility to victory with pride."<sup>121</sup> Both clergy go as the bishop sends, but the latter is obedient. Obedience is the practice of trusting that the way of understanding is by walking a path that others do not see as valuable.

Abba Arsenios was once asking an Egyptian elder about his own logismoi. Another person, when he saw him, said, "Abba Aresnius, how is it that you, who have such a command of

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<sup>120</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 271.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 270.

Greek and Roman learning, are asking this peasant about your logismoi?” But he said to him, “A command of Greek and Roman learning I have, but I have not yet learned the alphabet of this peasant.”<sup>122</sup>

The Orthocardic practice of obedience is not limited to appointments of clergy to local churches, but extends to the early training of the clergyperson. For instance, many clergy bemoan educational requirements in seminaries for not being relevant. This common mentality assumes that the clergyperson knows what is and what is not going to be relevant for ministry. This shows a lack of humility that corrupts the purity of heart *skopos*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many clergy said, “I did not learn how to do ministry in a pandemic in seminary.” It is not just that there is not a class discussing how to do ministry in a pandemic. Even if there had been a course in seminary prior to the pandemic about how to do ministry during a pandemic, it is difficult to imagine that students would have attended such a class. Obedience as practiced in Orthocardic clergy leadership resists the temptation of relevancy for the sake of faithful dedication to the *telos* and *skopos*. Henri Nouwen writes elegantly about how the temptations of Christ in the desert were the temptations to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, in his book *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*.<sup>123</sup> In this book, Nouwen suggests that the practice of contemplative prayer is the remedy to the temptation of relevancy. Nouwen’s description of contemplative prayer is parallel to the desert tradition of seeking hesychia.<sup>124</sup>

Just as Orthocardic clergy leadership approaches humility and obedience differently, so too does it approach accountability differently. Some leaders use leadership as a way to judge or even attempt to police the behavior of those who are outside the group. For instance, clergy leaders who demand that Christian prayers be the only prayer allowed in public spaces are leaders

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>123</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 20-22.



attempting to police those outside the group they lead. These leaders are able to unify a group of followers because they state a set of behaviors or beliefs that those outside the group should have but do not have. This leader attempts to create a group that is internally pure by highlighting the impurity outside the group. Other leaders seek to unify a group by policing or judging the behaviors or beliefs within the group. Perhaps this looks like a clergy who demands that all church members must sign a behavioral covenant or face removal. This leader attempts to create a group that is internally pure by purging those who deviate from the group norms. Another leader seeks to unify a group by having people hold themselves accountable. This might look like a clergy leader who asks members to set their own goals and then expects the member to hold themselves accountable to those self-determined goals. The leader attempts to create a group that is internally pure by atomizing the group into individuals who only are accountable to their own selves. The Orthocardic clergy leader seeks to unify a group by promoting humility among the group, which teaches that God holds us accountable as the ultimate judge. It is important to know what the Desert Mothers and Fathers thought about God's judgement. They did not see God's judgment as vengeful or petty. "Abba Antony said, "I do not fear God anymore; I love him, for 'love casts out fear.'"<sup>125</sup> If we consider 1 John 4:16 which says that God is love, then Abba Antony hints that God may not be capable of being vengeful. Some are skeptical of this way of considering accountability and may think this is not accountability at all. That this way of accountability permits people to continue to behave poorly without any repercussions. The Orthocardic clergy leader is not a judge, but a model. The Orthocardic leader does not practice coercion or invitation. It assumes that love is powerful enough to change hearts and so the Orthocardic clergy leader is persistently aiming at the goal of love. This model takes inspiration from Origen's image of God's love. Origen offers up

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<sup>125</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 300.

the metaphor that God's love is like the heat of the sun. Some hearts made of wax melt while other hearts made of mud harden.<sup>126</sup> The conditions of each person's heart respond to this type of accountability of love differently, however the Orthocardic leader is to insist that all are accountable to God and trust that the love of God changes hearts.

Orthocardic clergy leadership also has an alternate understanding of what it means to be reliant on God. Some leaders are codependent on God. This leader views God in transactional ways such as, "If I pray this, then God will do that." This model of leadership assumes that God wants to do things for humanity, but can only do so under certain preconditions and the leader is responsible to fulfill the preconditions. Still other leaders function independently from God. These leaders perform actions without any indication they are consulting or considering the divine. These leaders may not even uphold that God is capable of doing anything and thus the leader must operate independent of God's guidance or presence. Still other leaders assume God chooses them as a particular leader and that God is dependent on their leadership. This model of leadership often guides people to think they are the only ones who can fix the organization, or that without their leadership the whole organization would fall apart.

Orthocardic clergy leadership is not codependent on nor independent of God. This model also does not embrace that God is dependent on the leader, but rather that God and the leader are interdependent. Interdependence requires that each party "self-empties" for the sake of the other. Orthocardic clergy leadership mirrors this *kenosis* of Christ expressed in Philippians 2:5–8:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

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<sup>126</sup> George Anson Jackson, *The Fathers of the Third Century* (New York: D. Appleton, 1881), 115.

Orthocardic leaders read the story of Jesus and see God being interdependent with the disciples. Jesus asks the disciples to do things with and for him. The disciples ask Jesus to show them the way of life and light. There is an interdependent partnership between the disciples and Christ: both need the other to complete their work. Orthocardic clergy leaders are interdependent with the congregation. For instance, clergy cannot attend to every hospital visit and laity may not have the same knowledge of people's current condition in the hospital. The clergy and laity are interdependent to provide care for the hospitalized. The interdependent nature of Orthocardic clergy leadership means that the primary marker of discipleship looks different from other models.

Fundamentally, a disciple is one who follows a teacher. One could be a disciple of a particular thinker or philosopher, as Aristotle was Plato's disciple. The markers of a disciple may vary among different fields. Some fields require the disciple to watch a teacher while others require the disciple to pass an exam before they can do anything. Jesus invited disciples to "follow" him. Following Jesus is the primary marker of a disciple of Jesus Christ. However, what exactly does it look like to follow Jesus as a disciple? Unsurprisingly, different clergy leadership models have a different primary marker of what it looks like to follow Jesus and live as a disciple. Some models emphasize learning as the primary marker of being a disciple. If a subject is learning about Jesus, this indicates a disciple. These leaders emphasize reading and memorizing scripture and make book or movie recommendations. These leaders place a premium on things like lectures and speakers and they may encourage people to listen to sermons and podcasts. The subject grows in their discipleship if they have a growth mindset and are always open to learn and develop. These leaders may struggle with a disciple who chooses to be with their family rather than attend a Bible study or someone who only reads the Bible in communal worship.

Other leaders affirm that discipleship is not how much one knows about Jesus, but if one knows Jesus. These leaders might point to characters in the Gospels who knew about Jesus, but did not follow Jesus. Herod, Pilate, the Sadducees, and even Judas knew *about* Jesus but they did not *know* Jesus. Therefore, these leaders elevate action as the primary discipleship marker. Does the disciple do things that Jesus did? These clergy leaders may use the parable of the sheep and goats found in Matthew 25 as a starting point for discipleship:

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

This leadership model places a premium on engaging with others who are on the margins of society. This model may struggle with other things that Jesus did, such as going away from the people to pray or refusing to help the people in his hometown (Mark 6).

Some clergy leadership models suggest that the key indicator that someone is following Jesus is if that person is making more disciples. This model of leadership might argue that making disciples is the first thing that Jesus does. Jesus calls people to follow him and in doing so those people become disciples when they, in turn, make other disciples. A key scripture for this model might be Matthew 28, where Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples in all the nations. The argument attempts to combine other models of discipleship and argue that someone cannot make a disciple of Jesus without learning about Jesus and doing the work of Jesus. This model may struggle with things that Jesus did which drove people away from following him. For instance, Jesus tells followers to take up a cross and follow (Matthew 16:24). Still another time Jesus tells people to hate their parents (Luke 14:26), or even to sell what they have (Matthew 19:21). If the marker of genuine discipleship is to make more disciples, then this clergy leadership model is

likely to avoid things that are faithful to Jesus, but also might not result in making another disciple of Jesus.

Orthocardic clergy leadership embraces a different key marker of discipleship: discretion/discernment. The disciple of Jesus Christ is one who practices discretion/discernment in all aspects of their days. This model might take inspiration from Jesus who was a student of John the Baptist and the Torah, but Jesus discerned a different interpretation of the law. For instance, Jesus exercised discretion in applying the law governing the Sabbath and the laws of ritual bathing that looked to some like disobeying the law. The practice of discretion/discernment means that one must know the laws well enough to break them properly. Orthocardic clergy leaders might consider the poetic scripture of Ecclesiastes 3 in which the author writes, “for everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven.” Orthocardic leaders know there is a time to study, a time to work, and a time produce, a time to rest, and a time to be silent, but knowing when it is time to do which action requires the disciple to practice discretion/discernment. Orthocardic clergy leaders understand that you can teach people about Jesus, but they still may not follow Jesus. Orthocardic leaders follow the example of Jesus and the Desert Mothers and Fathers by prioritizing discretion/discernment as the key discipleship marker. Consider this story of the desert:

Abba Silvanus and Zachariah, his disciple, once visited a monastery, and they made them take a little to eat before they went their way. When they came out, his disciple found water by the wayside and wanted to drink. Abba Silvanus said to him, ‘It is a fast day today, Zachariah, ’but he said, ‘Did we not eat, Father?’ The elder replied, ‘That eating was out of love [for the brothers]; but let us keep our own fast, my son.’<sup>127</sup>

Here we see Abba Silvanus with the proper discretion/discernment of when to break the fast. He tells the younger one that receiving the hospitality of their host is more important than

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<sup>127</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 47-48.

keeping the fast because to keep the fast would offend their host. Abba Silvanus gives Zachariah an insight into discretion/discernment by offering him a model of what to think about the next time he is fasting in the presence of others. It is one thing for a subject to be able to practice discretion/discernment on their own, but what marks the disciple of Christ is one's ability to help others in their practice of discretion/discernment.

A brother asked the same Abba Poemen, 'A legacy has been left to me; what do you bid me to do with it?' Abba Poemen said to him, 'Go away and in three days I will tell you.' Then when he came back again the elder said to him, 'What am I to say to you, brother? If I say to you, 'Give it to the church,' they will have banquets there; if I say, 'Give it to your relatives,' there is no reward for you in that; but if I say, 'Give it to the poor,' you will have no worries. So go and do what you like; for me, this is not my business.'<sup>128</sup>

Abba Poemen helps the brother break his dependence on another to discern what he is to do with this legacy left to him. Abba Poemen understands that discretion/discernment is not limited to knowing what to do, but it is taking responsibility for one's actions. The discipleship process of the Orthocardic clergy leader is one that looks to use and promote discretion/discernment as the key marker of being a disciple of Christ.

Orthocardic clergy leadership also views the stewardship of the church's resources differently. Some clergy leadership models live out of the conviction that these resources belong to the congregation. This makes logical sense because the membership of the church gave time and treasure to establish buildings and ministry. This provides the leader an opportunity to encourage the membership to take ownership of decisions while being somewhat removed from decisions on how to steward these resources. Making a decision to use resources often looks like voting among the membership with the clergy as a non-voting presence. Other clergy leaders may frame stewardship of the church's resources not as *your* resources but as *our* resources. This model

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 162-163.

suggests clergy and laity are equally yoked in decisions about allocating resources. This model values strategies such as dialectical inquiry and consensus making. Still others feel it is the responsibility of the clergy leader to be the primary steward of resources of the congregation. The leader in this model may pull together a small group of trusted advisors, either formally or informally, to advise the leader on how resources should be allocated, but the clergy leader retains the authority to make the decisions. Congregational involvement happens after the decision is made and the congregation is being informed or solicited to support the decision. This model might value things like executive teams, efficiencies, and a single governing board rather than several committees within the church.

Orthocardic clergy leadership approaches the stewardship of churches' resource with the essential understanding that everything belongs to God. The church is not *yours* or *ours* or *mine* but God's. This means that when it comes to allocating resources, the Orthocardic clergy leader advocates the allocation of resources not because it is strategic, efficient, or fruitful, but because such an allocation is faithful. The Orthocardic leader knows that the most faithful action may look frivolous, illogical, or prodigal, but remains steadfast in these efforts because they help the church realize the *skopos* and *telos*. One of the potentially radical examples of such stewardship of resources is how the Orthocardic leader considers their own compensation. In the UMC, the clergyperson is a voting member of the Pastor Parish Relations Committee (PPRC). It is the responsibility of the PPRC to recommend the clergy salary level to the whole church to vote on. Orthocardic clergy recuse themselves from the compensation conversation and vote, but also, if possible, advocate lowering their compensation.<sup>129</sup> Alternatively, another Orthocardic practice

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<sup>129</sup> This suggestion is more complicated than it first appears due to the existence of Conference minimums for clergy salaries. These Conference-prescribed minimums serve as vital safeguards, protecting clergy, particularly those historically undervalued and under-compensated, including women and minorities, against persistent economic

around stewardship is to make public how much the clergyperson gives to the church. While this practice may create opportunities for vainglory or even shaming others for not giving, the radical nature of this practice may move the hearts of others more faithfully than withholding this information. The topics of compensation and giving are complex and often taboo topics, but the Orthocardic leader must be willing to address these subjects with purity of heart in mind. The Orthocardic leader might wrestle with a question such as, “If the UMC requires the local church to know what compensation level the clergy receives, should the church also know what level the clergy gives?”

The final characteristic of Orthocardic clergy leadership to explore is the way the passions present themselves in the clergy leader.

Poemen said, ‘Passions work in four stages - first, in the heart; secondly, in the face; thirdly, in words; and fourthly, it is essential not to render evil for evil in deeds. If you can purify your heart, passion will not come into your expression; but if it comes into your face, take care not to speak; but if you do speak, cut the conversation short in case you render evil for evil.’<sup>130</sup>

Abba Poemen’s description of the way passions manifest in the life of an individual aligns with the four leadership models described in this project. Orthocardic clergy leaders prioritize having a right heart because the heart is where the passions begin. Orthocardic clergy leaders know that the power of the passions has a cumulative effect and they are more potent the longer they have to work in the individual. The passions are at their most fundamental and early stages when they are in the heart, so addressing the passions early at this level is a practice of Orthocardic leaders. This might look like addressing these passions with the spiritual director and practicing obedience and

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inequality. Additionally, it is essential to recognize that numerous clergy members face challenges in negotiating for a reduced salary due to the financial burdens incurred while pursuing the requisite degrees for their roles within the United Methodist Church. Orthocardic clergy leaders should not advocate for salaries to drop below these established minimums.

<sup>130</sup> Carrigan, Athanasius, and Jerome, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, 126.



humility to the director's guidance in order to tame the passions. The Orthocardic clergy leader appreciates the passions for what they are: harbingers of the Good News of Christ. When we listen to our passions, we can hear where we are in need and where the liberating power of Christ can heal us. These passions show which parts of the heart need purification. If someone is afflicted with the passion of vainglory then it is important for the person to consider why he or she is trying to seek fame and fortune over the *telos* of the Christian life.

If the passions are unaddressed in the heart, then they will grow in their power and harm by moving to the subject's face. When the passions reach the face, they contort one's ability to see clearly. The CEO clergy leader is constantly on guard for things that cloud their vision. However, the passions have the characteristic to rationalize things that pull the subject off the target of love. When passions influence our vision, we are unable to see how our vision is impaired. To put it another way, we do not see things as they are, but we see things as we are. One might rationalize the passion of vainglory by seeing fame as a tool to help spread the Gospel of Christ. When our face contorts vision, clergy might see fame as the only way to be a faithful clergy leader. When the passions reach the face and distort one's vision, they are much more difficult to address, but the passions become even more harmful if they reach our words.

When the passions are able to cloud our vision, they shape the words we use. Words shaped by the passions may sound loving to the speaker, but are laced with judgmentalism and even condemnation. Passion-shaped words are often qualified with statements such as, "I love you but ..." or "you should ..." When the passions reach one's words, the clergy miss the target of love by placing oneself above another. The pastor as Evangelist is most susceptible to this stage of the passions because of the emphasis placed on words within the model. The Orthocardic leader knows that passion shaped words are harmful not just to those who hear but those who speak them:

Abba Diodochos said, “Just as the heat quickly escapes outside if the doors of the bathhouse are continuously open, so it is with the soul when it wants to do a lot of conversing. Even if the conversation is good sometimes, its own heat dissipates through the gate of speech. So silence at the appropriate time is a good thing, being nothing other than the mother of wisest thoughts.”<sup>131</sup>

However difficult the passions are to address when they contort the face, or how harmful they are when they shape our words, Abba Poemen highlights that the passions are their most destructive when they reach the stage of one’s actions. The pastor as Servant Leader is most susceptible to this stage of the passions because this leadership model prioritizes action. In many local churches, the model of Servant Leadership claims Jesus Christ as its inspiration. Many Servant Leader resources cite John 13 when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples as the example of what a Servant Leader should do. Notice that this puts the Servant Leader in the position of the Christ rather than that of the disciple. The Servant Leader model tempts the adherent to avoid being in a position of needing to be washed or served themselves. This is in part why passion shaped actions are so harmful; they suggest that the Servant Leader is only a good leader when they are serving or that the leader is without need. When one acts as though they are without need, then one cannot practice humility. Without humility, one is powerless to the passions as they begin in the heart, contort our face, shape our words, and culminate in our actions. Passions are parasitic and can only live by placing roots down in the heart of a person. The Orthocardic clergy leader works with the master gardener Christ to pluck these roots and throw them into the fire. Orthocardic clergy leadership is different in a number of ways from the models of Evangelist, Servant Leader, and the CEO. After the work of the focus group and continued reflection, we can add to the original chart differentiating these models (figure 3):

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<sup>131</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 18.

	<b>Evangelist</b>	<b>Servant Leader</b>	<b>CEO Leader</b>	<b>Orthocardic Leader</b>
<i>Telos</i> (ends)	reign of God			
<i>Skopos</i> (purpose/aim)	To Convert	To Serve	To Make (meeting market needs)	To Purify Heart
<b>Privileged</b>	Speech	Action	Vision	Humility
<b>“Ortho”</b>	Doxy (teaching)	Praxy (action)	<i>Ophthalmoi</i> (eyes)	Cardia (heart)
<b>Problematic aspect</b>	Conformity to culture	Does not require Christ	Following the desires of the market	Foolishness
<b>Accountability</b>	Regulate out group members	Regulate in group members	Regulate self	Regulated by God
<b>Reliance on God</b>	Codependent (If God does ‘x’ then I will do ‘y’)	Independent (don’t need God to do the work)	Dependent (God is dependent on the leader)	Interdependent (God as mutual partner in the work)
<b>Key Marker of Discipleship</b>	Learning	Working	Producing	Discretion/ Discernment
<b>Guidance from</b>	Mentor	Trainer	Coach	Spiritual director
<b>Preaching Emphasis</b>	Facts	Directives	Motivation	Imagination
<b>Relating to others</b>	Above	Below	Among	Indirectly
<b>Stewardship</b>	My church	Our church	Your church	God’s church
<b>Poemen’s sequence of passions</b>	Words	Hands	Face	Heart

Figure 3

## **Chapter 5 – Significance, Limits and Future Study**

### **Significance**

If a doctor is going to prescribe a treatment, then the doctor needs to have an accurate diagnosis so the doctor knows what treatment options are available. Without a proper diagnosis, treatments are likely to fail, and the patient will continue to struggle and suffer. Clergy and local churches are receiving the same treatment to address the problem of clergy leadership. There are retreats, trainings, leadership resources, and countless tools to help the clergyperson with the diagnosed lack of leadership among churches and clergy. As clergy undergo this treatment, the clergyperson does not receive healing but grows even more overwhelmed by new demands, expectations, and requirements. The denomination and Conference continue to treat the problem by adding more, but these treatments are not working. Until the denomination and Conference address the misdiagnosis, the problem will persist.

The significance of this project is its argument that the problem of clergy leadership is not in a lack of leadership but in its abundance. This project not only attempts a more accurate diagnosis but also prescribes an alternate treatment. Rather than adding to the abundance of leadership models for clergy and local churches to choose from, Orthocardic clergy leadership prunes away the abundance. The denomination and Conference can aid in this treatment by helping to eliminate expectations and demands. Supporting clergy does not look like adding more to their role, but giving permission for clergy to re-discover an ancient model of the Christian leader. By identifying, naming, and describing the Evangelist, Servant Leader, and CEO models, one is able to see their shortcomings and deficiencies. A different diagnosis leads to a different treatment, and

the new treatment cannot look like previous treatments under a different name. This is in part why the Orthocardic clergy leadership model is significant.

This model does not demand the clergy learn new things, but rediscover what they already know in their bones to be true. It does not add more to the expectations of clergy leaders but eliminates expectations. It does not change the *telos* of clergy leadership but it significantly modifies the clergy's *skopos*. It is a model that is rooted in the Christian tradition and thus more aligned with the organization called the Church. It is a model that introduces clergy to fellow leaders who have walked a similar path and offers companionship. It is a model that seeks to uncover deep wisdom rather than settling for knowledge. It is a model that can assist the clergy leader through the expected and unexpected while maintaining integrity and consistency. This project restores clergy agency in defining the role and function of the clergy in a local church. It does this by drawing upon the sources that are most familiar to clergy such as Scripture, John Wesley, and the Desert Mothers and Fathers. Rather than clergy receiving expectations being thrust upon them, the re-discovery of the Orthocardic model gives clergy a reason and language to work with the local church.

This leads to the second point of significance: this project and model addresses the unmet need to examine the embedded leadership philosophies. The Orthocardic clergy leadership model gives permission for a clergy leader to address the sprawling expectations of clergy leadership. These expectations are vast and wide and only more complicated when the clergyperson and local church do not examine the role of clergy leadership in a setting. Unexamined philosophies of clergy leadership contribute to the problem of abundance, because clergy may be operating with one model of leadership while the laity expect a different model of clergy leadership. These mismatched expectations or models contribute to clergy isolation, compassion fatigue, and

burnout. Orthocardic clergy leadership is still in the early stages of rediscovery, and clergy and local churches can use the Orthocardic model as a resource to examine clergy leadership models together and come to a greater alignment.

The third point of significance is that Orthocardic clergy leadership invites clergy and laity to re-discover an underused lexicon. The number of laity engaged in a project of critically reflecting their embedded theology (commonly called *deconstruction*) suggest that previous answers and responses to questions are unsatisfying. The common responses and answers for life's questions are stale or often filled with empty platitudes. Laity are so familiar with the responses from the traditional and progressive positions that they are looking for a third way. The current dichotomies are oppressive and unimaginative. Orthocardic clergy leadership helps the church move beyond this tired dichotomy and sustained tensions often described as the tension between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Through short stories and spiritual insights, the Desert Mothers and Fathers spark the imagination of a new generation of Christians. Orthocardic clergy leadership asks the same questions of faith but offers a refreshing response rooted in the forgotten native language of the Christian desert. The Orthocardic leadership model also reveals more interesting questions such as, "What is the *telos* of the Christian life?" and "What is the *skopos* of the clergy leader?" The rediscovery of questions like these and the invitation to practice the language of the Abbas and Ammas make Orthocardic leadership a much needed treatment for the problem of clergy leadership.

The final point of significance is the opportunity Orthocardic clergy leadership has to re-introduce clergy and laity to the wisdom, values, and practices of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. Perhaps because of the distance of time, context, or geography, the Desert Mothers and Fathers are forgotten. For instance, let us consider a current desire compared to the wisdom of the desert

tradition. Today, many people desire something described as *balance* as they navigate the chaotic waters of life. The pursuit of balance drives the person to expend resources and energy to find tips, tactics, and teachers to achieve this balance. The wisdom of the desert suggests that seeking a balance will only make one seasick and waterlogged. Rather than seeking balance, the desert wisdom teaches one should find the *center*. As the wheel imaged by Dorotheus of Gaza elegantly describes, when we move to the center we move closer to God and the support of neighbors. Locating and receiving the support of the center means one abandons the desire for balance. Orthocardic clergy leadership liberates individuals from trying to find a balance by running from one side of the metaphorical boat to the other and instead invites them hold to the center mast of the cross. As Amma Syncletica said:

They who set out to sail unfurl the sails at first when they encounter a favorable wind but then undo it when an adverse wind comes at them; the sailors do not discharge the ship because the wind is against them. They wait quietly for a while or wrestle with the storm, then they sail on again. So it is with us; when an adverse wind is against us, let us complete our voyage without fear, having unfurled the cross instead of a sail.<sup>132</sup>

In this metaphor, the invitation is to consider the role of the sails and the mast. Sails sway in the wind and are susceptible to tearing. Sails, while providing a deceptive sense of control, are ultimately powerless against the current and can become liabilities, risking the capsizing of the boat when buffeted by harsh winds. Consequently, during storms, it becomes imperative to gather and secure the sails to the mast, symbolized by the cross. The Orthocardic clergy leadership model encourages both clergy and laity to recognize the inherent fragility of relying solely on times of good fortune. Orthocardic clergy leaders focus toward the steadfast mast. The desert wisdom is full of different metaphors, which work within people's hearts so they may faithfully live the

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<sup>132</sup> Wortley, trans. *The Book of the Elders*, 105.

skopos and telos of the Christian life. Perhaps going to the dry desert is what so many people drowning in the abundance of leadership need.

## **Limits**

There are at least four limits affecting this project and the adoption of Orthocardic leadership. The first are the limits of the author-researcher. Efforts were made to limit the influence of conscience bias, such as taking direct quotes from focus group members and faithfully aiming to reflect the Desert Ascetics, but it is impossible to address all of one's unconscious biases. Other facts such as the author's biography, geographical location, and social location also limit the research and findings.

The second limitation is that the focus group lacked ethnic diversity. The only ethnic diversity in this project are the voices of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. This was not for a lack of trying to invite ethnic diversity, but perhaps a consequence of the composition of Conference clergy. According to the 2023 Conference statistical report, there are only forty-five non-Anglo clergy in full connection. The small number of potential candidates may have contributed to the lack of ethnic diversity, but fewer numbers did not affect the female participation. Of the 434 clergy in Full Connection in the Central Texas Conference, there are 194 individuals who identify as female, and 240 individuals who identify as male. However just over 70% of the focus group identified as female. It is possible this project failed to reach non-Anglo clergy in the recruitment stage. Email invitations went to the clergy pool at the same time and in the same manner. The email list was very accurate, with only two emails bouncing back due to non-functioning email addresses. The email open rates were not tracked and it is unknown which clergy did and did not open the invitation. Communication may have contributed to this limitation, but perhaps this



project does not address the needs of non-Anglo clergy. It would take further research to explore the lack of ethnic diversity in the focus group.

The third limit of this project relates to the adoption of Orthocardic clergy leadership because it requires clergy and laity to work together. There are some local churches where this partnership is not possible or where the context is not appropriate for such work. For instance, if the local church is in an acute crisis they may not be able to consider the role of clergy leadership. Even if the local church desires to explore the role of clergy leadership, it also is essential that the clergyperson(s) share this desire. If the status quo works for or is tolerated by the clergyperson, for example, they may not be interested or willing to engage in redefining their role. Many clergy are in their positions because of their past work and previous success. It may be difficult for such people to imagine that previous performance will not translate to future success. Adopting this model of clergy leadership requires openness and humility to consider whether the clergy needs to change what they are doing. This change can provoke fear or even seem intimidating, which limits Orthocardic clergy leadership adoption.

The *Sayings* of the Desert Mothers and Fathers themselves are a limit to this project and adoption. It is not that these *Sayings* are beyond comprehension, but they do require discernment and time to shape hearts. Many clergy and laity may not feel they have time to dedicate to grasp the fundamentals of these teachers. While there are many books and resources about the Desert Mothers and Fathers, these resources are not always easy to find or promoted in the public discourse, even in spaces where short stories would be ideal. Consider the rapid growth of podcasting over the years. Podcasting is an ideal medium to share the *Sayings* of the desert wisdom, not only because the ease of podcasting makes it possible to promote these stories, but the stories originated in an oral tradition. These *Sayings* are meant to be heard, not read. And yet, a simple

search for “Desert Fathers” yields only one active podcast, *Philokalia Ministries*, sharing the stories of the desert. The sources of Orthocardic clergy leadership are both an essential function and a limitation to adoption.

## **Future Study**

As stated above, it is very early in a rediscovery of Orthocardic clergy leadership and the possibilities for future study are broad. The limitations to this project are obvious places to begin future study. What contributions can a greater ethnic diversity make in this rediscovery and adoption? How can the *Sayings* and wisdom of the desert be more publicly accessible or break through the problem of leadership abundance? How can clergy and laity consider the role of the clergyperson if they are in crisis such as disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church? With the declining number of clergy and local churches, is Orthocardic clergy leadership transferable to lay leadership? How can these stories be shared through current communication tools?

The geography and limits of the focus group means that it is possible that other Conferences in the UMC have more to add to this model than reflected in this project. Perhaps other clergy leaders outside the UMC have not only rediscovered Orthocardic clergy leadership, but are farther down the road of adoption and implementation. If so, what do these other leaders have to contribute to Orthocardic leadership’s rediscovery?

Future study can consider how the Central Texas Conference may adopt and implement Orthocardic leadership. For instance, it is worth studying if the current ordination process creates conditions where clergy stop maturing after ordination. The structure of the ordination process suggests that ordination is a capstone rather than a foundational stone of vocational ministry. Future study is needed to create a process that guides the clergy to explore and mature in the model

of Orthocardic leadership. Building such a process can be addressed by the joint work of the Board of Ordained Ministry, the appointive cabinet, and the bishop.

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