A Secular Congregation?:
Understanding and Responding to the Effects of Secularization within the Congregation

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Thesis: While many Christian leaders focus upon reaching out to an increasingly secular society, this paper addresses the dynamics of secularization within the congregation, using the insights of philosopher Charles Taylor, and discusses the role of the Christian leader as seeding a renewed Christian social imaginary to counter secularization.

Abstract
This paper address the impact of secularism on the life of the Christian congregation and how the clergy and congregational leadership might respond. Reflecting upon his experiences as Rector of an Episcopal congregation in Northern California, the author uses the insights of philosopher Charles Taylor to understand how secular modern social imaginaries subvert the Christian social imaginary of the congregation. While ostensively open to transcendence, congregational life is often lived within the immanent frame, with parish life and practices sufficiently described through secular means. Taylor's understanding of secularity is described with reference to the congregation. The work of philosopher James K.A. Smith provides a teleological account of social imaginaries, wherein the telos of the imaginary is apprehended by intentions the hearts and wills of the congregation which have been formed by the practices of the church.

Response of congregational leadership is to seed in the midst of the secular imaginaries a renewed Christian imaginary. This is pursued through attention in preaching and teaching to the Reign of God as the telos of Christian life, an exploration of baptismal vows as aligning the congregation to this telos, establishing a set of common practices.

While many Christian leaders focus upon reaching out to an increasingly secular society, this paper addresses the dynamics of secularization within the congregation, using the insights of philosopher Charles Taylor, and discusses the role of the Christian leader as seeding a renewed Christian social imaginary to counter secularization.[1] The issue of increasing secularization within Western culture has been a subject pursued by numerous thinkers and authors for a number of decades.[2] While such writings were not unknown to clergy and congregational leaders, the challenges that they present have not always been front and center. Church growth studies assumed an active interest for church participation, provided that congregations offered the attractive programs for seekers, neglecting secular people.

What has changed for congregations has been a growing awareness that the pool of ostensibly religious people seeking congregational membership is itself shrinking, and that sustainability of parishes will depend ultimately on the engaging secular people in our various contexts. This was brought home most emphatically with the publication of the Pew studies showing in recent years a marked increase of those in our society that claim no religious affiliation, the "nones."[3]

This recognition of the changed situation has encouraged the exploration of how churches might engage this secular culture, whether with accommodation to new ways of believing, behaving, and belonging,[4] or engaging in more thorough apologetics.[5] Yet the implicit presupposition underlying much of the conversation is that secularism refers to a set of people outside of the church, whether they are hardened atheists or the more fluid "spiritual, but not religious," while the social space within congregations and their life and practices can be called "sacred." The task is then to either draw secular people into the sacred sphere of congregations, or to challenge this perceived "sacred/secular" divide.[6] It is a gazing from this presumed sacred space into the ostensibly secular arena. What is not addressed is the extent to which our congregations have been deeply effected themselves by this "secular age," and are in need of addressing the topic of secularism in reference to their own doctrine, practices, and mission.

The Secular Congregation

I began grappling with these issues some 14 years ago as the rector of a medium sized Episcopal parish in the rural Sacramento Valley which is home not only to relatively conservative rice and nut ranchers, but also to the more progressive professors and administrators of the large Chico State University. St. John's Episcopal Church is a rather politically mixed congregation. The joke that has been made is often true, on any given day the most liberal letter to the editor in the local newspaper and the most conservative would both be written by members of St. John's.

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[1] This paper is based on my D.Min. dissertation for Fuller Theological Seminary, Richard B. Yale, 2015, The Reintegration of Doctrine with Church Life and Mission. D.Min. diss. Fuller Theological Seminary. Several sections here are adapted from my dissertation.

[2] See Lesslie Newbiggin *Foolishness to Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986). Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

[3] "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religous," Pew Public Forum, November 3, 2015, accessed March 15,2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/

[4] See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

[5] See Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013)

[6] Alan Hirsh, The Forgotten Ways (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) 96.

In 2003 two events divided opinion at St. John's. First was the debate about a possible invasion of Iraq and the subsequent military action. The second was the election and ordination of the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, a partnered gay man, to be Bishop of New Hampshire, an event which roiled the entire Anglican Communion. Opinions on both of these events were split at St. John's. Yet what struck me as I tried to help the congregation navigate through these issues was that each respective side appealed not to theological or biblical arguments, but rather to a priori political commitments. My working theory was that our doctrine or theology had simply been severed from the concrete issues of living both in civil society and in the church. The perceived effect of this disconnection of Christian theology from parish life and mission resulted in the diminishment not only of the practices of the church, but of the doctrine of the church, the latter of which is reduced at best to a marker of ecclesial identity.

Continued reflection in the years to come has suggested a deeper dynamic at work than merely the disconnection between theology and church practice and mission.[7] I have come to understand that secularism is not merely phenomenon that exists primarily outside of the church, but rather is an all encompassing reality that overlaps and quite often subverts Christian modes of thought and action. This secular subversion of specifically Christian practice and thought can be discerned when cardinal practice and thought can be sufficiently described with reference to what Charles Taylor calls "the immanent frame," "a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within the natural (rather than supernatural) order. it is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence.[8] Thus good worship is assessed through how well it was performed or its relevance to the felt needs of the congregation. Fellowship is less the koinonia of the Spirit and more the possibility of human community in a rootless world. Evangelism becomes a focus on institutional perpetuation through church growth and mission, perhaps more often called "outreach", pertains to addressing issues of social justice and civic activism.

This is not to say that reference to God is not made, or that the engagement of the congregation in more immanent concerns was wrong, but the tendency is to make the divine the means to immanent ends. Sacred teaching, language, and ritual are aids to human justice, emotional well-being, and social cohesion. David S. Yeago captures this dynamic in his discussion of the state of the preaching of the Cross as merely an affirmation that God is with us in the difficulties of life:

> The gospel thus preached is invariably a gospel of affirmation, not transformation. It reassures us but does not make anything happen. The cross of Jesus is proclaimed as the token of our assurance that God is with us "no matter what," a divine presence that enables us to cope with things as they are but does not change anything and therefore in the end reconciles us to things as they are. We have no plausible exegesis of Paul's audacious pronouncement: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" We tend rather to say: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new

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[8] James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014) 141. This definition of the immanent frame is from James K.A. Smith's very helpful book on the thinking of Charles Taylor and his *A Secular Age*.

interpretation: everything remains the same, but we feel quite differently about it."[9]

 Certainly the life and teaching of the church are meant to impinge upon all such immanent goods as mentioned, we are, for instance affirmed through the Cross as we navigate the dark recesses of life, but they are not simply contained by such without remainder.

Even those areas for which the recourse to the transcendent would seem to be required can be subverted by the immanent frame. Take, for instance, the traditional teaching of life after death. Even here, particularly in popular parlance, the immanent subverts the transcendent. What sense of afterlife there is is generally a projection of what was enjoyed on earth. Often it is about a reunion with loved ones, or even rejoining the foursome for some heavenly golf. Even if such language is not meant "literally," we are certainly far from Dante's Mystic Rose or the Beatific Vision.

The point is not that religious communities do not have any room for God or the transcendent, but that secularism is not a phenomenon outside of the church. Rather it has become deeply imbedded within the practices of our congregations. Among the potential ramifications may well be that people, whether inside our congregations or those outside, come to see the distinctive teachings and practices of the church as merely accidental to the primary immanent goods they provide, whether in terms of community, social action, therapy, or other goods provided by groups and agencies outside of religious gatherings and institutions.

Secularism and Social Imaginaries

The standard narration of the process of secularization is that premodern people needed to believe in a god or gods to explain the mysteries of nature and life. As modern science progressed it provided both naturalistic explanations of natural phenomena and significant contributions to human flourishing. In such a situation the purposes of a god are slowly whittled away. What is true of the sciences also is increasingly true in politics and psychology, as seen in Marx and Freud. This is a subtraction story, where the very need for the transcendent vanishes over time.

Recently, however, this subtraction story has been challenged on several fronts.[10] It is less a matter in these account of science disproving or obviating the need for God. One such account can be found in the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and his work on the process of secularization in his books *Modern Social Imaginaries* and the magisterial *A Secular Age*.

In Taylor's retelling of the narrative of the modern era, Western civilization has undergone since the late Middle Ages what he calls "The Great Disembedding."[11] Central to his thesis is the concept of a "social imaginary." By this he means a pre-theoretical construct of story, ritual, legend, and practices shared by a wide social grouping, broader and deeper than the theoretical reflection of an intellectual elite. A social imaginary is so pervasive that a society or group cannot imagine life constituted differently from this common "imagination."

Three critical questions that social imaginaries seek to answer concern the people's relationship to the gods, God or the cosmos, the right ordering of human society, and the meaning of human flourishing.[12] Taylor sees three great epochs that have answered these three questions differently. Earliest societies were fully embedded in an enchanted cosmos where there was no

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[9] David Yeago, "Crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate" in Christopher Seitz, ed. *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*,(Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001) 90.

[10] See, for instance, Brad S. Bird, The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012).

[11] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 49.

[12] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 56.

delineation between the sacred and secular. The world was full of gods and spirits, which, on the whole, tended to be indifferent to human society and flourishing. There was a capriciousness of the divine world which is evident in ancient myths, such as those recounted by the early Greeks. Human flourishing in such cultures focused upon the survival of the society amid a hostile world and capricious deities and spirits. The ordering of the society was centered in sacral leadership that functioned both religiously and politically, propitiating the gods and organizing the people for their survival.[13]

A profound shift begins to occur in the last millennium among a number of civilizations, seemingly independent of one another when "higher religions" begin to emerge. Taylor calls this the "post-axial" era, employing Karl Jasper's reference to the "axial age."[14] This was the age of Confucius, Gautama, Socrates, and the Hebrew Prophets. While the world was still viewed as enchanted and populated by spiritual forces, both good and evil, the Divine, though construed differently in different cultures, ceases being capricious and is viewed as benevolent. Combined with this, the Divine also is viewed as transcending the cosmos, inhabiting now a heavenly realm or sphere.[15]

This had implications for the ordering of the social order, as it was now to be construed as a reflection of the heavenly or ideal order, such as Plato's *Republic* and Augustine's *City of God*.[16] Another aspect of this shift in the social imaginary was that in relation to the heavenly or divine realm, the world was now viewed as disordered, and the object of reordering and reform to better reflect the transcendent order.[17] Justice emerged as a primary concern of the social order. This differs from pre-axial societies where the world, with both blessing and bane, was taken as given.[18] Evil in these early societies is "just a part of the order of things, to be accepted as such," merely the dark or harm-inflicting side of the cosmos.[19] The social order was not focused upon social improvement as much as magnifying blessings and mitigating curses, whether spiritual or material.

Human flourishing also is reimagined in post-axial societies. Taylor writes, "The highest human goal can no longer be just to flourish, as it was before. Either a new goal is posited, of a salvation that takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing. Or else Heaven, or the Good, lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness, and hence to alter the mundane order of things down here".[20] Human flourishing would still entail the basic needs as it was in early societies, the post-axial imaginary relativizes such needs in light of transcendent ends. Thus self-denial and ascetic practices emerge, not as a denial of the more mundane aspects of flourishing, but for their proper ordering.

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[13] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 147-149.

[14] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 57.

[15] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 151.

[16] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 151.

[17] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 152.

[18] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 151.

[19] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 153.

[20] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 152.

The Christian faith as it develops in the New Testament era progresses into the medieval era is a post-axial social imaginary. The answers to the three questions are found in a transcendent framework. Moreover, these answers but become ends to be pursued. These transcendent pursuits become formative of people and are evident in vows made. They are stated in a negative fashion in the classic baptismal renunciations of the Devil, the world, and the flesh. They are also present in varying fashions in monastic vows such as the classic Augustinian commitments to poverty, chastity, and obedience, and the Benedictine vows of stability, *conversation morum,* that is continuing conversion of life, and obedience.

Taylor asserts that in both pre-modern eras, the pre and post-axial, not believing was simply not an option. Atheism as understood today with the affirmation of the "immanent frame," a socially constructed space which precludes transcendence, was not possible. One might convert to a non-theistic post-axial social imaginary such as Platonism or Stoicism, yet such an imaginary would still be reflective of some semblance of transcendence, such as the Realm of Ideas or the Logos. The pre-modern self, in Taylor's terms, is a "porous self," open to enchantment, to grace on the one hand and possession on the other, and to the spirits or the Spirit.

Beginning with the late Medieval era Taylor posits that this post-axial social imaginary begins giving way to modern social imaginaries which, for the first time, make non-belief a viable option. This is "the Great Disembedding." The story of this disembedding that Taylor weaves is a long and complex which takes the better part of his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, to tell. For the purposes of this discussion a few salient points need to be mentioned.

The process of secularization was not a top down project of philosophers and scientists. Certainly theorists contributed to the process. But the point Taylor is making through his concept of social imaginaries is that secularization happens through shifts in a whole matrix of stories, theories, ritual, art, and myth. Many of these are the unintended consequences of shifts in Christian thinking. For instance, an important theme in Tylor's understanding of disembedding is the shift from the focus on sacred time to secular time.[21] Time in the axial age is marked not only by mundane history, but was also grounded in sacred history, such as the observance of the liturgical year. When the Puritans of both England and North America turn from what they feel are the excesses of Christian observances such as Christmas, they were unwittingly disembedding from a more transcendent imaginary.

It is also important to point out that people can inhabit different social imaginaries simultaneously. This is particularly evident among American Christians, such as a sizable number of Evangelicals inhabiting both a form of a Christian imaginary as well as an imaginary of certain strands of conservative politics. This is no less true of many on the "left" inhabiting both a liberal Mainline imaginary and a progressive political one. Often there are places of overlap between imaginaries. At times one can subvert another. It is this issue of one imaginary subverting another existing in a common social space that is at the heart of the problem of secularism.

Among the possible modern social imaginaries are those which exist entirely within the immanent frame. The ends pursued in addressing Taylor's three questions regarding God or the cosmos, the ordering of society, and the meaning of human flourishing can be rendered without any reference to any transcendent value. Thus the relationship to the cosmos in the immanent frame might become a consideration of the exploration of a godless universe. Visions of a more fair society present a new end without needing to be underwritten by a heavenly realm, and human flourishing entails pursuing one's own pleasures and passions. Within such an imaginary one may choose to follow a spiritual or religious path, but it tends to be a quest for authenticity within the immanent

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21 Taylor, *A Secular Age, 55.*

frame.[22] The question is whether or not this will be the lot of congregations as the secular age unfolds.

If congregational leadership is to respond to the effects of secularism within the congregation, the response will have to engage on the level of the social imaginaries in which the church exists. But how does one change a social imaginary? What are the inner workings of an imaginary which are amenable to pastors and other parish leaders? Understanding Social ImaginariesIn his book *Desiring the Kingdom* James K. A. Smith seeks to articulate "the shape of a Christian 'social imaginary' as it is imbedded in the practices of Christian worship."[23] In essence, his task is to dismantle the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" which has held sway not only in secular epistemology, but in far too many Christian ones as well, with "I love, therefore I am,"[24] or better "I am what I love."[25] Smith here takes an Augustinian turn that humans are motivated by love and longing in a pre-theoretical way. Humans' lives are fundamentally oriented toward that which is ultimately loved.[26] This ultimate love shapes and makes sense of penultimate desires and actions in the world.[27] "It's not what I think that orients my life from the bottom up; it's what I desire, what I love, that animates my passion. To be human is to be the kind of creature that is oriented toward this primal, ultimate love – even if we never really reflect on it."[28] People give their allegiance to their ultimate love, or in the language that Smith prefers, they offer their worship.

Smith inquires after how these persons pursue that which is loved. The first element is seen in the area of intentionality, to which he refers as "love's aim."[29] Humans do not merely dispassionately think about the world and the objects in it. They are involved participants who, in Heiddegger's phrase, care for that in which they participate.[30] Thus knowing is rarely, if ever, a dispassionate pursuit. There is always an element of intentionality and personal involvement.

Love is ultimately aimed and intended toward a *telos*, an end.[31] In ancient categories, the heart's intentions aim at that which is ultimately good, beautiful, and true. This tends not to be theoretical abstractions which constitute the end, but is embedded pre-critically in a social imaginary. Through such things as story, ritual, and iconography the good, the beautiful, and the true, for which the heart longs, the ultimate end is apprehended pursued by the intentions of the

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[22] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

[23] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) 11.

[24] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 39.

[25] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 46.

[26] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 46.

[27] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 46.

[28] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 46.

[29] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 47.

[30] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 49.

[31] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 52.

heart. In fact, it could be said that the *telos* pulls or attracts the desires of the heart.[32] The *telos* lures the affections of the heart, which is expressed first and foremost as a pre-theoretical social imaginary.

For Christians, this end is, in Smith's thinking, the Kingdom of God. Yet, as he is quick to point out, human beings are set among numerous social imaginaries with different, and often opposing, ends.[33] Even the idea of the Reign of God can be envisioned and presented in conflicting ways. For Smith, practices derived from and expressive of the intentions of the heart and the end to which they aim become habits that are "love's fulcrum."[34] "Our habits thus constitute the fulcrum of our desire: they are the hinge that 'turns' our heart, our love, such that it is predisposed to be aimed in certain directions."[35] Practices "understand" the world in light of the Gospel.[36]

Leaders navigating through overlapping social imaginaries will need to give due attention to a rich understanding of practices, and the means of inculcating them among the congregation. While certainly cognitive content is not unimportant, it must be recognized that the human persons are not containers for belief or ideas, but arrows aimed at something ultimate.[37] Practices that become habits correct the aim of the heart's intentions and desires toward the proper end. In turn, the end becomes a mirror of the type of persons they are to become.[38]

If the thesis presented here is an accurate description of the dynamic that exists in congregations in regard to secularism, the question remains as to how the leadership is to make positive change to counter the deleterious effects. In light of the reflections on the work of both Charles Taylor and James K.A. Smith the focus of both pastors and congregational leadership should be focused upon developing a robust Christian social imaginary that can enable congregations to live in the midst of secular imaginaries while remaining increasingly open in thought and practice to the transcendent as received through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The task is not to turn the clock back to indwell a premodern imaginary. There is no going back. Nor is the task to vanquish the presence of the secular imaginaries parishioners inhabit. Christian will continue to inhabit different imaginaries. Yet in this regard the task is not too dissimilar to the challenges of Christian existence since the beginning: the struggle of spirit and flesh in Paul's writings, living in the eschatological tension of the "now, but not yet," and being in the world, but not of it.

Seeding a Renewed Social Imaginary

For the remainder of this essay I will outline some of the steps taken at St. John's Episcopal Church in Chico, California. No pretense can be offered that we have discovered the universal response to secularism as it effects congregations. Context and denominational perspectives may well alter the best the means of responding in other congregations. The contours of the response, regardless of congregation or denomination, should find points of similarity, seeding a robust Christian social imaginary through presenting a vision of a transcendent telos apprehended by

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[32] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 54.

[33] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 54.

[34] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 55.

[35] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 56.

[36] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 78.

[37] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 71.

[38] James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 71.

exploring and affirming the intentions of the heart, which are expressed and formed by a set of practices or habits.

Seeding a renewed Christian social imaginary which can stand alongside the secular imaginaries that are present in congregations is grounded in leadership being clear on the transcendent nature of the telos or end they pursue as a parish, and an intentionality in articulating that end. This is not to omit more immanent ends from proclamation and practice; but it is a call to place those ends more explicitly within a transcendent perspective. It is to push against the easy reductionism that our call is merely to house the homeless or feed the poor. Rather these are eschatological signs of the reign of God, and expressions of the New Creation manifested in the Resurrection of Jesus.

In discussing with the congregation at large the ideas behind seeding a new Christian social imaginary, it was hardly possible to use the nomenclature developed and used by Taylor and Smith. Yet it was deemed helpful if a mnemonic device could be developed to convey the basic concept to people. We used, for reasons that should become more clear in the sections below, "Know the Story of God; Commit to the Story of God; Participate in the Story of God."

While there are certain tasks that leaders and pastors have taken in inculcating this renewed social imaginary, this is not merely to be understood as a top down task. Qualified clergy and leaders do have special roles in teaching, proclamation and organization. Nevertheless, they too are being shaped as fellow apprentices in attending to practices as they pursue the *telos* of God's reign through the intentions of the heart. Leaders are less authorities and teachers as fellow pilgrims.

Envisioning the End, Knowing the Story
It is in knowing the story of God that the end or telos of a Christian social imaginary comes into focus. At St. John's we have employed N.T Wright's five act scheme of understanding the Bible as the means of placing the end in the sight of the congregation. For Wright, scripture should be understood as one coherent drama moving from creation and fall, through God's rescue project of the world in the covenant with Israel, which is then recapitulated and fulfilled in Jesus. These contours of the story constitute the first four acts of the narrative, which is then continued and extended through the mission of the church, and culminates in the eschatological vision of the fulness of the reign of God. This fifth act begins with the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, but also incorporates the ongoing life of the church through time.

The task is to keep before the congregation the end or *telos* of the narrative of the Scripture as present in this five act scheme, and put them into conversations with the three issues addressed by Charles Taylor's understanding of a social imaginary: relationship to God, the proper ordering of human society, and the meaning of human flourishing. This end is present throughout the narrative of faith, and is not easily reducible to one vignette of Scripture or a simply expressed phrase. The task it to keep this end within the purview of preaching, teaching, and pastoral work.

The *telos* is often expressed at St. John's as a restoration of the original vocation of human creation first gleaned from the Prologue of Act One of the biblical drama (Gen. 1:27-28). This can be encapsulated as a three-fold call to be a priestly people of God, offering praise, thanksgiving, and intercession to the Creator, a people created for mutual and loving community with one another, and sent into the world to be stewards of God's creative goodness and mercy. This call is thus doxological and priestly, communal and ecclesial, and the missional. Directionality can be applied: the upward call worship, the inward call of *koinonia*, and the outward call of mission. This can even be explored graphically: a community of people with arrows designating upward, inward, and outward.[39]

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[39] Just such a graphic was prepared by graphic designer, Alan Rellaford, of Chico State University for use at St. John's, Chico.

This three-fold vocation is lived out and enriched through the course of the narrative, and can become a leitmotif throughout the entire story. The various contours and themes of Israel's history can be described through this same vocation, with themes such as exodus, Torah, covenant, and justice, among many others, deepening the meaning of the upward, the inward, and the outward. The story finds its pivotal moment in Jesus Christ as the full expression and restoration of the original creation. Thus he is the New Creation which the church proclaims and reflects.

As Act Five of the scriptural drama includes not only the biblical material but also the story as it continues through the history of the Church, this graphic means of expressing the vision or end being the restoration of the three-fold vocation can become the lens for understanding the continuing mission and ministry of God's people. Certainly this would include any overview of Christian or Anglican history, perhaps in an inquirer's class. History is here seen as faithfulness to or violation of this vocation. Yet even discussions of such mundane subjects as the purpose of the Vestry can be seen in this light. Nevertheless, this leitmotif becomes most relevant in assisting Christians in the pews see this as their continuing vocation, not only in attending to church duties and functions, but more importantly in their neighborhoods, their workplaces, and homes.

Making Vows, Committing to God's Story

In discussing the idea of intention in the parish setting we speak of the idea as making promises or vows, life long commitments. This is perhaps difficult for parishioners to grasp. While vows are regularly made in congregations both at weddings and at baptisms, the thought of even these as binding promises entailing lifelong commitments seems often tenuous at best. Reasons for this it may be assumed are many. For the purposes here, however, it is suggested that one of the significant reasons for the apparent fragility of vows and promises is that they are often grounded in either a person's affections or opinion, rather than in the will.

Within the making binding commitments to the *telos* of the narrative of faith. The very concept of a vow as a commitment of the will is inherent to the narrative itself, present as covenant and God's *hesed* toward the Covenant people. It is strengthened in Jesus as the covenant partner of the Father. While a discussion of the nature of the will may fall upon deaf ears among the parish, stories of covenant faithfulness can be told.

At St. John's we engage the congregation in vows that they have made at baptism. The renunciations of spiritual wickedness, corrupt and evil power, and sinful desires of the flesh can serve to focus the intentions of the people. There are several valuable aspects of utilizing these particular vows. First, the vows are grounded in the sacrament of baptism. Through baptism intention is continually remembered by the people and embodied in the very action of the sacrament. Secondly, these vows are shared with the greater tradition of the Church through time. The renunciations are reflected in numerous baptismal liturgies in several Christian traditions, albeit worded in different ways. Their use binds congregations to a large catholic community of Christians through time and space.

The task is not merely to recite these vows, but to understand them within the context they are made and lived out. One writer's suggestion that people ask themselves when reflecting upon the renunciation of Satan and spiritual evil what occult or alien spiritualities, such as Ouija or Wicca, they may consult has little relevance among many, if not most, of the Anglican or Episcopal congregations. More helpful might be to reflect upon the siren call first heard in the Garden to eat of the fruit and become like God (Gen. 3:5). While there may be instances of people actively aligning with malignant spiritual forces, on the whole the temptation is to live disembedded from God. Even though God's existence may be affirmed, he is view in a more deistic fashion, separate from most of life. Similar contextual questions should be asked of the other two renunciations as well.

A case in point were several conversations with some students from California State University about the meaning of their baptismal renunciations. The renunciation of Satan was

addressed from the perspective of the explicit disembedding from God in a secular university setting, with issues of faith at best to be sequestered into the private lives of the students. The vow in light of their context was to seek the intersection of their studies and their faith. The goal was not only to get a degree and a career, but ask how God might be glorified through what they were learning. For instance, the civil engineering student gave thought to improving the infrastructure of poorer communities. Similar work was done with the other vows. In terms of renouncing evil social power, discussion centered on the role of fraternities in light of hazing and alcohol related deaths on Frat Row, and the fraternities' participation in disorderly conduct and the perpetuation of racist stereotypes on Cinco de Mayo. Conversation also focused on being a different sort of social gathering together centered in Christ. The question of sinful desires was framed in light the bar and party culture of their college town.

Of course, such vows cannot be reduced to context. Those students will not always be in that particular setting. The temptation to become disembedded from the Christian faith pertains not only to their studies. One of the virtues of contextualizing the vows is that practicing them in one context can translate into their observance in another.

Were the baptismal vows to be used as the means of articulating the intentions of the heart in a congregation, the Christian calendar itself provides an opportunity to teach and discuss them among parishioners. Lent as a time of preparation for catechumens can easily be a time to reflect upon the vows in community. In fact, the Gospel reading for the First Sunday in Lent, the three temptations of Jesus in the Wilderness, can become the entry into discernment and discussion.

Practices: Sharing in God's Story

The importance of practices lie in the how they link people in a participatory way to the narrative of faith and the end that is embedded in it. In the words of *Missional Church*, practices are "the social embodiment of the Reign of God."[40] While there are many ways of defining a practice for the purposes here a practice can be thought as a communally recognized craft of Christian living, derived from Jesus and the apostolic church, in which Christians must be apprenticed, the pursuit of which, by the power of the Spirit and the application of Christian virtue, they become increasingly conformed to the likeness of Christ.

Not all that Christians do together as Christians qualifies as a practice. Engaging in conflict management under the rubrics of Matthew 18:15-20 constitutes a significant Christian practice. It is derived directly from Jesus' express command, expressed through the virtues of love, forbearance, and courage, and empowered by the Spirit who "knits together the elect in one communion and fellowship." On the other hand, riding bicycles together as part of Christian cyclists' club is not a practice. Cycling itself may be a practice, but it is not in any way derived from the scriptural narrative. What is to be guarded against is the propensity to simply baptize non-Christian practices and programs, such as Christian aerobics or the softball team, and place them at the center of the congregation's life and participation. While there is nothing wrong with such activities, they do not of themselves connect the participants to the narrative of faith and the end embodied in it, nor become the means in which the intentions of the heart are expressed.[41]

This raises the issue of identifying a specific set of practices. Here the literature will both find many common elements and points of divergence. John Howard Yoder identifies five central New Testament practices for congregations: binding and loosing, baptism, eucharist, the multiplicity of the gifts of the Spirit in the congregation, and the open congregational meeting as the basis of

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[40]Guder, *The Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 158.

[41] It is true, however, that practices and programs not specifically Christian may be imbued with authentic Christian practices, and may become the context for their expression.

polity.[42] Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* identifies twelve different disciplines divided into three groups: Inward Disciplines, Outward Disciplines, and Corporate Disciplines.[43] *Missional Church* does not specifically enumerate what is referred to as "ecclesial practices,"[44] but does place them under several headings such as those derived from Baptism and Eucharist, cultivating reconciled and reconciling communities, engaging in spiritual discernment, and cultivating communities of peace through hospitality.[45] This approach of finding a means of categorizing groups of practices as the authors of Missional Church have done, whether their groupings are accepted or others are suggested, will assist in the identification and pursuit of ecclesial practices.

What is being proposed here as a means of seeding a new Christian social imaginary among the members of the congregation is identifying a set of basic practices to be engaged by the congregation. What is meant by "basic practice" is a set that forms the basic participation in ecclesial practices that both the most seasoned Christian and the new believer can participate, albeit in perhaps differing degrees of depth and appreciation. Basic practices form a sort of common spiritual vocabulary and a springboard into other practices as well. The basic set is meant to be broad enough to build upon, but not so comprehensive so as to be a disincentive to members of the congregation. As Todd Hunter writes that being a Christian, what he calls being a "cooperative friend of Jesus," is not a matter of adding "a bunch of religious stuff to an already busy life."[46] Identifying a set of basic practices would help to ameliorate this possibility.

In identifying his own basic spiritual practices for pastors, Eugene Peterson employs the metaphor gardening, identifying certain practices as the necessary "soil" for spiritual growth.[47] He focuses upon three in particular: common weekly worship with the people of God, praying the psalms, and recollected prayer throughout the day. Other spiritual disciplines, of which he offers a list of fourteen including spiritual reading, fasting, confession, and Sabbath keeping, are considered tools for use in the metaphorical spiritual garden.[48] As tools they are not employed regularly, but as needed to care for the soil. They are left in the shed until such time as they prove helpful. Avoided here is the possibility of overwhelming a person with a myriad of obligatory practices. While the practices suggested here as basic diverge in some respects from Peterson's, the metaphors of the soil and the toolshed are helpful for engaging in the practices in congregations.

At St. John's our set of basic practices have included the Daily Offices, lectio divina, ministry among the poor and marginalized, "neighboring" or indwelling our neighborhoods as the locus of the Spirit's activity,[49] and the Holy Eucharist. The intent has been to strike a balance between those practices that are more interior to the spiritual life of the congregation and its members and those practices that are more missional. The Offices and *lectio divina* reflect the more interior focus

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[42] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992).

[43] Foster, *A Celebration of Discipline*, passim.

[44] Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 153.

[45] Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 159-180

[46] Hunter, *Christianity Beyond Belief* (Downers Grove: IVP Press 2009), 90.

[47] Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 110.

[48] Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 108.

[49] This practice is derived from the work of a number of missional practitioners and theologians. See Alan Roxburgh Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood (Grand Rapids: Baker Books: 2011), and Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, The Art of Neighboring (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012).

balanced by the two missional practices. The Holy Eucharist stands at the center of the practices, reflecting both inward and outward foci.

These practices have been introduced through formal catechesis and through regular seeding of each at various times. For instance, the Offices led by lay members are scheduled as a regular part of parish worship, are adapted for meetings of various studies and groups, and figure into classes for spiritual formation. Similarly opportunities are found to fold the other practices into the warp and woof of parish life. Further, simplified forms of the practices, such as a booklet with a weekly cycle of brief offices produced for each liturgical season, or a time of silent meditation after the scripture reading in liturgy or board meetings, adapt the practices for beginners.

As mentioned, these practices do not exhaust the significant practices in which the congregation engages. It is incumbent upon pastors and other leaders to be cognizant of the panoply of practices, and discern how they might be easily subverted by other secular imaginaries. Among the most profound is the practice of marking time. Great attention is given to ground our life in the rhythms and movements of sacred time. This informs preaching, liturgical practice, and spiritual formation.

Attention to *telos*, intention, and practices at the means of building a robust Christian social imaginary are at the heart of St. John's. It is expressed simply to the people through the saying "know the story of God, commit to the story of God, participate in the story of God," which represent *telos*, intention, and practice, respectively. This pattern is implicit throughout the life of the congregation. It is also explicit in our approach to catechesis.[50]

Concluding Remarks

What are the marks of a congregation that has responded to the challenge of secular social imaginaries? There is no particular metric to measure this. Assessment will be discovered in listening to stories and observing subtle ways the congregation responds to each other and the world around them.

Among these stories might be the time when after a burglary at the church with considerable damage the vestry was asked by the District Attorney's office to file for monetary restitution from the perpetrator. Being Easter Week, the vestry began their meeting with *lectio divina* on John's story of the resurrection and Jesus' charge to forgive sins (Jn. 20:19-23). The discussion moved directly into being witnesses of Jesus' resurrection through forgiving the burglar and conveying that through the D.A.

There are also stories parishioners indwelling their neighborhoods as the place where God is active and being surprised by unseen opportunities for ministry and unexpected grace. One woman felt compelled to invite an unfriendly neighbor out for an evening at a local wine and tapas bar. The hope was that when the parishioner went to the neighbor's home to make the invitation that she wouldn't be home, thus fulfilling the obligation to attempt the invitation without having to actually go through it. As turned out, the erstwhile hostile neighbor gladly accepted, saying it would be fun. Praying for the presence of the Spirit, and intent on doing more listening than anything else, the parishioner as able to be present to the neighbor as the latter shared the many pains her family life.

One might notice subtle changes in the way certain things are described. A middle aged man discussed his father's recent death not with the usual cultural bromides of "being in a better place" or having been rejoined with loved ones, but as given new life by the resurrected Jesus. The director of Vacation Bible School describing their task as extending God's hospitality to the children of the

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[50] It is interesting to note that in catechesis we have developed a specific order. The first month or two are spent building up practices. The next stage is to share the narrative of scripture as expressive of the end of Christian life, with the practices becoming the existing praxis upon that launches us into understanding the narrative. Lent is spent with the baptismal vows as expressive of the intentions of the heart.

neighborhood, rather than as a way of recruiting young families. The older stolid gentleman explaining the passing of the peace to someone in the congregation in light of the impartation of peace by the seventy sent by Jesus to the neighborhoods to which they were sent (Lk. 10:5-6), thus connecting liturgy and mission in a profound way. The owner of a store downtown explains his business model through reference to the congregational graphic of the human vocation being upward in prayer and worship, inward in covenantal community, and outward in mission to the community, and then explaining to other merchants that this business model of upward, inward, and outward will help them with the homeless problem downtown.

Pastors should also observe new habits take place, both within the life of the congregation and in the community beyond. The business owner previously focused upon the bottom line looks for the opportunity to give young men in a halfway house the opportunity for a second chance when hiring, irrespective of efficiency. There were those who moved from simply giving assistance to a homeless man to inviting him and his wife into the life of the congregation, mentoring them in life skills as well as guiding them into eucharistic fellowship.

Ultimately, leaders assess the progress in seeding this new social imaginary by employing the same skills and pursuing the same virtues as encouraged in the basic practices. As fellow apprentices with members of the congregation pastors and leaders learn to discern the presence of God and signs of the new imaginary. New life will perceived to the extent the leaders are themselves re-embedded. Of the virtues formed through the basic practices for pastors perhaps the most important is that of gratitude. It is formed through offering such stories just mentioned through the oblation of the Eucharist, giving thanks for what God is doing. Eucharist becomes the lens for perceiving this new imaginary.

Secularism will continue to impinge upon our congregational life, both by defining the space in which mission occurs, and through the social imaginaries that overlap with the parish's proclamation and life. Nevertheless, leaders can engage the situation with confidence, seeding a robust Christian imaginary that can continue to transform the lives of parishioners and to touch the community with grace and hope.

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