

# When the Church Stops Working

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

## Study Guide

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Also, this is my take on the book. Feel free to disagree, correct, or challenge it.

### Ch. 1: “Why Your Church Has a Problem, but It Isn’t What You Think”

Statistics show that church attendance has been declining for decades, and many see a decline of the church’s influence in society and even a decline in the faith of church folk. Many congregations are facing a dismal future and perhaps closure if this trend does not reverse.

**Typical Diagnosis:** the church is in decline.

**Typical Prescription:** innovate to attract folks to church.

**Root and Bertrand’s response:**

Decline is a misdiagnosis.

Proper diagnosis: the secular age has infected the church.

Innovation is the secular age’s prescription; it will not help.

**Secular:** What does “secular” mean? What do you think Root and Bertrand mean by it?

At the very least, a secular age is a time in society when the values and outlook of the broader culture are not informed by the Christian (or any other) faith.

Many have argued that American is entering a “post-Christian” age. That does not mean the there are no more Christians, but that Christianity is no longer a dominant influence on the larger culture.

**Symptoms of decline:**

1. Influence: The sacred has separated from the secular. The church does not have the influence on the state it once had.

2. Attendance: Faith has become private rather than public. People are not going to church.
3. Unbelief: Secular society focuses on the immanent (what is before us that we can see, touch, and feel) rather than the transcendent (that which is beyond our immediate perception). Society does not see God's transcendent activity in the world.

A return to a more sacred age does not seem to be likely, so we need to figure out how the church functions in a secular age. Root and Bertrand argue that most of the approaches discussed in Christian literature and thought today adopt strategies, such as efficiency and innovation, that come from the secular world. By applying secular strategies, we fail to distinguish or selves from the secular world to see what God is doing in the world. This, the secular age has infected the church.

**Imagination:** What do Root and Bertrand mean by the “secular imagination?” How we “image” the world—our “imagination”—shapes what we see and value. The secular imagination is the frame and values system of secularism that shapes how we see and interpret our world.

**Acceleration:** The secular age tells us to work at balancing a variety of goals and commitment. We do not know how to decide which is of the most value or how much is enough, so we constantly race for more of everything. Thus, the need for efficiency. To be efficient means to move faster, and we get caught up in a cycle of acceleration. To be “good,” we think we need to do “more.”

**Resonance:** Root and Bertrand say that the opposite of acceleration is not slowness but resonance. Resonance is connectedness, being in sync, being fully present; it is experiencing fullness. When resonant, the clock does not matter. It is finding meaning beyond the immanent; “it is about the sacred, the public, and the transcendent.” We begin to understand resonance when we experience or remember moments that are more amazing than others, moments when the passage of time is irrelevant.

Root and Bertrand argue that the church does not need more influence, or people, or faith, it needs resonance. Then membership numbers become less important than relationships.

Ch. 1 concludes with the claim that when the church is uncertain about how to relate to the world, the answer is not efficiency and innovation, but **waiting**.

**REFLECTION:** Consider the concepts used in ch. 1: secular, imagination, acceleration, and resonance. Do they seem relevant to how you experience life? Do they challenge you to consider a different way of understanding your place and activity

in the world, how you prioritize, experience, or relate to your life and activities? What role does the clock play in your life?

## Ch. 2: “Busy People, Busy Church—A Killer Cocktail”

**Origins stories:** When did the church begin? Often Acts 2:46-47 is considered the origin of the church, the fellowship and worship of the new church in Jerusalem. That congregation grew daily: growth = success! More is better. So says our secular values. Whatever that congregation was doing, we should as well to be successful.

This is the post-Pentecost church. Root and Bertrand claim we have pointed to the wrong passage in Acts to find the origin of the church. They see it in Acts 1:4. Jesus was about to ascend from the earth, to physically leave the disciples, and he told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait.

**Wait:** The church was born not born in a flourish of triumphant growth but in a huddle of frightened people waiting and wondering what was going to happen next. A major point of this book is that we deal with our problems first by waiting. We object that waiting is not success, not productive, not efficient. But when we evaluate it in those terms, we are deploying a secular view of the life, a view that has infected the way we think about faith and the church.

**Not Quietism:** This waiting is not a theological quietism, the claim that all is God’s action, and we are to do nothing. Our waiting will lead to action, but we must first wait, because “the secular age blinds us to God’s action, and so all we are left with is our action.” (23)

God’s people only ever act in response to God’s act. They do not plan their own activity and proceed. They encounter God and act in obedience to that encounter. God acts through God’s people, not in the way a puppet master manipulates a marionette but in the manner of a relationship that starts with God’s action. (24)

**Meaning in Life:** We associate meaning in life with productivity and success, which leads to a value system of “more” which drives acceleration and tramples resonance. In that process, we miss the real meaning in life. (See the story of George, pp. 25-29.) This impacts our relationships; we do not value those who go slow—the young, the old, the disabled. We associate slow with stop with dead!

**Resonance in the Church:** Church life is busy, too, and we associate successful ministry with ever more—more people, more money, more mission activities, etc. Acceleration is a symptom of our frustrated search for meaning. The antidote is not slow, but genuine meaning. Busyness distracts us from meaning.

**Waiting in Hope:** When we begin by waiting on God, we wait in hope and anticipation of God’s action. When we get busy and take things into our own hands, our

actions may not be God's action. Abraham and Sarah got impatient with God and used Hagar to get the promised child. But that did not work. In God's time, Sarah conceived and bore Isaac, the fulfillment of God's promise and activity.

**Isaac means "Laughter:"** Sarah's response to God's promise was laughter, but the birth of Isaac, the fulfillment of that promise delivered a greater laughter, joy as God's brought life out of bareness—a new meaning to life for her and Abraham. When, in our accelerated urge to act, to achieve, we bypass the waiting, we miss out on the very meaning that we crave.

**God's Presence as a Problem:** To give slightly different language to Root and Bertand's point, we have difficulty with waiting because the secular age tells us that value and meaning are in doing, and doing a lot, and doing it fast. That is a trap with no end in sight. Waiting feels like nothing, but if we act before waiting, we act on that secular value system and lose the resonance of connecting with God. Then, with all the good intentions of serving God, we end up trying to manage God. That is what Sarah and Abraham did, and it led to the abuse and suffering of Ishmael and Hagar.

**REFLECTION:** Do these ideas resonate with you? Do you feel caught up in the acceleration of life, driven to move ever faster to accomplish and find meaning? Or, is your working life over, and now you feel empty and of little value because you are not driving forward, being efficient and producing? Do we bring the secular world of ever more to our approach to church? Do we expect to make Southminster better by doing more?

What would it mean to us to seek resonance rather than more? What would it do for Southminster if we first waited for resonance with God, for God's action, before we set our agenda for action?

**Isaiah 40:30-31 (NRSVUE)**

30 Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted,  
31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;  
they shall run and not be weary;  
they shall walk and not faint.

**You might find these YouTube videos interesting:**

**The Church in the Accelerating Age: Part 1 - Reforging the Horizons**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3AtwuFkY3k&authuser=0>

**The Church in the Accelerating Age: Part 2 - Resonance vs. Relevance**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLma6tvGc8U&authuser=0>

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### Ch. 3: “Stop All the Having and Just Be”

Our faith is about death and resurrection. Our salvation was accomplished by Jesus’s death and resurrection. But our own spiritual transformation involves a death and resurrection as well—death to who we were and resurrection into who God calls us to be. The story of Aziz Ansari illustrates such as death and resurrection. He died to his old way of always living into the future, looking for more and more, an outlook that led him to treat a woman as a source of more pleasure rather than as a person. His career flamed out but resurrected once he learned that genuinely relating to people in the present is a better way to live than using them to get more in the future.

Root and Bertrand argue that being with people completely, in the present, is what church should be about.

In our striving for more, for what is next, do we forget to live in the now?

If we diagnose the church’s problem as decline, then we buy into what is next rather than what is now. If our goal is more—more people, more programs, more facilities, etc.—then we are doomed to fail because we never get enough of “more.”

**Acceleration and the “More:”** Because the “more” is always in front of us, we are impelled to move faster, to get busier, and treat those around us as means to accomplish “more.” This is a secular measure of success and results in alienation from ourselves and from other human beings. “Acceleration is a disease that promises

victory over the crisis of decline but ends in spiritual disaster.” (p. 42) It only produces burn-out and depression.

### **Step One in Being, Not Having: Humble Death**

The only solution to acceleration is death! Death is our mortality; it is part of being a creature and not the creator. We can deny it or accept it in humility. True humility is surrender to God; it is not forced subordination, frustrated resignation, or collapse into despair. It is powerful, not weak. Just as we must confess that our salvation is a gift of God and not a product of our hands, so approaching our concerns about our church requires the humility to acknowledge that the solution comes from God and not from our efforts. This is a good death.

### **Step Two in Being, Not Having: Confession**

Unlike an apology, a confession builds connection others. When we confess that our approach to the church’s challenges is acceleration—our never-ending effort to fix, improve, and increase in order to avoid the “decline” of the church—and learn to wait on God, we build connections with God and each other. This waiting is rooted in a humility that is not a weakness or quietism. It is powerful.

### **Step Three in Being, Not Having: Gratitude**

When we confess and our confession is heard, we experience gratitude because confession and being heard restores relationships. This distinction, here, is tricky, because we tend to see apologies or confessions and a brief moment of vulnerability that we want to get past and on to the next thing, to the “more.” That approach misses the point. In true confession we come to God (or anyone we need to confess to) in vulnerability and then remain in the place of vulnerability because that is the place of true relationship. Our gratitude emerges from those relationships.

**Being, Not Having, the Waiting Church:** Being vulnerable, we wait for God. It is God’s actions we seek, not our “more”-driven innovations and solutions, things that we create and pursue. We wait by attending to our connections, with God and each other, in the here and now, not some possible future. And we say, “thank you.”

The job of church leaders—of the church itself—is “to tend to the connections of the community. Focus on the relationships.” (p. 50) The negative examples of the collapse of Mars-Hill church in Seattle or the Southern Baptist Conference and its sexual abuse scandals teach us that acceleration, growth at all costs, costs us our relationships. The “now” of connection is lost to the “tomorrow” of “more.”

The logic of acceleration is always looking to tomorrow because now is never enough. Death to “more” and “tomorrow” allows confession and connection in the here and now, not for the purpose of more tomorrow, but for its own sake.

**An Invitation to the Waiting Church:** This waiting places no value on acceleration. It does not look to tomorrow, and, in that sense, it faces death. Yet, it is transformative. It focuses on the now and waits deeply with others. Jesus called the church to this in Acts 1:4-5, “While staying with them, he [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to **wait** there for the promise of the Father.” “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

**Resonance: Worship and Prayer:** We wait in the process of worship and prayer; that is how we wait with God. We don’t manage God; we wait for God. This resonance—“the action of seeking connections and the result of that seeking. . . It seeks not growth but depth, participation, and union. . . We wait for what is uncontrollable by attending to *this moment with these people*.” (p. 57)

**REFLECTION:** Do the concepts of death, confession, gratitude, and waiting land with you? Why or why not? If not, what concepts work better for you? What would Southminster look like if we were a “waiting church” as Root and Bertrand describe. Is this attractive? Read “Red Paint” case study at the end of the chapter (pp.57-59). How would a “waiting church” deal with that situation?

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### Ch. 4: “It Is Time to Wait, But for What?”

Being stuck in traffic is a time-hallowed Chicago tradition, one that we do not enjoy. We do not like to wait—it can lead to anxiety, anger, and even rage. Will we get there on time!?

In this chapter, Root and Bertrand remind us of their claim that the church was not born at Pentecost or with dramatic growth and ministry that took place from that time on. Instead, they point to 1) the disciples and followers of just being with Jesus between the resurrection and the ascension and 2) the waiting Jesus instructed them to do between the ascension and Pentecost. The church was born from being and waiting, not from doing. In fact, our authors claim that the church was created by “Jesus’ command to wait as prayer, and prayer as waiting.”

Jesus’s followers were to wait for God to act. Their actions were to be a response to God’s actions.

**We are to wait *together*, not alone by ourselves in a room contemplating our navels.** We wait together by talking, sharing, telling stories, praying, eating, and all manner of just being together. When it feels like the church is not thriving, we feel that we should be doing something. Then the waiting together gets pushed to the side, and we get caught in the trap of innovation and acceleration. But it is in the waiting and the being together that we encounter the living God.

**God Chooses Saul:** Waiting is hard, and we get antsy. Peter got that way, and so called a meeting to fill the disciple position that Judas vacated with a noose. Matthias was appointed, a decision instigated by Peter and executed by lots—a church administrative act. Then we never hear of Matthias again. Did Jesus’s followers jump the gun by doing rather than waiting? Later, in Acts 9, Jesus calls Saul, who we know as Paul. Now him we hear about! (He wrote some good books; check them out.)

The first thing Saul was to do after his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ was to wait. We think of Saul/Paul, as an incredibly busy guy, traveling from town to town, preaching, planting churches, getting arrested and beaten up (he included that bit in his resume!). But his amazing career began with just waiting.

There is a time for doing, but our doing, as the church, must arise from our waiting. We do not jump into action and appoint a Matthias, to fix our problems. That produced

nothing. The church grew only after God acted, and the disciples' actions were in response to God's actions, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

**Storied Waiting:** This waiting is not just passing time twiddling our thumbs. We wait by telling the story of Jesus, rehearsing that story so that it penetrates and shapes our story. Paul had the story wrong at first, and he acted on that wrong story with his vicious persecution of the church. (Acts 9) Then he encountered Jesus, was struck blind, and forced to wait for Ananias. That waiting resulted in him seeing again and "seeing" the right story. His ministry gets into gear, once the waiting and storying is complete. Our impatience in waiting rise from stories we tell ourselves in which our needs and wants are at the center. It puts us into fight or flight mode when events do not go according to our script—when we feel like we are stuck in traffic when we have somewhere urgent and important to go. Waiting changes that story by getting us off of our script and onto a better one.

By waiting together, we deprioritize our personal stories—where we are the central characters and it is all about us—and open up the narrative of our life to God's story, but also to the stories of those around us.

**Kenosis:** Growth, personally and corporately as the church, comes as we decenter ourselves from our stories. This a death by humility. In Phil 2, Paul cites an early church hymn that describes Jesus as emptying (Greek: *kenosis*) himself in the incarnation. Decentering ourselves from our stories is such a emptying; it requires humility—it is sort of a death, the kind of death Aziz Ansari experienced when he career crashed and when he was at this grandmother's deathbed. He and his ambitions were no longer the ruling story of his life.

"The church is a community that believes that it is not the star of its own story."(74) We accomplish that by rehearsing and remembering God's story, the gospel. We witness "to God's acts in the world."(75) Our waiting is a participation in what God is doing, and it generates an identity for us that is rooted in more than our own anxious existence. We become about something more than just ourselves or just our church.

When our concerns for our church drive us to anxiety and action rather than waiting, we put our church at the center of its story. At that point, we have stopped hearing God. This is hard to face when membership is declining, budget shortfalls are on the horizon, and our congregation is looking more like a senior's home than a complete church family. We jump into crisis mode and get to work, but that is the wrong work. It takes our eyes off of God's actions and God's story and puts them on our problems and puts the church at the center of the story.

**REFLECTION:** What is at the center of the story of Southminster Presbyterian Church? Do we see the current chapter of that story as a crisis? Are we concerned that Southminster might not be here in a decade? What is the hardest part of committing to wait when we feel like we are in a crisis? How do we cultivate waiting in those times? Perhaps we are not in crisis at the moment. So, should we be cultivating waiting, anyway? What does waiting look like to you? What does waiting together look like to you?

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### Ch. 5: “Waiting Brings Life, Not a Slow Death”

Won't it be nice if everything ran smoothly . . . schedules, work, technology, and the Church?

#### Two Mistakes:

#### 1. No Tension = No Community

If we love the church, we need to love the real church, as it is, rather than some idealized notion of community. A smooth experience is not a sign of life; tension, discord, and even crisis, are. These can become dysfunction, destruction, and dehumanization if not dealt with well. But smooth often means smoothing over serious problems rather than facing them, as with cases of the abuse of power in the church. Compare this to a family. Siblings may have tensions, but they love each other.

#### 2. No Crisis = No God

We long for better days when life, and the life of the church, seems less fragile, but avoiding crisis does not remedy fragility because we worship a God who shows up. We misidentify our crisis as the decline of the church. But the real crisis, the one that we should live in, dwell in, and wait in, is in “encountering a living God who is God.” (88) The mistake is to push that crisis aside to focus on decline or other issues that are not the real task of the church. Our task is to encounter God.

Crises shape our lives. So, we need to choose the right crisis, either the crises that distract us from God and focus our attention on ourselves or the important crisis of encountering God. Church leaders should be concerned with how to help their people experience God, encounter the living God, when we live in a world that “blinds them to anything beyond the here and now.”(89) Life comes out of that crisis.

**The Danish Treat:** Encountering God is a crisis, perhaps, because we must do it on God's terms. Saul was persecuting the early church because that is what he thought God wanted. In his zeal for God, he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Act. 9). That changed his direction, his action, his very understanding of God and what God wants. It even changed his name to Paul. Paul did not plan on that encounter. It was not what he wanted until he understood it. It was a crisis.

In the nineteenth century, Soren Kierkegaard challenged the national church of Denmark, a church that had everything under control and running smoothly because it was a church that was not facing the crisis of encountering God. They had no decline because they managed everything to their satisfaction, but not to God's. Kierkegaard pointed out that they

had smooth religion but without God, and his criticisms irritated the leadership of the Danish church; he was the crisis that was their encounter with God. We don't manage God; encountering God will upset smooth.

**The Wild and Unmanageable God:** We cannot manage God. There are no procedures or technologies we can employ to encounter God. We encounter God because God chose to be revealed to us, and always on God's terms rather than ours.

To be clear, we could not know God if God did not reveal Godself. As creatures, we simply do not have the capacity to know God on our own. When we try, we are as pathetic as a six-year-old trying to explain quantum mechanics to a physicist. But God has revealed, acted, and spoken in ways that we can comprehend; God accommodates this revealing to our capacities. Knowing God is so far beyond our abilities that we cannot manage it; we can only receive it.

We can encounter God because God acts in the world. Not all the books of the Bible have historical content, but they all fit into a large story that scholars call Salvation History, the story of God's actions in the world to redeem us from our sin and restore our relationship with God. Those actions in history are often not what we would expect—the pregnancies of barren or virgin women, leaders who stutter, leaders who sin, and a weak people who survive against great strength because of the grace of God.

“Faith is the crisis of knowing the true God by how God had revealed Godself in the world. The church has no life other than waiting for and witnessing to the God who reveals Godself in the world in the backward way of love.” (97)

Time and eternity are not the same. To encounter God is to experience eternity, moments when what (really who) is in front of us and the now of that encounter is the focus rather than the passage of time onto what is next. When we truly encounter God or each other in moments of genuine love, we touch eternity. We encounter God in the waiting.

**REFLECTION:** What is your crisis? What is our crisis, as Southminster? Are we working to fix a problem, to end decline, to create a smooth religious experience or community? What do we need to do to wait and encounter God? Root and Bertrand's use of the word crisis is provocative, intentionally so, I am sure. What does the word “crisis” mean to you? How is God a crisis to you, to us?

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### Ch. 6: “Forget the Mission Statement—Get a Watchword”

**Giants, ants, and mission statements:** We are all familiar with the notion of a mission statement. As Root and Bertrand put it, mission statements tell us (churches, businesses, or whatever) why we exist, and they are necessary for growth. Without them, both giant corporations and ma-n-pa grocery stores die as the world changes around them. With them, we can accelerate into growth, cultural relevance, and all measures of success. Of course, our authors have already criticized acceleration and such secular measures of success.

Mission statements and missional theology are not the same. Mission statements are to organize us to get something done. They focus on people and production. Missional theology is about what God is doing; in it, God is the agent, not us. Mission statements don't lead to waiting; they are a call to action. Missional theology waits on God. In it, we wait and witness, even wait as a form of witness. We witness to God's action, so we need to wait to see what that action is. Mission statements are fine unless they are all we have. By themselves they escalate stress and lead to burn out. We work and we work, but it is our action not God's. To avoid this, Root and Bertrand suggest considering a watch word first, rather than pursuing a mission statement.

**Watchwords:** According to Root and Bertand, a watchword is “shorthand for a story of a deep experience that has shaped a group of people.”(105). Watchwords feed the church community and function as the foundation of the church's ministry. They are not a passwords used to keep people out. Instead, they reveal stories of the mystery of God's action. Our watchword, as short-hand for the story of what God is doing in us, shapes our lives because it “is a story of slogan of how this church, this community, has encountered God.”(106). The watchword shapes how we see the world and cope with the crisis of the living God. We live out our watchword.

**Our Watchword:** We cannot purchase or expropriate a watchword. It has to be *our own* because it expresses what God is doing in *our* community. Church leadership needs to help our community find its watchword, then lead us by living into that watchword.

How do we find our watchword?

- 1) Encounter each other. We need to truly encounter each other rather than use each other to meet some accelerated goal.
- 2) “We need to wait in the right way so that we can encounter God.”(108-109). The secular world works against that by focusing us on the immanent, what is in front of us, rather than the transcendent, that which is beyond the immediate, where God is.

Both of these are done by telling stories. We encounter others by sharing our stories. We wait on God by telling stories of what God has done and is doing in and through us. Our watchword is discovered when we find a theme in these stories.

A real watchword is not a marketing slogan, the banal symbol of a brand. A real watchword emerges from our lived experience with God, with waiting on God's action instead of jumping into ours. We would never give our life for a brand, but we might for the loving God who comes to save us.

### **First Move: Learn to Encounter**

We have already seen that the acceleration driven by secular society keeps us from encountering others. When with a person, we look beyond them to what is next or how they can help us get there. True encounters respect healthy boundaries but include a true back and forth in which we truly "see" each other rather than look past each other. CoVid did not help. Encountering is a nearly lost art that we need to recover.

### **Second Move: Encounter God**

As Karl Barth pointed out, we can encounter God in anything, but God does use certain things to create encounters: preaching, prayer, mission (and I would add worship.)

**Hearing God:** The Bible is a certain means of encountering God, and its stories are a key component of the encounter just as our stories are an essential component of encountering each other. In the Bible we hear God, and in Deut. 6, God commands Israel to tell their stories. Reading the Bible is a form of waiting that leads to encounter.

**Seeing God:** We see God in the sacraments, or, better, in the sacramental. Root and Bertrand are not concerned here with the number or form of the sacraments—each Christian tradition has its own version of that. When we perform the sacraments, in the context of prayer, God meets us. God is there and encounter is possible if we wait rather than accelerate.

**Serving God:** We often think of mission as something that we bring to the world in Christ's name, as if the gospel is a commodity that we are marketing. But our service is a form of encounter where, at times, the world speaks to us in Christ's name. We encounter God and are changed in our acts of service. It is not unidirectional because it is God's action more than ours. For example, when our youth go on their summer mission trip, and spend a week working for other people, they get more than a good feeling that comes with such action, they also encounter God in the folks they serve, in the work, and in all the events of that sacramental week.

**REFLECTION:** What is Southminster's story? How have we encountered God? Have we had a watchword for that story? Has the story changed since our last watchword? Do we have one now? What do you think would be the watchword for this point in our story? Are we prepared to wait on God to see where our story goes next?

Would you want to participate in a version of the PEEL project (113-115)? What do you think that would be like? What can we do to learn to encounter each other and learn to encounter God afresh?

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Study Guide- When the Church stops working #7

### Ch. 7: “Out of the Family Basement”

This chapter is largely a case study illuminating the tension between encounter, watchwords, and success measured in secular terms. There is no moral to this story, but there is meaning.

**Traps of Small Churches:** Root and Bertrand tell us that small churches (especially rural ones) tend to get caught in two traps: 1. Family—extended families dominate. 2. Endowment effect—we tend to overvalue things that we own or are invested in, such as our building. Both these effects are reinforced by comfort. We are comfortable with our family and with our stuff.

These traps can make such congregations less that hospitable to newcomers. There is no room at the “family table” for them, or the “table” is not accessible (i.e.: we like our building and don’t want to change it by adding a wheelchair ramp).

**Feed My Sheep:** Howard the seminarian, motivated by his life-long catchphrase “feed my sheep,” led Queenston UCC into a ministry beyond its family and building.

Some new folks came to Queenston when Howard started there, and he led this tiny congregation of established families and new folk with biblical preaching and regular communion. Eventually his guiding phrase emerged as the church’s watchword—“feed my sheep.” That they literally did by breaking out of the endowment trap of their building, buying a food truck, and participating in community food truck events hosted by another church. The whole process took time and was messy, but it had an effect. Queenston’s watchword had become a vital ministry. It took an outsider’s perspective—Howard showing up as their part-time pastor—to get the folks of Queenston to look past their families and building to what God was doing in their midst. The watchword, “feed my sheep,” came from Howard’s own experience of God, his called to reach the marginalized, and became part of the congregation’s experience of God. The food truck ministry enabled the congregation to look beyond itself and the immediate crisis of its decline and wait for God, for the watchword, and that took them into a new phase of their congregational life. Their inward gaze became an outward testimony to God’s grace in their lives. They had been feeding themselves; now they were feeding others, God’s lost sheep.

**Trevor’s Tenure:** Howard took his next call before the food truck project had been realized, so its final execution was under his successor’s ministry. Trevor got the food truck going and reached out to the student population, part of his passion and call, which increased attendance but strained the budget. Young bodies have small pockets. The food truck never did do much that was measurable for the ministry of Queenston, but project energized the congregation, something that the new, younger folks coming in valued. In the process, and

new watchword emerged. Trevor's catch phrase was, "You are loved and you are enough." This phrase had critical ambiguity and led to a lot of discussion—especially the second part about "enough"—but it also struck a chord with new folks coming in.

In fact, the "feed my sheep" watchword can be read in different ways. Both that and Trevor's "You are loved and you are enough" resonated with different folks in different ways, but both provided focus for the Queenston congregation. The phrase "enough" was comforting, but with their dramatic growth and the need for money, there was never enough. The secular "acceleration" kicked in, and eventually Trevor got burnt out and left for another church.

**Watchwords Need Champions:** Howard's and Trevor's tenures and watchwords came in quick succession (the two pastorates together were seven years) and tended to collide. Howard and Trevor were the champions of their watchwords, so when they left, their watchwords faded. Watchwords need champions in the congregation not just their pastors. "If the pastor is the only one who has the watchword, it will disappear with them, even if God is not yet done with it."(138) The food truck ministry never really had a fully impact, and eventually the church sold the truck.

**The Moral?** The moral of the story? Root and Bertrand do not recount this story as a morality tale, a story about decisions or actions to avoid. The point of watchwords is not to remember mistakes but encounters. "The real crisis that Queenston UCC faced was not one of decline. The real crisis, as always, is how to encounter God who is God."(138) The story of Queenston can be presented as a success by secular standards: increased population. But Root and Bertrand tell it as a story of encounter.

The food truck ministry was the outworking of Howard's "feed my sheep" watchword, which encapsulated a story of his encounter with God. When it became the congregation's watchword, it led them to move from a focus on decline to a focus on encounter, to bring their encounters with God in their tradition of shared meals into the community. It was a costly and audacious move for a small congregation, but it occasioned further encounters with God as they moved in faith into an unknown future and showed the love of God to others by feeding them. That continued after the truck was sold as it was used to feed even more "sheep." Yes, Queenston UCC grew in those years, a practical and measurable indicator of success by such standards. But the encounter is the real success.

The point is not about objective measures of success but the waiting on and encounter with God. Watchwords remember those encounters and lead us to further encounters. But they are fragile; they lose effect when we take our eyes off the goal of encounter.

**REFLECTION:** Are Root and Bertrand telling Southminster that everything will be alright if we go out and buy a food truck? What should we be doing? How do we wait on God? What watchword(s) might emerge as we wait? What encounters have we had with God that will shape our watchword(s). Who will champion our watchword(s)? How do we keep our focus on encountering God and not be tempted to focus wholly on what is next? You are invited to join together for Lunch in Fellowship

Hall about 11:00, after worship to discuss watchwords for Southminster and other learnings from “When The Church Stops Working”.

# When the Church Stops Working

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

## Study Guide

### Ch. 8: “Nothing Can Separate You”

A watchword is found not made. A watchword proclaims rather than brands. A watchword has a season, and then it is gone. We wait for a watchword, let it work on us, and then it fades, and we wait again. This is the rhythm of church life that Root and Bertrand describe in this book.

Watchwords emerge differently in different contexts and for different reasons. Peace Lutheran’s watchword that emerged at the beginning of Pastor Mike’s tenure—“Nothing can separate us from God’s love. This is a God who stands with us and for us, on our side”(p. 145)—arose out of the painful experience of the middle-school Sunday School class teacher’s parenting of their deaf son and his eventual death. The entire congregation shared with them as they went through those experiences, and their story was the church’s story. So, when the Jurgenson’s one and only Sunday School lesson became the watchword for the church, everyone knew what it meant and why it meant so much.

That watchword faded over time. Not because of neglect but because God’s work in that church had moved it to a new period of its life. So, their leadership called for a period of discernment, of doing less so that the congregation could wait, tell their stories, and listen for a new watchword. Eventually it came, “Never alone.” But this one was a mystery. It seemed plain to all that it was their new watchword. But, unlike the previous one, its significance to them was not apparent; then came CoVid, and all was clear.

Waiting for a watchword is not the same as looking for one. We can evaluate, study, and create mission statements that guide us in the practical task of marketing our church to the larger community. *But that model of ministry—driven by our fear of decline—is secular.* It is driven by us and draws us in to the acceleration of never enough because the measures we use are quantitative and open-ended. If more people, more programs, more revenue, are the measures of ministry for us, we never get to enough. We get caught in the cycle of acceleration working harder and faster to accomplish a goal that can never be met because enough is always a little bit more.

Instead, our goal is to encounter the God who is truly God. So instead of getting into gear and using all our considerable human talents, resources, and skills, we wait. We tell our stories as we wait. And, out of that waiting, we encounter and hear God. A watchword emerges that encapsulates our individual stories and our corporate story. That word gives us focus, provides a core to what we proclaim, and guides us into ever deeper encounters with God.

Instead of figuring out what needs to be done and doing it. We listen and discern for what God has done and is doing. The watchword is an expression of what God is to us and is

doing in this season of our church life. It aids us into the next season, and fades as it has done its job. So, we listen, story, and wait for the next.

Pastor Mike learned that two things happen during a period of waiting and discerning: 1) More change happens during those times than when are a “working.” 2) The watchword emerges—it is not forced, created, or manufactured. It is not a product of our effort; it comes from God. We listen and accept it.

The temptation during the waiting period is to do more, to accomplish, but the doing interferes with the listening, and we end up doing a lot but likely not what God would have us do. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone, and you realize that you are not listening because you are so busy getting ready to say something? To listen to God, we need to stop being busy and just listen. We need to believe that God is doing things, acting in our lives, and we tune ourselves to what God is doing by telling our stories as we wait. Watchwords emerge from that telling.

**REFLECTION:** How do we feel about waiting? How do we wait as a congregation? What is your story and how is it part of Southminster’s story? Have we had a watchword, even if we did not call it that? Does that watchword serve us now, or is it time to wait and listen for a new one? Perhaps the most important question is, do we believe that God has acting in us and through us at Southminster? Do we believe that God is acting now and will continue to act in our congregation and our lives in the future? If so, what is next for Southminster will come from waiting, listening, and telling our stories about God.