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# The Church is a House of Mourning

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Jaco J. Hamman

"It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting" (Eccl. 7:2). These words, once spoken by the Preacher, convey the disillusionment and pessimism of the Book of Ecclesiastes, but may be a prophetic word describing the Protestant church in the Western world, and especially the Reformed Church in America. Without conscious awareness, we may find ourselves at a funeral, a house of mourning, every time we enter our local congregation to worship God.

In this article, I argue that most mainline Protestant denominations in North America find themselves in a certain position, one that determines much of their self-expression and experience.<sup>1</sup> This position is the experience of mourning significant losses over numerous years. Furthermore, I question whether Protestant denominations, whether Reformed, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, or Lutheran, are doing the theological, spiritual, and emotional work needed to move them beyond this position. A major aspect of the emotional process that governs denominations and congregations may receive very little attention.

In individuals, in families, and within institutions, the emotional process becomes the organizing principle for the life of the individual or for the system. The emotional process can be defined as *the peculiar ways of being in relationship with oneself, with other people, and with institutions*. This process is driven by an affective force, i.e., by the energy generated by specific emotions influencing a person or an institution in a partly conscious, but usually in a predominantly unconscious, manner. Some of the emotions that can function as an affective force are guilt, shame, sadness, joy, and gratitude. This article argues that a major aspect of the emotional process that defines the life of mainline Protestant churches is the emotional process governed and energized by the dynamics of loss, mourning, and sadness. This process is often hidden in the life of denominations and individual congregations. However, the church is grieving significant losses.<sup>2</sup>

Although mourning and grieving is a normal process following a loss, it can wear away the health of a denomination or a congregation. Health is the focus of all theological disciplines, but it is the special focus of pastoral care and counseling. Pastoral care and counseling is that discipline within practical theology that focuses on *cura animarum*, the cure of souls.<sup>3</sup> During the past four hundred years, however, *cura animarum* has evolved from the saving of souls to having concern with the health of the totality of one's person, including spiritual, emotional, physical, material, political, and economic health.

First, I argue that loss is a painful experience that is often hidden in the life of a denomination or local congregation. The Protestant church is sad, mourning a series of significant losses. The losses can be quantified, but it is within the qualitative and multidimensional nature of loss that the significance of the losses becomes evident. Here, I do not focus on the reasons for the losses. Rather, I want to highlight the diverse nature of loss and ask about its impact on the church. Second, I draw on insights offered by psychology and other helping disciplines. I nominate the psychodynamics of sadness and the phases of mourning and grieving as being informative to denominations and local congregations as they identify, name, and address the losses they have experienced. The essay concludes with a brief theological reflection on living with chronic sadness and finding hope for a sad church. I offer brief suggestions on how denominations and congregations can mourn the losses they have experienced, and I identify issues that need further exploration and research.

### Losses Beyond Numbers

The church is sad, and its emotional process is defined largely by the affective force governed by the mourning and grieving of significant losses. Pastors, congregations, and denominations relate to themselves, to each other, and to the world influenced by the losses the church has experienced. Thus, the losses I refer to become tangible when one reflects upon statistics comparing membership numbers of denominations in the 1960s (when most denominations peaked in terms of memberships) and the year 2000:<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Statistics of Membership in Selected Protestant Churches**

<i>Denomination</i>	<i>1960s (Highest number)</i>	<i>Current membership</i>	<i>Loss in membership</i>
<b>Reformed Church in America</b>	225,000	181,163	43,837
<b>Christian Reformed Church in North America</b>	316,415 (1992)	278,944	37,471
<b>Presbyterian Church (USA)</b>	4,694,440 (1971)	2,525,330	2,169,110
<b>Evangelical Lutheran Church in America</b>	5,572,022	5,099,877	475,145
<b>United Methodist Church</b>	11,511,709	8,333,770	3,177,939
<b>Episcopal Church in the U.S.A.</b>	3,444,265	2,318,238	1,126,027

A closer look at the Presbyterian Church indicates the following. Starting in the year 2000 and working backwards, it has lost the following members: 34,871

(2000); 27,473 (1999); 21,517 (1998); 22,275 (1997); 33,810 (1996); and, 32,986 (1995). The average loss for the decade 1990-2000 was 33,138 members per year in a decade in which the number of churches dissolved per year consistently outnumbered the churches organized.

These numbers indicate a significant loss in the Protestant church. Such a decline in church membership is not true of all Christian churches in the United States, however. *Faith Communities Today* (2000), a research study based at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, found that 51 percent of churches show signs of growth. Growth was tied to congregations with strong commitments to social justice and with direct participation in community outreach ministries, as well as churches that threw out their organs and traditional music.<sup>5</sup> Most growth occurred within the Baptist tradition. These statistics of loss within Protestant ecclesial contexts, however, are deceiving, since they do not indicate the magnitude and multidimensional nature of the loss denominations and many congregations experienced and are still experiencing. The qualitative nature of loss is multifaceted, and it calls for wide-ranging identification of loss and comprehensive mourning and grieving by the body of Christ.

### **The Multifaceted Nature of Loss**

The authors of *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*, Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, identify six types of loss, defining the multifaceted nature of mourning and grieving.<sup>6</sup> It is within these losses that I identify the qualitative sense of loss in Reformed and Protestant ecclesiastical contexts. Although the book was not written with an institutional audience in mind, the six types of loss can function as a heuristic device for church leaders and congregations to name and address the losses the church of Christ experiences. In addition, the types of loss expose how vulnerable the body of Christ is to loss. Of course, not all congregations will be able to identify with all six types of loss, but I contend that all congregations will be able to identify with some of these losses. All six types of loss, however, can be found within Reformed and other Protestant denominations.

#### ***Material Loss***

Mitchell and Anderson identify *material loss*, loss of a physical object or of familiar surroundings to which one has an important attachment, as the first kind of loss.<sup>7</sup> Numerous congregations, especially in rural areas and in inner cities, have closed their doors or are facing that threat. A front-page article in Sunday, July 7, 2002 edition of the *New York Times* reflected on this situation.<sup>8</sup> In "Beacons of Faith Are Dimming on the Prairie," Patricia Leigh Brown writes somberly, "The flight of people from the North Dakota countryside has been silently devastating to this obscure but historically significant rural architectural heritage." She continues to lament the loss of prairie churches, which "are disappearing at a rapid rate." In North Dakota alone, four hundred of these churches founded by Norwegian, Swedish, Germanic, and other homesteaders,

churches once “beacons of faith and optimism,” have closed their doors. Individuals and non-church groups now find it a calling to maintain church buildings.

In inner cities, a similar narrative unfolds. Where mainline Protestant denominations once had a strong presence through local congregations, many congregations closed their doors permanently or closed them temporarily, only to re-open them in a suburb. Not surprisingly, denominations do not publish how many congregations closed their doors on their web pages. However, one can find much information about new church starts there.

Material loss is not limited to the closing of church doors. All over North America, farmland is sold and housing developments appear. Many rural congregations are losing their rural surroundings as they see suburbs encroaching ever closer. They are challenged with the awareness that the number of people in their church neighborhood is growing exponentially, while their numbers remain constant or are slowly dwindling. Few congregations can argue that their context has not changed radically in the past decades.

Of course, many denominations and congregations have experienced significant financial losses as their membership numbers decreased. Often at consistory, church board, and congregational meetings, the financial situation of a congregation is a dreaded topic of discussion. A pastor of a Reformed Church in America congregation recently told me: “Five years ago we had so much money we did not know what to do with it; now we are facing a financial crisis.” The pastor contemplated whether it was time to leave this particular ministry. Another congregation had to gain the painful awareness that the church leadership has an economic relationship with the congregation’s membership. Much of the communication between the church leadership and the congregation consisted of asking for pledges, giving financial reports, and passing the leaders’ anxiety about the congregation’s financial position to the congregation. Through these brief narratives, it is clear that the Protestant church in North America does not have the financial resources it once had.

Losses of physical objects and of familiar surroundings have been taking place for many years and will probably continue in the years ahead. Important questions to direct to these denominations and congregations are: How have you mourned the losses that occurred? How are you grieving the continued losses of physical objects and of familiar surroundings the church of Christ experiences?

### ***Relationship Loss***

Contained in the numbers of membership loss is *relationship loss*. Relationship loss is the ending of opportunities to relate with, share experiences with, settle issues with, even fight with, and otherwise be in the emotional and/or physical presence of, a particular human being.<sup>9</sup> With church memberships declining steadily since the 1960s at a rate of between 0.5-1.0 percent per year, most congregations and Protestant denominations have experienced and are experiencing relationship loss.

Besides membership loss, denominations and their congregations have been losing clergy as well. A report of the Reformed Church in America's General Synod Council's Ministry and Personnel Services Committee (2000) revealed that 182 churches within the denomination were without a full-time ordained minister, which means that there is a pastoral leadership need in approximately 19 percent of the Reformed Church's congregations. One hundred four of those churches have been without a full-time pastor for the past two years, with positions deemed "not fillable" due to the congregation's limited finances or limited membership. As the report identified a great need for new church plant pastors, it continued that in the next five years ninety-one pastors are scheduled to retire and that graduating seminarians are not numerous enough to fill these vacancies and meet other needs.<sup>10</sup> Writing about a similar crisis in the church, Lloyd Rediger quotes the statistic that a pastor is fired or forced out of a Christian congregation in the United States every six minutes!<sup>11</sup>

The declining number of church members in Protestant churches and the clergy shortage are the result of population shifts and of improved mobility. They are due to generational changes, changes in education and birth rate, and other demographical and cultural factors.<sup>12</sup> As denominations and congregations mourn losing key relationships, however, rationalizing about the reasons for the loss can become a defense against mourning the losses that occurred.

Relationship loss comes in many forms, with pastors experiencing this loss often as a congregation's membership constantly changes. A pastor of a historic church close to a denominational seminary, whose congregation always had members preparing themselves for the ministry, suddenly found himself without any such persons in his congregation. He lamented the loss, saying, "So as William moves on towards his ordination and candidating, I finally lose the joy and presence of persons in the congregation doing theological study and field work at the church." The pastor then proceeded to name the individuals who had studied theology and left his congregation. For more than ten years, this pastor was a mentor and a pastor to future pastors. He lost important relationships and a significant role.

Relationship loss has occurred and continues to occur. Mitchell and Anderson state that the urge to replace lost objects masks the grieving process.<sup>13</sup> Why are congregations so reluctant to decide upon an interim pastor when a pastor decides to leave? Also, are the numerous programs in denominations that focus on establishing X number of new congregations in X years driven by the (unconscious) urge to replace lost members? This excerpt from a report by the General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America describes the kind of programs I identify as reactive to significant relationship loss:

The classes of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes are developing plans to support their "25 by 2005" goal, while the Regional Synod of Canada, "Lord willing," starts eleven new congregations and the Regional Synod of the Heartland plans

“fifty new ministries that will reach ten thousand people for Christ.” In the Regional Synod of the Far West, the Classis of Cascades has a “4 x 4” initiative (four new churches by 2004), and the Classis of Central California has the “20/20 Vision” required for twenty new churches by 2020. Efforts like these demonstrate the RCA’s commitment at all levels to the future of mission on this continent. **Our overall denominational goal is to start eighty new churches by the end of 2005 and to “restart” twenty in that same period** [original emphasis].<sup>14</sup>

The Reformed Church also had a “9.8 by ‘98” vision, seeking \$9.8 million by 1998 for church expansion and revitalization. Ironically, if these visions and ideals are unrealized they may become new losses that have to be mourned, even as they hide continued losses.

Some may argue that these visions of church growth reflect theological and spiritual faithfulness—answering Christ’s call to make disciples of all people. Such theological faithfulness may be questioned, however, if it does not consider systemic health. That is, ecclesiastical visions that exclude mourning and grieving, while spending much energy on generating new life, are never faithful. Theological faithfulness has to integrate the death and resurrection of Christ, thereby inviting us to remember our future, keeping us from fleeing from the past blindly into an unknown future.

As denominations and congregations experience past and continuing relationship losses, we must ask: Are they mourning these losses?

### *Intrapsychic Loss*

A lifelong member in a Reformed congregation that lost most of its prominence within its immediate context recently reflected, “Our church was the center of the community and then they built the mall down the road.” This statement contains another significant loss the Protestant and Reformed churches of Christ in North America have experienced. *Intrapsychic loss* is the experience of losing an emotionally important image of oneself, losing the possibilities of “what might have been,” the abandonment of plans for a particular future, and the dying of a dream.<sup>15</sup> The church member I quote here lost the image of her church being the center of the community, both in terms of location and in terms of being a spiritual home to people. Another congregation referred to itself as “The Beacon Church,” for from the 1960s to the 1980s, the congregation was a beacon in its community and a leader in its denomination. That image and role, however, is long since lost.

I hear intrapsychic (and relationship) loss when pastors refer to their previous congregations with nostalgia, when pastors close to retirement tell me how it was “back then.” Other pastors grieve losing the image and identity of being a shepherd, as they try to live up to their congregations’ expectations that they think and function like CEOs. These “closet shepherds” remember preach-

ing to pews filled with people, teaching to large confirmation classes, and more. In addition, most Protestant denominations that started within a specific ethnic group, such as the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, have lost their ethnic character. A "Dutch identity" or a "German identity" is no longer true of these denominations. Rather, as they expand their membership within minority cultures, all of whom bring different ethnic identities (such as Hispanic, Asian, or an African American), the Dutch, German, or Scandinavian identity is diminishing.

Intrapsychic loss implies that the way one thinks about oneself no longer holds any truth in reality. It is a painful loss to experience and a difficult loss to embrace. With all the signs and narratives of intrapsychic loss that I witness within denominations and congregations, I wonder if these intrapsychic losses were ever mourned. In addition, are these losses mourned as they continue to occur?

### ***Functional Loss and Role Loss***

Closely related to intrapsychic loss is *functional loss* and *role loss*. Functional loss is the grief reaction when a part of one's body no longer functions. Role loss, on the other hand, is that loss of a specific social role or one's accustomed place in a social network.<sup>16</sup>

The *New York Times* article to which I referred earlier is a witness to numerous congregations that closed their doors. Many more congregations will follow. The congregations, as "beacons of faith," are disappearing, and so is the role they played in their communities. Another role loss, which also implies a functional loss, is found in the disappearance of the pastor as shepherd. In addition, the church of Christ, which once functioned as moral educator, provider of spiritual and religious knowledge, and overseer of rites of passage, now finds itself on the periphery of moral education. New rites of passage for society, such as getting a tattoo or receiving a body piercing, have replaced rites of passage once overseen by the church.

The statement, "Our church was the center of the community and then they build the mall down the road," describes a specific role the congregation played in its community. It was the hub of that community, the place where people could find spiritual, relational, and even physical nurture. The congregation was like a caring mother who discovered that she was displaced. She was no longer needed.

What happens to denominations when individual congregations close their doors? How does the loss of significant functions and roles influence the church? Can the church of Christ thrive or even survive without shepherds who guide, reconcile, sustain, heal, and communicate?<sup>17</sup> These questions need to be addressed as one asks how losses are mourned and how losses affect the church.

## *Systemic Loss*

The church that lost out to the mall, the latter now addressing the community's spiritual needs, experienced *systemic loss*. Systemic loss is the loss experienced when one realizes one is no longer part of the bigger system.<sup>18</sup> The congregation in question was pushed to the periphery of society, and the elderly members dream nostalgically of ways they can be part—or even be the center again—of the community. A pastor said recently how thankful he is to be invited to be part of the Memorial Day services in his town. After World War II and until the mid 1980s, his congregation was a key player in the services and parades of the day. The venue changed from his congregation's building and fellowship hall to the football stadium in the 1980s, and now the presence of the congregation is limited to the pastor's symbolic presence at the front of the parade. His congregation finds itself in the position of having no voice in the larger society. Yet, society requires the congregation's silent presence whenever society so pleases.

Denominations, too, have been pushed to the periphery of national life and policy making. The theological reflection of the church of Christ does not guide the policies of society. This is another example of the systemic loss the church is experiencing.

Congregations closing their doors experience another kind of systemic loss. Their loss is the realization that they are no longer part of the bigger system called the denomination. The individuals and families that are still members of the church suddenly find themselves without a spiritual home. They have to find a new place of spiritual belonging. Even if they find such a home in another congregation that is part of the same denomination, or if two churches join to become a new church, the systemic loss experienced is not diminished.

For more than forty years, the Protestant church in North America has experienced systemic loss. Has the church mourned this loss?

### **The Head or the Heart?**

Reflecting on a loss challenges us to balance the tension that exists between our heads and our hearts. Stated differently, the danger in dealing with loss is that we can rationalize and attempt to understand the loss, while not mourning affectively and relationally the loss that occurred. Finding such a balance is important, since some of the losses I discussed were avoidable and others were not; some are temporary, but most are permanent. A few of the losses denominations have experienced may be imaginary, but by far the most are actual losses. Some could have been anticipated, but others were surprises. And of course, some of these losses are due to leaving people and places behind, while other losses are due to having been left. Regardless, it is clear that mainline Protestant denominations and individual congregations experienced and are still experiencing numerous losses.<sup>19</sup>

Surely individual church members, congregations, and the denominations I identified have mourned the losses contained in the types of loss mentioned.

However, I have not met many individuals and congregations who consciously mourn their losses. By conscious mourning, I mean recognizing the loss cognitively with our heads, naming the loss, and then mourning the loss affectively with spiritual awareness. Thinking about loss experienced is not enough. It is, however, a good place to start. To the best of my knowledge, for example, the Reformed Church in America has not mourned the fact that its growth in the Hispanic, Asian, and African American communities implies the loss of a traditional Reformed worship style. Holding the paradox of saying, "You are God's gift to us as we mourn the loss of our traditional identity," seems extremely difficult. This article argues for the holistic mourning of significant losses. For what is the impact of these and other losses, especially those unmourned, on the church?

In the second part of this article, I will focus on the insights of two clinicians, Silvano Arieti and John Bowlby. Arieti provides us with knowledge about the psychodynamics of sadness, while Bowlby highlights the importance of attachment and loss in human development. Here I take seriously the scriptural view that the church functions as a body, that it is a living organism that can be understood by using metaphors often used in the life of an individual or a family.<sup>20</sup>

### The Psychodynamics of Sadness

Major sections of Silvano Arieti's book, *Psychotherapy of Severe and Mild Depression*, are devoted to the psychodynamics of sadness.<sup>21</sup> The psychodynamics of sadness and also of depression are summarized as follows: "Common is the sorrow that visits the human being when an adverse event hits his [or her] precarious existence or when *the discrepancy between the way life is and the way it possibly could be* becomes the center of his [or her] reflection."<sup>22</sup> Sadness and depression sets in when, due to some adverse event such as a loss, the difference between the "way life is" and "the way it possibly could be" becomes too big. Depression is thus seen as "fundamentally only a quantitative transformation" of sadness.<sup>23</sup>

The acute experience of the difference between the "way life is" and "the way it possibly could be" often defines the inner state of a grieving person. Sadness and a desire to undo a loss become an emotional force determining how one thinks, behaves, and, of course, how one feels.<sup>24</sup> As a motivational force, sadness is the promoter of behavior and the initiator of imagination that aims at removing the sadness. These behaviors may range from shock and crying to searching actively and restlessly for the lost person in an attempt to recapture the loss. It can include denial that the loss ever took place, rationalizing about the reasons for the loss, or an attempt to diminish the impact of the loss. Typically, normal patterns of functionality cannot be maintained, since sadness can slow down all behaviors, even to the extent of catatonia. Often the feeling of sadness is replaced by other feelings that have a "negative value," such as anxiety, anger, and rage; sadness can be somatized as it enters the physical body. At other times,

the psyche cannot tolerate the painful awareness of sadness and externalizes the sadness instead. Then, one's sadness and brokenness reflects the sadness and brokenness of this world.<sup>25</sup>

Arieti states further that a futile search to replace the lost person or object can cause the wish that a "powerful" or "dominant other"—a family member, a teacher, a counselor, a pastor, or even God—will reduce the gap that exists between "the way life is" and "the way it possibly could be." Typically, the saddened person enters into a bargaining relationship with a "powerful other" to change the situation. The reparative grief work is then left to the "powerful other" to bring to realization the way life "could be."<sup>26</sup> The sad person will deny himself or herself any autonomous functioning and satisfaction so that, in a *quid pro quo* fashion, he or she can receive gratification and acceptance from the dominant other. When the dominant other does not step forward and change the situation, normal sadness becomes unresolved, helplessness sets in, and sadness escalates into depression. Arieti states that caregivers need to function as "significant others," persons who can assist and empower the person who experienced the loss to return to some level of autonomous function and satisfaction. As long as caring relationships remain on the level of the "dominant other," sadness will prevail.

Drawing on Arieti, the question can be raised whether the church is experiencing a big discrepancy between the "way it should be" and the "way it is." Theologically, there may always be a discrepancy between what is and what is to come. Christ will return to reign over all! Due to the fall of humankind, however, we never enter paradise on earth. The "way it is" and the "way it should be," however, refer to things within our power and are often tied to the memories of positive experiences we had. If one asks a church member or a governing board to give an image of what the congregation "should be," they often can provide an image after some reflection. Reflecting on the "the way it is," however, is much more difficult. Often a lack of communication skills or the entrance of shame assures that the conversation breaks down, with core aspects of the congregation's life together remaining unnamed. Thus, church leaders can say that the congregation needs families with small children, but they have a much more difficult time naming those aspects of their life together (their emotional process) that works against this vision. Following Arieti, congregations often rely on the "powerful other," a pastor, a search committee, a specific program, or even God, to change the "way it is" into the "way it should be." Often I hear a congregation say, "If we can only find a pastor who can relate to families with young children." Or, "What we need is a good administrator." Sometimes a congregation searches for someone who carries all the gifts Christ gives to his body. Others may say, "We need to pray to God, for God will change our congregation into a dynamic faith community," without working on their life together.

Denominations and congregations are searching for the powerful or dominant other, often in the form of a specific pastor or program that will lead

them to new heights of experience, membership, and more. When they do that, they are portraying key aspects of a body in mourning, a body that is sad. Whereas Arieti focuses on the psychodynamics of sadness, and, more specifically, a sad person's bargain relationship with a dominant or powerful other, John Bowlby focuses on the centrality of attachment and loss as primary motivational forces within human development. The third volume of Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* trilogy is subtitled, *Loss, Sadness, and Depression*.<sup>27</sup> Bowlby identifies attachment as the primary motivational force in human development. Attachment is an organizational concept, referring to a person's natural tendency to seek out proximity to and contact with a specific figure and to do so especially if one is threatened, tired, ill, or in distress.<sup>28</sup> Although Bowlby's research was done on infants, he states that this tendency changes little over time. Attachment implies the experience of loss, since it is impossible to maintain all the relationships (attachments) one has in life.

Despite the close relationship between attachment and loss, Bowlby states that "there is a tendency to underestimate how intensely distressing and disabling loss usually is and for how long the distress, and often the disablement, commonly lasts."<sup>29</sup> Conversely, there is a tendency to suppose that a normal healthy person can and should get over a loss not only rapidly, but also completely. Countering these biases, Bowlby states that grief typically has a long duration, that it is difficult recovering from loss, and that loss often has adverse consequences for personality functioning. Although grieving and mourning are never sequential, one can identify stages of mourning that are interrelated and that intersect with one another.

In support of the argument of this essay, I would like to highlight certain aspects of the four stages of mourning Bowlby identifies, since I believe that they hold specific relevance to denominations and congregations who grieve significant losses. As a consultant to churches, I have witnessed many dynamics that can be clarified when Bowlby's insights are used.

A central aspect of the first stage, *the phase of numbing*, is generalized hostility and anger, often leading to shallow and detached relationships.<sup>30</sup> Bowlby noticed that a child's persistent longing to be reunited with his mother is often suffused with intense, generalized hostility, directed at no figure in particular. Inherent to the hostility is an unconscious reproach against the lost person as well as conscious and often unremitting self-reproach.

Conflict seems pervasive to congregational life. Institutions such as the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center<sup>31</sup> have active ministries educating congregations on mediation skills and conflict resolution. It is ironic that a community based on love as it is portrayed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, experiences so much conflict. Congregations experience conflict about diverse topics: personal differences, different opinions about doctrinal issues, financial issues, buildings and building projects, and more. The conflict often is never resolved or leads to church splits. I believe that some of the conflict,

however, is motivated by losses that went unresolved, such as a pastor who left without the congregation being informed as to the reasons why.

For Bowlby, the numbing phase is followed by a *phase of yearning and searching* for the lost figure. This yearning to return to the original state or relationship can last from days to months to many years. It may manifest in what Bowlby calls “obscure forms,” and the search can be directed at an “increasingly obscure goal,” with the disbelief that the loss can be permanent. The church of Christ seems to forget that losses cannot be replaced, only mourned.

One does not have to search far to find goals and visions that can be described as “obscure.” The General Synod Council, a group of core leaders within the Reformed Church, for example, sold a vision to delegates to the General Synod “that each church achieve a net membership growth of one percent or more each year . . . so that by God’s grace, by 2012, there will be 1,100 Reformed churches—joyful, healthy, winsome, growing communities, following Christ in mission in a lost and broken world so loved by God.” The denomination’s 2001 General Synod voted “that by the year 2011 the RCA will be one of the fastest growing denominations in North America.”<sup>32</sup> Questions that I want to raise as a pastoral theologian include: What motivated the urge within the RCA to be one of the “fastest growing denominations in North America”? And, why a growth of one percent? Why not a half percent or even two percent growth? I suggest that these “obscure goals,” with the “4 x 4 Initiative” and the “20/20 Vision,” are in part motivated by the fact that the denomination is not mourning its significant losses.

Bowlby’s third phase of mourning is the *phase of disorganization and despair*. The principal dynamic in this stage is the activation of what Bowlby calls “defensive exclusion.”<sup>33</sup> Defensive exclusion is the common reaction of a grieving person to exclude certain information from further processing. Defensive exclusion is a defense mechanism whereby the body protects itself against overloading its capacities. Bowlby mentions that this disconnect between a person and a situation often plays out in the interpersonal field, where a person may dwell insistently on details no longer applicable.<sup>34</sup>

At a congregational meeting, the pastor opened the meeting by stating that the congregation does not have enough “sustainable units” to afford him as a (senior) pastor and to continue the upkeep of the church buildings. The threat of two losses, that of the relationship with the pastor and the loss of their spiritual home, fueled a debate about increasing the rent on a rental property by \$500 per month. Ironically, an immigrant, someone who knows loss intimately, showed the congregation that the \$6,000 per year under discussion would not “save” their pastor or their church. When questioned afterwards, the pastor said that he wanted to “motivate” the congregation and church leadership to “do something.” “I wanted to shock them out of their complacency.” Selective exclusion often can be identified in congregations and in denominations, where insignificant projects and conversations consume much energy and time.

The fourth and last phase is a *phase of greater or lesser degree of reorganization*. This phase depends upon the amount of attachment between the person who experienced the loss and other individuals. One cannot experience a relational loss without being in relationship, and, conversely, successful mourning depends upon having relational attachments. From this position of greater or lesser degrees of reorganization, one enters into the next loss.

Bowlby's contribution to understand sadness and mourning is that he argues for the pervasiveness of mourning and loss to our lives. Because the need for attachment is our primary motivational force, we continually experience loss. Significant is the fact that Bowlby found that loss remains traumatic, whether for infants, children, adults, or groups. Yet the Protestant churches of Christ in the United States seem to be unconscious of the losses the church is experiencing.

In the final section of this paper, we turn to a pastoral-theological reflection on the emotional process of sadness in denominations and congregations, and raise further questions and concerns.

### Hope for a Sad Church

Since the church of Christ is a life-giving community—a *levensgemeenschap*—as the Dutch Old Testament scholar T. C. Vriezen defines the essence of the God-human relationship—losses have a great impact on the church of Christ and the God-human relationship.<sup>35</sup> The church truly functions as a *body* of believers! The question is, do we believe this as a cognitive statement, a theological truth only, or will we embrace the relational and emotional components inherent to a life-giving community and to the functioning of any healthy body? In a community that receives its life from God and is to be life giving to its members and to the world, losses are noticed and named, painfully experienced, and mourned.

Israel, as God's chosen people, knew how to lament those moments that impinged upon its relationship with God or those times when the brokenness of the world touched its life. According to Gerhard von Rad, Israel's lament was a pivotal aspect of its faith expression.<sup>36</sup> One can argue that the people of Israel, generally speaking, were not stoic when it came to mourning and grieving losses. Often they refused to rationalize about the loss, but rather gave voice to it. They were able to name, grieve, and mourn those losses that painfully touched their lives, as we read in the books of Lamentations and Job and in the psalms of "disorientation," as Walter Bruggemann calls them.<sup>37</sup>

The new covenant of the community that gathers around Christ knows loss intimately as well, since it is a body that experiences the mixed emotions the death and resurrection of Christ brings. Furthermore, an intimate relationship exists between the experience of loss (Jesus' death) and the Spirit of God. The New International Version translation for John 14:16 is, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever." Often this text is translated using "Comforter" to describe the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. This relationship, between the experience of a significant loss and the

Holy Spirit, is rarely mentioned in commentaries. Calvin, in his commentary on this text, focuses on the fact that the Spirit guards us and reminds us of things Jesus said that have to be remembered, the things the church needs to teach.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Raymond Brown, in his reflections on the Paraclete, states that the primary role of the Paraclete is to dwell within the disciples, guiding and teaching them about Jesus, to put the world on trial and to establish the sin and guilt of the world. Regarding the relationship between the Paraclete and loss, Brown writes: "No Paraclete passage speaks of the Paraclete in the role of consoling the disciples. *The role of consolation is confined to the context . . .*" (italics added).<sup>39</sup> Brown does identify a relationship between the Spirit of God and loss, although he refrains from elaborating on the relationship. He comments that "in the Old Testament we do find examples of a tandem relationship wherein the principal figure dies and leaves another to take his place, carry on his work, and interpret his message."<sup>40</sup>

Arguing for the intimate relationship between the Spirit of God and the experience of loss and mourning lies outside the scope of this essay. However, it can be asked whether the body of Christ can listen to the Spirit of God if it cannot mourn. Likewise, can Christians fully understand the resurrection of Christ if they cannot embrace his death? In addition, I believe that, by its inception and its very nature, the body of Christ knows loss intimately. The context of John 14:16, 25-26, and John 15: 26-27, and other passages that refer to the Paraclete, is one of persecution of and tribulation for the church of Christ. Loss is inherent to such a context. To use a contemporary metaphor, the church may find itself in a position of chronic sorrow or constant sadness.

In her book, *Chronic Sorrow: A Living Loss*, Susan Roos addresses the dynamic of living with a loss that never goes away: a chronic or living loss.<sup>41</sup> She defines chronic loss as "a set of pervasive, profound, and recurring grief responses resulting from a significant loss or absence of crucial aspects of oneself (self-loss) or another (other-loss) to whom there is a deep attachment."<sup>42</sup> The essence of chronic loss is a painful discrepancy between what is perceived as reality and what continues to be dreamed of as coming to reality. Roos differentiates between chronic sorrow and complicated or pathological grief, the difference being that in the former, "normal functioning" can continue, whereas in the latter, "normal functioning" is impossible. A characteristic that both these grief dynamics share, however, is that both erode intimacy while fueling a need to belong. Chronic sorrow is a normal grief response, and only when unattended do pathological elements enter the dynamics. Chronic sorrow is about living with irremovable loss, unending wounds, and unrelenting endings.

Due to the losses Mitchell and Anderson identified and which I brought to bear on the lives of denominations and congregations, I believe that the Protestant church in North America and many congregations experience chronic sorrow. Whether it is surrounding farmland that is slowly disappearing or the congregation's youth who go off to college never to return, many congregations

experience pervasive and recurring grief. The Protestant church of Christ in North America is sad.

Chronic sorrow requires and demands much energy and persistent courage to cope with the crises loss brings and to make the adaptations necessary in order to redefine one's life. Roos writes that the energy needed by chronic sorrow for its upkeep can "dissipate fantasies of being watched over by a loving and caring God."<sup>43</sup> She admits that some individuals who experience chronic sorrow also experience growth in their faith. She found, however, that believing in a loving and caring God becomes a challenge if one crisis follows the other, with no hope for a changed situation.

For an individual's relational life, including the person's relationship with God, to remain unaffected by chronic sorrow is impossible. This raises important questions: What will happen in denominations and congregations if the energy that is applied to the unconscious grieving of numerous losses or the pursuit of obscure goals can be used to build the reign of God? How does the emotional process of grief and loss, for example, influence the interpretation of scripture and the living out of church doctrine? Are denominations and churches making decisions based on the unconscious recovery of losses unmourned? And, is the Protestant church of Christ resisting change in order to hold nostalgically to what was?

In *Chronic Sorrow*, Roos argues that the "companioning model" is the best model to address chronic sorrow.<sup>44</sup> The companioning model is distinguished from the "treatment model." Elements of the companion model include honoring the spirit (vs. focusing on the intellect), curious creativity (vs. expertise), learning from others (vs. teaching others), walking alongside (vs. leading), discovering the gifts of sacred silence, bearing witness to the struggles of others, and respecting disorder and confusion. For Roos, companioning is the only responsible way to address chronic sorrow. Through her metaphor I find hope in the God who is our companion.

In the God of the covenant, we have a God who is our true companion. Wayne Oates, in his book *The Presence of God in Pastoral Counseling*, reflects on the covenant nature of God. He identifies God's "Over-againstness" and God's "Alongsideness" as paradoxical elements of the covenant. An encounter with the "Over-againstness" of God generates awe and reverence in a person.<sup>45</sup> The "Alongsideness" of God, on the other hand, is inherent to the covenant and emphasizes the relational character of God and the community between God, humanity, and creation. It receives its deepest meaning in the new covenant and the gift of the Paraclete. God's "Alongsideness" brings intimacy, trust, fellowship, and collaborative effort to the God-human relationship. Though God enters into a relationship with humanity, God stays the Other in the relationship.

Denominations and congregations can rediscover the "Alongsideness" of God—and find hope for a sad church—in prayerful solitude and discernment. Church leaders can reflect on what it means to lead by walking alongside a grieving body of believers. Such a presence, of course, will be nearly impossible

if the church leaders do not develop sensitivity to the presence of loss within the body of Christ, or if the leaders believe that words or teaching is sufficient in addressing loss. In worship, the congregation can be reintroduced to the covenant God who journeys with the church of Christ. Preaching can invite the congregation into a space where losses are named, honored, and mourned—a space where the body of Christ engages in active remembering. The sacraments are signs and seals of God's love for humankind, shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and they can be a comfort to those who grieve. Through their hymnody, especially by singing psalms of lament, the choir can meet the congregation emotionally in their sadness. Bible studies and reflections on Scripture can address the affective, the relational, the spiritual, and the cognitive aspects of our persons. In addition, Christian care giving can foster sensitivity to the presence of loss in our lives. These ways of being together do not deplete the ways the Protestant church in North America can address the sadness within the Church's life.

### **Conclusion**

I conclude this essay with a series of thoughts pertaining to the church's relationship with loss that I left unexplored. Further reflection on these issues is important, since loss becomes a motivational force in the emotional process of denominations and individual congregations.

First, we need to ask seriously whether mainline Protestant denominations are underestimating the emotional impact loss has on the Christian church in North America. Second, understanding the relationship between the dynamics of loss and the relational, spiritual, and emotional pathology we find in too many clergy and in congregations is paramount. Are some of the hostility and conflict, but also the presence of erotic relationships within the church, symptoms of pathological grieving? If so, dysfunction in the body of Christ may be a sign of hope, attempting to direct the leadership of the church to be significant to the church.

Third, church leaders have to reflect on how programs brought into a congregation to bring new life to the congregation interact and intersect with the emotional process of a grieving congregation. Fourth, we need to remind ourselves that denominations with an ethnic heritage have the dynamic of loss as an inherent part of that denomination's emotional process, regardless of the reasons for the migration. This inherited dynamic may make the mourning of contemporary losses especially difficult for historically immigrant churches. Fifth, those who educate the future leaders of the church need to ask themselves whether they prepare and educate clergy who can identify and work with the emotional life of a congregation, especially an emotional process determined by the dynamics of loss and sadness.

Lastly, through pastoral-theological reflection, we need to understand the relationship between the Spirit of God working in a congregation and the experience of loss. It might not be possible for the church of Christ to listen to

the Spirit of God with a sense of openness and expectation if there is unresolved grief in the life of the church. The church has to embrace the fact that it finds itself in a position of chronic sorrow.

If the church is a house in mourning, is the church depressed, or just sad? I believe that mainline Protestant denominations are primarily unconsciously, but also with some consciousness, mourning numerous losses experienced the past forty years. The Christian church in the West is sad and grieving with the diversity and individuality thousands of congregations bring. If—and this is my pastoral and prophetic concern—denominations and congregations do not mourn and grieve their losses consciously, the chances are great that a congregation or even a denomination may become depressed.

A depressed congregation or denomination will experience rapid loss of membership; it will experience much anxiety about the future existence of the church, yet be unable to attract and keep new members; and it will experience excessive internal conflict and hostility. In addition, a depressed church might discover no commitment from its generally dissatisfied members to partake in any activity, or it may find itself fleeing into what I would call “manic attempts” to change the status quo by depending on new programs to change the way it relates to itself, to God, and to the world. A depressed congregation will search for a dominant other.<sup>46</sup>

Reflecting on “Seelsorge,” the German translation for *cura animarum*, the Dutch pastoral theologian Gerben Heitink reflects that “Sorge” translates as “sorrow,” i.e., the “sorrow of the soul.”<sup>47</sup> Sorrow, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “distress of the mind caused by loss, grief, [and] deep sadness.”<sup>48</sup> My topic in this paper, the hidden emotional process of mourning and loss within mainline Protestant denominations and individual congregations, has brought us to the essence of pastoral care and counseling: the cure of souls.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article was first delivered in a slightly different format as a public lecture at Western Theological Seminary (April 2001), the Christian Reformed Church offices (June 2002), and at Calvin Seminary (September 2002).

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the word “church” is used synonymously with denomination. “Congregation” is used to designate the local manifestation of the “church.”

<sup>3</sup> G. Heitink, *Pastoraat als Hulpverlening: Inleiding in de Pastorale Theologie en Psychologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1977), 69ff; D. Louw, *A Pastoral Hermeneutics of Care and Encounter: A Theological Design for a Basic Theory, Anthropology, Method, and Therapy* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 1998), 1; 20.

<sup>4</sup> W. Granberg-Michaelson, *Focusing for Faithfulness, Health, and Growth: Report to the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church in America, 2000); The Christian Reformed Church's numbers were provided to the author by Dr. David Engelhard, general secretary of the CRC; [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org);

<http://www.elca.org/co/news/table.html>;

[www.umc.org/abouttheumc/organization/factsangfigures.htm](http://www.umc.org/abouttheumc/organization/factsangfigures.htm); [www.ecusa.org](http://www.ecusa.org).

<sup>5</sup> See: [www.hartsem.edu/default.htm](http://www.hartsem.edu/default.htm).

<sup>6</sup> K. R. Mitchell and H. Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 36ff.

<sup>8</sup> P. L. Brown, "Beacons of Faith Are Dimming on the Prairie," *New York Times*, July 7, 2002, Section 1, page 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 39ff.

<sup>10</sup> See, <http://www.rca.org/synod/workbook/vocations/maps.html>.

<sup>11</sup> G. L. Rediger, *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 6.

<sup>12</sup> T. E. Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.rca.org/synod/minutes/2000/secretary.html#evangelize>.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>17</sup> Seward Hiltner identified these as the classic functions of a pastor as shepherd. See S. Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology: The Ministry and Theory of Shepherding* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958).

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Although the focus of this essay is the Protestant church in North America, Protestant and Reformed churches around the world are experiencing significant losses which seem to be unmourned. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, for example, lost its position as the "Apartheid Church," with its close relationship to the pre-1994 Nationalist Government. How does one mourn the loss of something that was confessed a sin? Yet, there may be a strong correlation between the inability of the DRC to mourn the loss of apartheid and its inability to work toward church unity with the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa.

<sup>20</sup> This argument extends the now common practice of using family systems theory to understand the dynamics of the church family.

<sup>21</sup> S. Arieti and J. Bemporad, *Psychotherapy of Severe and Mild Depression*, 1st softcover ed. (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1993), 109-128. Arieti, an Italian-born psychiatrist and psychotherapist, immigrated to the United States in 1939 and lived in New York City, where he died in 1981.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 126. The saddened person typically adopts a pessimistic worldview, projecting the state of sorrow into the external world. The person's sadness is then consumed by the general sadness and brokenness of the world. Arieti states that religions, epistemologies, and cosmologies have played such a role in humankind's history. However, he is critical of this mechanism, since it leads to a culture that can become "pessimistic" with a pervasive "social melancholy."

- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>27</sup> J. Bowlby, *Loss, Sadness, and Depression* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).
- <sup>28</sup> J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 371.
- <sup>29</sup> Bowlby, *Loss, Sadness, and Depression*, 8.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>31</sup> <http://www.lmpeacecenter.org>
- <sup>32</sup> See <http://www.rca.org/synod/gsc/0402summary.html>.
- <sup>33</sup> Bowlby, *Loss, Sadness, and Depression*, 44.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>35</sup> T. C. Vriezen, *Hooflijden der Theologie van Het Oude Testament* (Wageningen: H. Veenman en Zonen, 1987), 183.
- <sup>36</sup> G. Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972), 291.
- <sup>37</sup> For psalms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, see W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).
- <sup>38</sup> J. Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 11-21*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 88.
- <sup>39</sup> R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1137.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1138. Examples are Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and John the Baptist and Jesus.
- <sup>41</sup> S. Roos, *Chronic Sorrow: A Living Loss*, The Series in Death, Dying, & Bereavement (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002).
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Notice the close connections with John Bowlby and Silvano Arieti.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 178ff.
- <sup>45</sup> W. E. Oates, *The Presence of God in Pastoral Counseling* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 85.
- <sup>46</sup> It is questionable for this author whether Protestant congregations perceive female pastors as “dominant or powerful” others. Thus, if a congregation has un mourned losses, its openness to having a female pastor may diminish.
- <sup>47</sup> Heitink, *Pastoraat als Hulpverlening*, 69.
- <sup>48</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary (CD-Rom)*, 2nd edition, version 2.01 ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1999).