

Grace and peace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I write to you from Dallas, Texas, a place known as the heart of the Bible Belt. For generations, evangelists have shaped the religious and social fabric of this land. Evangelical Christianity remains interwoven into the culture of our city, with public figures often mentioning their place of worship alongside their professional credentials. This religious identity binds many Texans, but it also draws political and social lines that divide.

After nearly ten years of ministry, I have journeyed with my congregation through mass shootings, divisive Presidential elections, the murders of unarmed people of color, a refugee crisis at our border, the largest mass shooting of police officers in U.S. history, and a global health pandemic. During this time, I have witnessed deep suffering and confusion. Pastors carry the weight of these global and societal issues while also tending to the personal burdens of their congregations.

It has become clear to me that the faith we have inherited has done little to prepare us for the complexities of life and the liminal spaces we must traverse. We have worked hard to educate our people in faith, but we have done little to form them in faith. We've taught theology, but we have not offered pathways into deeper wisdom, truth, and love. In the Presbyterian tradition, education is a central part of faith. Yet, education without spiritual formation may help in academic settings, but it offers little in the real, painful realities of life.

The tension between education and formation became especially apparent during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I found myself asking: Had the Church offered people a different way to live in the space between the known and the unknown? Did we prepare our people to go deep into their faith in the face of the pandemic's uncertainty? Did we cultivate the spiritual depths of their souls so that this season could be seen as not only something to survive but also a time for learning and growth?

My sense then, and now, is that we did not. The pandemic revealed what had been true all along but could no longer be hidden. As Richard Rohr says, we offered a spirituality that kept people stuck in the first half of life. The first half of life is about survival—securing our place in the world, seeking status, titles, and prestige. These concerns keep us tethered to a dualistic, either/or mindset. But they don't lead to deeper meaning. Meaning and purpose are not tied to our age, career, or societal achievements.

The pandemic exposed that we had prepared people only for first-half-of-life Christianity. The Church had not developed pathways to guide people into the second half of life—the deeper, more transformative journey that leads to wisdom. Not everyone can make this journey, but for those who can, there must be a clear path forward.

As the pandemic unfolded, I noticed that people were not turning to me for traditional pastoral counseling but instead seeking spiritual direction. Many felt unmoored, lacking meaning and purpose, unsure how to navigate major disruptions beyond just surviving them. The Great Resignation, where large numbers of people left their jobs or changed careers, showed a collective realization that their pre-pandemic lives lacked purpose. Relationships, too—many of

them once Christmas-card perfect on the surface—crumbled under the weight of isolation with partners or spouses they no longer loved. Some sought new lives in places that offered joy and connection with nature, chasing the meaning they had always longed for. And in matters of faith, many began questioning the Church's role in their spiritual lives. Some have yet to return to communal worship beyond Christmas and Easter.

I am deeply concerned that the Church has not adequately prepared its people for the second half of life—the deeper, more transformative faith journey. At best, we helped people survive the pandemic. We prayed that our churches would survive, too. I have great compassion for how clergy showed up during this time, but survival is not the ultimate goal of faith.

In the wake of the pandemic, I am convinced that the Church must evolve. We must move from merely educating minds to forming souls. We need to invite people into the wisdom pattern of life: order, disorder, and reorder. This is the pattern we see throughout Scripture, in the Psalms, in the life of Christ, and in the resurrection itself.

We need to help people move beyond a faith that clings to order at all costs. We must teach them how to navigate the liminal spaces of disorder as a practice of faith. And we must help them see that the reorder, the new life that comes in Christ, will look nothing like the order they once knew or most wanted for themselves. This is the promise of resurrection. Resurrection is not resuscitation—it is not putting the pieces back together as they were. Instead, resurrection shows that through disorder, new life is born.

I believe people are already in the deep waters of life and faith, but they may not realize it. I'm reminded of when my son first learned to swim. He would chase his sister around the pool and jump into the deep end after her. Each time, I would sit at the edge of my seat, ready to jump in after him. Each time he would follow his sister into the deep end, I would fish him out and tell him, "Buddy, you're just learning to swim. You can't jump in the deep end—you have to stay in the shallow end." But, inevitably he would chase after his sister and jump in again. One particular afternoon after I had pulled him out of the deep end a dozen times, it occurred to me: For a three-year-old, the whole pool is the deep end. If you can't touch the bottom, there is no shallow end. The whole thing is the deep end.

That's true of life, too. Jesus calls us into the deep waters, and perhaps we need to awaken to the reality that there is no shallow end in life, faith, and in relationships with God and one another. How might we help people realize this and navigate the deep waters of their lives and faith?

The deep water is where Jesus always calls us, and we need to offer practices and pathways that lead people into deeper waters of contemplation, spiritual direction, transformative worship, and authentic community. We must create spaces where people see their lives as expressions of their faith, thus helping them to understand their greater purpose in life and for the betterment of the world. We much offer spiritual practices that help people grow in this wisdom, helping awaken to the deeper waters that await them in life. We can turn to the wisdom of the mystics and contemplatives to help us know the deeper rhythms of life and see those moments as sacred. We must reintroduce rituals that mark holy seasons of life, reminding people that the living Christ is with us in those threshold moments.

In this way, the Church can reclaim its role as a guide through the second half of the life of faith, offering not just survival strategies but the tools for spiritual maturity. We must reorient people to their true identity in God as beloved children. We need to help them claim their original identity as original goodness, showing them that their faith is not about having the right answers or following political ideologies but about being on a life-giving journey with the living God. That journey may lead us to trust that we all belong to God and, therefore, to one another.

Pastors, if we don't attend to our own souls, we will remain stuck in first-half-of-life Christianity, and so will our congregations. This inner transformation is critical because it allows us to be the Church the world desperately needs. We are called not merely to be a refuge in times of crisis but to be active participants in the healing and transformation of the world. To do this, we must move beyond survival mode and into a deeper faith that helps us navigate the disruptions of life with grace, wisdom, and purpose, and always with— Emanu-el— God with us. .

We are already in the deep end. May we go deeper.