

THE WORLDVIEW CHALLENGE

By Jason Van Hunnik

In his book “The 2nd Mountain” David Brooks states the following. *“The grand narrative of ‘I’m Free to Be Myself’ has been playing out (in the North American culture) for about fifty years. It has evolved into a culture of hyper-individualism. This moral ecology is built on a series of ideas or assumptions (pg. 10).”* He goes on to name a few including the following.

- *The buffered self-* (The autonomous individual as the fundamental unit of society)
- *The God within-* (The ultimate source of authority is found inside the self)
- *The privatization of meaning-* (You come up with your own values, your own worldview)
- *The dream of total freedom-* (The best life is the freest life; in other words, without obligations)
- *The centrality of accomplishment-* (People are measured by how much they achieve)

Brooks goes on in the book to make an argument for what he calls “the 2nd mountain” which he would call a moral ecology driven not by the assumptions of a hyper-individualistic culture, but instead one driven by a deep valuing of interconnections. It would be a moral ecology that sees commitments as central which leads to very different assumptions than the ones listed above.

I found it to be a compelling book, not so much because of his particular points throughout the book (even though I believe there is a lot there that is insightful and helpful). What I found most helpful was the basic foundation of the conversation. Brooks has taken a step back, away from any individual arguments and moved instead to a sort of meta-narrative level. His book is interested in wondering about what he calls “moral ecologies” and the effects that the basic assumptions have on individuals and our whole society.

Brooks’ assertion that this base level is the place where our conversations need to begin to both understand and address the challenges present in our contemporary society is compelling and from my view, accurate. I believe this is not just about our society though. It will be the assertion of this article that this is the primary task of the church, a task that we either have neglected all together or not done well. Further, until we actually tell the truth about this worldview challenge there will continue to be a decline in the North American Christian church, and by decline I’m not primarily talking about reduction in numbers of people who call themselves Christian. I’m primarily talking about the distinctiveness of our witness to the crucified and risen Christ and what that means as we seek the thriving of our neighbor and the world that God loves.

What do we mean by “Worldview”?

What Brooks calls a “moral ecology” is what I will call “worldview”. Part of what we mean by this term comes from what he states above. It is the narrative that gives basic assumptions from which we live our lives. But it’s not just about assumptions. A worldview also provides basic definitions.

The book *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith documented the findings from a study across denominations and demographics of teenage spirituality in the US. The book “describes

what appears to be a major transformation of faith in the United States, away from the substance of historical religious traditions and toward a new and quite different faith (back cover of book), a faith that the book describes as “moralistic, therapeutic, deism”. From our perspective, it is a study that has not elicited nearly the level of “soul searching” by the US Christian church that it calls for. One of the core suggestions is that the church has not only not addressed the worldview challenge, it has given in to a dominant culture that defines terms. Consider just one quote from the book.

In fact, American religion and spirituality, including teenagers’ involvement in them, may be profoundly shaped by American mass-consumer capitalism. Capitalism is not merely a system for the efficient production and distribution of goods and services; it also incarnates and promotes a particular moral order, an institutionalized normative worldview comprising and fostering particular assumptions, narratives, commitments, beliefs, values, and goals. Capitalism not only puts food on the table, it also powerfully defines for those who live in it in elemental terms both what is and what should be, however taken for granted those definitions ordinarily may be (Smith, pg. 176).

My purpose in this piece is not to try to articulate the specifics of “mass-cultural capitalism”. The point here is to suggest, along with Christian Smith, that there is a dominant culture or cultures that define the basic assumptions from which we view our lives. We may agree or disagree with how helpful those definitions are, but the ultimate point is that this exists. Further, for the vast majority of the people that call themselves followers of Jesus Christ, these definitions are not provided by the Biblical narrative, but by a different narrative. And if this assertion is true, it raises some challenging implications, especially this one. If this is true, that would mean that most folks attending Christian churches have had their identity, their understanding of meaning, of purpose, of the definition of success and failure defined by the larger culture. If that’s true, then all that they are hearing at worship is either a discussion of what happens to individuals after they die or a religious discussion of matters that the larger culture has already defined. Church then is just a religious version of what is experienced all week long. Which at some point begs the question. Why participate in a faith community? Maybe it’s helpful as a balm when things are going bad or around certain life transitions, but when it comes to everyday joys and challenges, there really isn’t much that matters. The larger culture does just fine, and probably better, at helping folks to navigate life based on the larger culture’s definitions. If this scenario is at all true, then the decline of the Christian church should not come as much of surprise at all. It’s not because most folks have stopped believing in God (though some have). It’s not because most folks are vehemently anti-church (though some are). The reason is that most folks don’t expect much from the church. Most don’t see it much mattering beyond being a source of community and relationships (a good thing to be sure, but have you noticed the larger cultures attempt to find places for relationships? For instance, have you ever studied the intense communities that are forming the world of exercise?). At its core, the church offers one distinctive thing that profoundly matters. It’s a very different worldview based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This worldview has a very different definition of identity, meaning, purpose, and success/failure (faithfulness and lack of faithfulness in our language). When we talk about worldview at the congregation I serve (and what I will mean throughout this article) what we mean is the

narrative that defines these central terms from which the assumptions of how we see the world are constructed.

Is this a new challenge for the faith community?

Of course the answer to this is a resounding no. At the heart of the Gospel, is the statement about God's love for a world both profoundly beloved by God, but also seen as deeply broken by sin. One of the interesting elements of the Gospels and of the challenges of the early church is to see the struggle to proclaim the Good News of God in Jesus Christ not only as words of forgiveness related to our relationship to God, but also the challenge of having a community to live life in relationship to the community and ones neighbors as if basic worldview definitions of identity, meaning, etc. have been redefined. While there are many examples, allow me to share two of them, one from the letters of Paul and the other from the Gospels.

First, I would invite the reader to reread 1 Corinthians 1-3 from perspective of a worldview challenge. As is well established, Paul has written this letter in part to deal with the divisions within the church in Corinth. In 1 Cor. 1:10-17 it becomes clear that the source of the division comes in factions forming with loyalty to different people (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, etc.). Paul begins his admonishment of these divisions with the famous words coming from verse 18. "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Somehow, the Good News of the crucified and risen Christ seems to create a real conflict. Paul believes that it's a message that sounds downright silly to most. What's that all about? Verse 30-31 provides an intriguing answer. "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" Two words/phrases that are interesting to wonder about are "source of your life" and "boast". If Paul feels the need to make a distinction about the source of one's life, that must mean that others believed there was a different "source of one's life". Likewise, if Paul makes a point about what one should boast about, it must mean that most folks are boasting from another perspective. What would that be? I suppose we could suggest that it's one of the various gods of the day coming out of Rome or somewhere else. That may be true, but let me suggest another perspective to fill out this answer. "Sources of life" and "that from which one boasts" are worldview statements. They come from narratives that define identity, meaning, purpose, success, failure etc. What Paul seems to be saying to the church in Corinth is that while you may be confessing Jesus as Lord you have missed the worldview that comes with it which is different than the dominant worldview in the culture around you. If that's so, what was the old worldview in that culture?

In the New Interpreters Bible Commentary, J. Paul Sampley states the following about 1 Corinthians.

The most important cultural norm in Paul's time was the attainment of honor and its equally powerful counterpoint, the avoidance, or at least the minimization, of shame. Society was ordered vertically, with all persons concerned with identifying where they stood in the chain of descending power. To be sure there were the sideward glances to see how others were doing by comparison, but decisions were made and actions were pursued with primary regard for how they would secure honor and avoid shame for

oneself, how they would gain praise and limit blame. It was the understood obligation of the subordinate persons to praise and honor their benefactors, the ones on whom they found themselves dependent (pg. 782, volume X)."

As one can tell from the quote, this honor/shame culture had specific definitions of identity, meaning, purpose, along with measures of success and failure. One of Paul's main points is that there is a very different culture in a community that receives its definitions of identity, meaning, and purpose from the grace and mercy of God given in the crucified and risen Christ. First of all, it does away with all the conflicts that seem endemic in the Corinthian church based on this vertical ranking system of honor. A worldview of grace in Jesus instead sees deep value in each one based on the claim and call in one's baptism, which leads to Paul's famous discussion of the body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12. A culture committed to the vertical orientation of an honor/shame culture would certainly view these implications coming out of the cross of Christ as, well... foolish.

This difference between the honor/shame culture and a culture of grace coming out of being "in Christ" can also be seen in Luke 14:7-14. In this text, Jesus words to not seat oneself at the head of the table, but instead at a low spot on the table is usually presented as a text about individual humility. While this is present, to focus only on individual humility is miss both the way tables functioned in the Mediterranean world at that time, but also the way Jesus is redefining them. Tables were an expression of the honor/shame culture and the vertical orientation of society. Seating someone at the head of the table communicated to everyone their importance vis a vis those seated further down the table and even more so compared to those who did not have a seat at all. One of the unique themes of Luke's Gospel is how Jesus transforms the worldview that was communicated at tables during that day. As Dr. Eric Barreto of Princeton Seminary states in discussing the road to Emmaus story (Luke 24)...

"For Luke, Jesus is most Jesus at a quotidian table, at an ordinary meal infused with significance because of the people gathered around the food. Jesus is there at this table but so also all the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus shared meals. But not only that! Also at this table are the many powerful people with whom Jesus also dined. One of the most characteristic activities of Jesus ministry in Luke is eating. He is accused early in the Gospel of being a glutton and drunkard; worse, he eats with the wrong people!... In this sharing of bread at an ordinary table, we catch a glimpse of Jesus' transformative kingdom."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims a very different worldview from the culture around us. At its core, the task of the church is to proclaim the God's news of God's grace and mercy in the crucified and risen Christ and to invite the followers of Jesus to live into and out of the very different identity and definitions of meaning, purpose, and faithfulness that follow.

An attempt to address the worldview challenge

From the authors limited perspective, articles about the church in the North American context over the last 20-30 years have made strong statements that change is needed. Much less common appears to be an articulation of what the particular challenge actually is and even less common are actual attempts to change. What follows is one congregation's ongoing

attempt to deeply engage our theology as a means to forge a path into the future that takes seriously this worldview challenge.

Westwood is an ELCA congregation of approximately 2500 members located in St. Louis Park, MN, a first ring suburb of the Twin Cities. In 2014 Westwood, concerned about the separation of faith and most elements of our congregant's lives, embarked on a deep long-term engagement with the basic Lutheran confessions of grace and vocation. We had clear evidence that the "mush theology" articulated by Christian Smith in *Soul Searching* was present in many of our youth and in our adults. Our suspicion was that this "theology" was quite widespread. We believed all along that our theology was central to our journey, but we also had come to believe that our practices had clearly not addressed the rise of this "mush theology" and may have even contributed to it. The way forward for us was not to find some new program, but to go "all in" on engaging grace and vocation in a way that would use the everyday real lives of our people and our society as the ground for the conversation (for more on this decision, our commitments, and what we actually we've done in this journey, see the article "Grace and Vocation" Ministry-Focus-Strategy-Practice in the January 2019 edition of *The Currents in Theology and Mission Journal*).

While we didn't have a set up plan for this journey, we believed that a deep engagement with this theology would help address the challenges named by Christian Smith, we also believed that it would address what some believe is the central challenge of our time which is the challenge of meaning. Douglas John Hall articulates the challenge this way in his book *The Cross in our Context*.

"The question of people in developed societies today is not 'Is there anything after death?' but 'Is there anything before death?' What the theology of salvation must address if it is going to speak to a context that is as it were condemned to life is whether life is *purposeful*... Despite its exploration in the artistic and literary works of almost a century, to say nothing of the investigations of psychology and sociology, the anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness remains for the general public including the church, a virtually uncharted depth-and one intuitively, legitimately, feared and repressed. Yet until the depths of the human predicament have been plumbed, in any age, there can be no response to that anxiety from the depths of the Christian Gospel... It is particularly difficult in our North American context to enter this darkness, because our culture is so determinedly fixed upon the utter meaningfulness of our entire exercise in progress, in happiness (pg. 129-131)." (It's interesting to note the phrase "fixed upon the utter meaningfulness of our entire exercise in progress, happiness." This is worldview language.)

The first key to charting this course into our theology was to be clear about our theological definitions and clear about how we would engage them. The short tagline definition is "claimed and called". The longer definition is as follows. *In Holy Baptism each of us have been claimed as a child of God by God's grace alone and called to be God's hands and feet in all the realms of our life seeking the thriving of our neighbor and the world that God loves.* When it comes to "realms", we specifically speak about our callings in our work/school, in our families, as citizens, as friends, and neighbors.

From the foundation of this theological definition we have been able to assert the following things.

- By God's grace alone in Jesus Christ, you have received an identity as a Child of God. You have been grafted into God's ongoing story for the sake of the world.
- While people are sometimes called to "drop their nets" and change their lives in some way, we are all called to seek the thriving of our neighbor in all the roles we currently have. In other words, there is no time in which you are not called. All of your roles and relationships are callings.
- You are God's hands and feet. In other words, you profoundly matter to what God is up to in the world.
- Life is complicated. Being clear about God's claim and call doesn't change that. In fact, it may make it more complicated. Your questions, ambiguities, struggles, failures, pain etc. are not things to hide or white wash. These along with your joys are central places of conversations for us as a church. The particularities of each person's journeys are critically important.
- Church is not the place to come to hear a preacher tell you the answers. It's the place to come and hear again the Good News that in Jesus name you are claimed and called and then to wonder alongside other members of the Body of Christ, "What does this mean in my real journey of my everyday life?"
- Being claimed in Jesus Christ and called to seek the thriving of our neighbors is a very different worldview than the dominant worldview that we live in. In other words, this worldview contains very different understandings of identity, meaning, purpose, success, and failure.

Contemporary Worldview Challenges examples

It can be quite an ordeal to explain the worldview challenge to folks. In fact, we have found it interesting in our work to see that most folks haven't chosen one worldview over another. Most folks don't even imagine that there is another way to look at things. Their experience of church has been that we are preaching a sort of religious version of the dominant culture. We have found that it starts to make sense when specific contemporary examples are given that connect to their lives. Here are a couple examples that we've used to illustrate what we're talking about.

1. One of the well documented contemporary issues in our culture is the issue of "busyness". For many people it has become sort of an assumed reality of life. In the church we often hear about how busy folks are and how the church needs to do a better job of connecting and supporting people with busy lives. While we agree with this statement to an extent, it's interesting to wonder about the implications of a study that was cited by Brigid Schulte in her book "Overwhelmed: How to work, love and play when no one has the time". In the early 2000's a study was done out of North Dakota State University on the issue of busyness by using... Christmas letters. Those doing the study collected letters from the early 70s up until the early 2000s from across the country and across a number of demographics. They picked out a group of words

related to “busyness” and counted how many times they occurred in these letters over the decades and documented a dramatic rise in the use of these words. They came up with two conclusions. First, to no surprise, people seem to be busier than they used to be. But the second conclusion was quite interesting. It also seemed that people were quite interested in telling other people how busy they were. Which certainly raises a very significant question. Why would folks be so interested in telling other people that they’re so busy? One possibility is that it’s a sort of lament. While we think there is some truth in that, we think there’s likely another reason. In our contemporary society (that if Douglas John Hall is correct, has a deep challenge with the issue of meaning), busyness has become a measure of meaning. If one is busy that must mean that one is in demand and therefore must matter. It’s almost like a secular version of “works righteousness”. If there’s any truth in this at all (and we at Westwood think there is a lot in the context we are in), then I hope that it’s clear how different this is from the worldview of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While we don’t think it’s necessarily evil to be busy, we certainly as people of faith don’t believe that our worth is caught up in how busy we are. Meaning comes from the identity we’ve been given in our baptism and our call to be God’s hands and feet in the world. We have been set free from the need to justify ourselves by how full our schedule is or any other measure the world would throw at us.

2. A second example is from the headlines this last year. Most folks are familiar with the college cheating scandal where famous, rich and/or powerful families used their resources and connections to bypass the usual admission process to get their children into “elite” schools like Harvard and USC. Most folks (the author included) were appalled at this blatant abuse of power to cheat the system. But there is an underlying question that most folks don’t seem to be asking. “Why would it be worth the money and the risk of destroying one’s reputation by cheating to get one’s children into one of these schools?” It isn’t often asked because there is a powerful worldview in place that sees obvious answers to this question. It goes something like this. “Because the measure of parenting is in the success of ones children. And by success we mean a young person getting a high enough GPA and enough activities on their resume to get them into an “elite” school which will open doors (if they do well enough) to getting a good job with a high salary which allows them to by a fancy house in an elite neighborhood all of which leads to ‘happiness’ which is the point of life.” None of this by the way, seems to be in the Gospels. We as people of faith are certainly not opposed to education, whether college or vocational school etc. We see that has a good thing, but primarily as a means to develop ones skills so that one can better participate in what God is up to in the world and to seek the thriving of our neighbor. That can be done very well from folks from any education level. We don’t believe in the hierarchy of meaning that our society places on where you get into college. Our goals for our children are to have them believe that they are claimed and called; that they profoundly matter; that they develop a sense of resiliency to navigate the joys and challenges of life; that they see working for the thriving of our neighbor and the world that God loves as the primary calling and purpose in life etc. This is a deep worldview conversation.

Keys to engaging the worldview challenge

So, if this is really a deep issue, how would a congregation begin to address it? The temptation at this point is to go through the various techniques that we've tried out in our setting. Because church and community contexts are so different, I'll make the choice to not engage the specifics of what we've done (again if interested see the previous article from the January 2019 Currents issue). Instead, I'll share what we believe are some keys for a congregation to deeply address this worldview challenge.

1. Name the challenge- Until a congregation names the challenges it faces, very little will change. What we've tended to hear most of the time is that in the North American context, there is a significant decrease in church attendance and a dramatic rise in the "nones". The loyalty to institutions, including the church, continues to wane with no end in sight. These are important things to study, but we don't believe that it names the challenge. At some point in time we need to ask what's underneath this. Is it that folks no longer believe in God? The studies don't say that. Is it that folks are hostile to Christianity? While some are, that doesn't seem to describe the vast majority of folks. If the first two examples are the primary issue, that leaves the possibility that many don't expect much from the church. They don't think it much matters in people's every day lives. We believe that this is a bigger factor than the first two and that the reason for this comes down to the worldview challenge. If the church is seen as a place that essentially just puts a religious spin on the dominant worldview, then there's not much to see here. One gets the dominant cultures definition of identity, meaning, purpose, and success/failure all week long.
2. All in approach- Our experience has been that this is key for real transformation. In talking with others about our work with grace and vocation it's been interesting to note how often leaders or congregations seem to want to have a small group start a conversation for a short period of time or have folks start a small new practice. The idea seems to be that these techniques will sort of spread over time and change a culture. In the meantime, the main parts of the congregation's life continue. We have found this idea to be fundamentally false. The only way to address something as deep as "worldviews" is to go all in. For us that means that all parts of our congregation's life have this as a focus. It takes layering themes and a coordinated approach in worship, in our preaching, in our small groups, in our children and youth ministries, in how we discuss and plan in our staff and with our church council etc.
3. Focus and depth over time- These values come out of the previous point. It's been interesting to note that when we've talked with our folks that many have made the point that 6 weeks on the conversations of grace and vocation (and the worldview that comes out of this) would have done very little to change how they see the God, the world, and themselves. One of the critical decisions that we would point to was that at the very beginning of this journey we as leadership named that this was not just "the deal" for one year; this is the deal for the congregation. As a result, we have sought to engage grace and vocation and the worldview coming out of these confessions from different angles (again, see the previous article for more on what this looks like). One of

our experiences has been that people every year including year 5 and 6 are having the “aha moment” for the first time. This has even occurred with regular attenders that they will say things like, I never really got that you meant my work as a calling. This again speaks to why we think we’ve only scratched the surface of this journey. It’s taken a number of years just to get folks to begin to imagine that this idea of being claimed and called in their everyday real life could be true. There is so much more to still be done around how do we address agency in their callings or what spiritual practices are most helpful etc.

4. Language needs to be taught- We think that this is a critical issue for two reasons. First, one of the challenges for the church, in our view, is that the church is way too vague in it’s use of language. There are big religious words that we all use and nod along to that we may not all mean the same thing. One example would be the word vocation. For some that means religious callings, for some it means just employment, for others it means something related to an individual’s callings, but tends to be singular. In other words, one has a “vocation” which is the place that feels most meaningful or where a person has the most passion hopefully used for good in the world. In our first year of this journey our goal was to teach the language of grace and vocation. In regards to vocation, we specifically taught the idea that you are claimed and called wherever you are (work/school, family, citizen, neighbor, friend). There is no time in which you are not called.

But there is a second reason that a language needs to be taught. Language is very much connected to the narratives that define meaning, purpose, identity, and success/failure. Consider these quotes by the theologian/philosopher Charles Taylor and the theologian/sociologist Kendra Creasy Dean.

- Taylor- “inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality. Religious faith, practice and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them.”
- Dean- If language has world-creating power, a theological vocabulary that helps us talk about God also helps us imagine what a God-shaped world looks like.”

The primary way to address the worldview challenge is through the teaching of a new language. A congregation must step all the way back to teaching this language to both reveal and address the different definitions of identity, meaning, purpose, success/failure.

5. Leadership understanding is critical- It’s our belief that there is nothing that will enable or undercut this work than leadership understandings. One of the common traps set up for congregational leaders (especially pastors), is that we are to adopt a charismatic understanding of leadership. By this we mean, that we are to become the sort of “pied pipers” who by the eloquency of our speech and the magnetism of our personality attract and maintain members. We are to be the sort of “got it together” elevated Christians whose purpose is to enlighten, explain, and give answers to the complexities of life. We believe this is not only destructive to this work, it is actually an expression of the dominant worldview that we are seeking to confront.

Instead we would argue for a different understanding of leadership. The first task of the leader is to self-define around an identity and invite others to do the same. What that means is that the task of leaders (especially pastors) is to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that in Jesus name you have been named as a child of God by faith alone (identity). The second task then is to invite the congregation to support each other as all continually engage the question “So what does this mean in the real journeys of our everyday lives”? Each of the members of the body of Christ has much more capacity than the Pastor to understand the complexities of their real lives. They are the ones who have the expertise to answer this question more than anyone else. What the leader needs to be about is constantly proclaiming who we say each person is in Christ and then asking and creating the space to answer the question what does this mean? One of the quickest ways to undercut this is for a pastor to act as the great answer giver to all the diverse realities of God’s people.

6. Specificity and particularity are key- A story may be helpful here. It was the 4th year of our grace and vocation journey that we had a season in which we formed “sectors of the economy” affinity groups to go along with a focus on our jobs as a calling. I was talking with a regular worship attender about the specifics of his work in a corporation when finally he directly said to me, “so you actually mean that you believe that my work is a calling? I thought that being a disciple was primarily about doing something religious like inviting someone to church or doing something really dramatic to help people. I didn’t realize you meant me in my work.” Part of me wanted to scream, “are you kidding me? What in the world do you think we’ve been saying these last 4 years?” Of course, I didn’t which is good, because it in no way would have been appropriate. The point here is not that this person was slow in getting it. His story and many others we’ve experienced over the last 6 years demonstrates that many don’t get this worldview difference until we actually engaged the specifics of his journey. It was then that he got what we were talking about and begin to imagine things differently.

Our youth director has had similar experiences in her work testing out parent affinity groups. She has gathered parents in a similar stage of parenthood for 6 weeks at time. Included in the activities that she does with them are two that illustrate the point. First, one activity is to invite them to actually write a definition of the vocation of parenting in this stage. Usually, this conversation begins with sort of blank stares and statements like “uh, we’ve heard of this vocation word, but haven’t really thought about this specifically in relationship to our parenting”. As she reports, it’s when they start to actually get real about this specific calling that things start to open up.

She also invites them to do a worldview exercise on parenting. She asks them to articulate what “success” means for parents in the dominant culture around us. Interestingly, this also seems to initially be met with blank stares, but not because they don’t know. It strikes folks as an odd question. “Everyone knows what that is? There isn’t actually another way to think about it is there?” It’s only as they go through and articulate the dominant view and then ask about a worldview based on being claimed

and called that they begin to even imagine that there's a distinction. Specificity to people's actual experience is key.

7. A culture of grace- One cannot just talk about the differences in the worldview of an honor/shame culture and a grace culture. It's critical that it's actually experienced. This culture of grace is the key medium that needs to exist for folks to be able to be authentic to their experiences of life and begin to wonder and imagine about a different worldview. One of our observations early on in our context was how much it was actually an honor/shame culture. For instance, we heard people tell us that they would never want to even read scripture in worship for fear that they would make a mistake. Needless to say, if one would find the church culture unsafe to even read the scripture, they most certainly will not see it as a safe place to discuss the real challenges, ambiguities, successes and failure of their life. Leaders need to identify how shame functions in the culture of the congregation and then figure out how to address it simultaneous to the rest of this work. Part of this will be by the modeling done by leadership. If the leader finds appropriate ways to be vulnerable and authentic it will go far in building a safe space that will affirm that no matter where everyone is at, each are equally claimed and called.

Conclusion

It's hoped that from engaging this article that the reader will have had a moment to ponder the deep worldview challenge facing the church and time to consider a pathway forward. We believe that it's time for us not only to be honest about the challenges we face, but also begin to strategize, test out, and evaluate the way forward as we seek to be faithful to the call to be the Body of Christ in the real world. This is not easy work. It calls not only for deep honesty, but the deconstructing of assumptions that have driven our life together and the practices that have come from these assumptions, which is probably the easier part. The harder part is actually constructing a path forward. While this is hard, we also have found this work energizing, exciting, and filled with meaning. As God has promised, there is a future for God's church.

At Westwood we have come to end all our services with the Prayer of Good Courage. It is been critical to us as a whole body and in our individual lives. It has become not only a prayer but a confession of who we are and what God is up to in and through this small part of the Body of Christ with all the gifts and short comings that are present. I close with this as my prayer for all of us as a church.

O God you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending by paths as yet untrodden through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with Good Courage not knowing where we are going, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.