

# The new era: how are churches called to respond?



# Three letters to the churches

Together for the Common Good in partnership with  
Journal of Missional Practice and The Common Good Foundation

## **THE PLAGUE AND THE PARISH**

*An Invitation to the Churches*

## **RENEWING THE COVENANT**

*Churches and the Building of Local Relationships*

## **THE POLITICS OF GRACE AND PLACE**

*A Letter to the Local Church*





**MAY 29, 2020**

Journal of Missional Practice, The Common  
Good Foundation and Together for the  
Common Good



# **THE PLAGUE AND THE PARISH**

An Invitation to the Churches



# OUR SITUATION

Pope Francis said last year that we are not living through an era of change but a change of era. We are entering a new chapter in the history of the world, and of the church. In order to act effectively and faithfully it is good to understand what those changes are and how it is different to what went before.

These changes have been building for a while. In the era of globalisation, the previous chapter, it was assumed that borders and place would matter less and less as technology, knowledge, and trade dissolved restrictive barriers. Transferable skills were the key to success in the 'knowledge economy' and university degrees were the means to achieve social mobility. The future was for the educated and the working class were viewed as 'left behind' in the faraway towns by forces beyond their control. They were an evolutionary casualty in their inability to adapt to the changes that globalisation demanded. It was assumed that the future would be like the present only more so. Technology, mobility and transferability would intensify these changes indefinitely.

This would be underpinned by a legal framework that upheld the priority of individual and property rights. Place, democracy, tradition, faith, community and class did not really matter anymore. The internet, global corporations and new media would combine with frictionless trade in an increasingly integrated global economy to provide peace and prosperity that would benefit everyone. If in doubt, do another degree.



But it's not turning out that way.

It turned out that democracy was not dead, that the abandoned people in the neglected places had something to say about how they were treated in the era of globalisation, something to say about loss, grief and rage. And their vote mattered more than people thought it would. And the most shocking thing of all, it turned out that it was conservatism and not liberalism that was shaping the future.

The coronavirus has intensified all of this. Nation states have a greater ability to act in combating it and workers are more visible and respected than they have been for decades. People find themselves stranded in the place they actually live in, longing for real physical presence and aware of their neighbours and the nature around them that renewed itself this spring. A time characterised by a greater awareness of vulnerability and our dependence on others for food, health and shelter.

# INTIMATIONS OF THE NEW CHAPTER

This is a new chapter of an extremely long and ancient book. Earlier chapters give greater insight than the one that went just before regarding how to engage with these new realities. There are three plot dynamics that give life to this new era and bring to awareness different aspects of the vocation of the church.

## AN OVERTURNING

The first is that what was once invisible becomes visible, what was devalued becomes important, what was desecrated is reconsecrated. One example of this is the respect shown to workers: to shelf-stackers, bus drivers, carers, cleaners, truckers and farmers. They were of no importance in the previous chapter but they will be key characters in the new one. Another example is that the places denuded of value and purpose are revealed again as a site of meaning, a place where people live and from which they work. The parish has returned as a site of living community, with its land and nature, its character and history, its wounds and its promise. It is the elemental theatre of living community. Its institutions and buildings, including churches, are no longer abandoned monuments to inevitable decline but full of necessity and hope and the new chapter is played out within its bounds. People and place matter in this story. Their particularity is transcendent.

## A VULNERABLE CHURCH

The second plot dynamic in this new chapter is that the church needs to recognise that it is vulnerable, that it shares the fate of abandonment with its neighbours in the parish, and can be written out of the story. It shares the need for mutual protection with others. It can be isolated and easily ignored. It can be merged and bought out. Its redemption is found in its friends and neighbours 'of this parish', who are also vulnerable and anxious. In relationship, it becomes stronger. In doing things together it brings meaning to locality, it rewrites its history.

The church needs those relationships because crunch time is coming. That precious mutuality, the recognition of neglected places and workers could count for nothing unless we build a constructive alternative that can resist the famine that will follow the plague.

## "POLITICS" MATTER

Which brings us to the third part of this new chapter which is that politics matters again. Here, this is to be understood as a relational power that flows from being a faithful neighbour and the pursuit of the common good, that is by building a mutual space that can defy the earthly powers. Both the church and its neighbours are vulnerable to desecration. The state has coercive power and the market money power. But there is a relational power in a faithful neighbourhood which evokes a new politics.

This politics is not party politics, nor is it about national or even local government. It is not calling out enemies on Twitter. It is about the restoration, or the resurrection, of the body politic; the civic institutions that give substance and form to stable settlement and communities, that enable connections to be made between the parish and its neighbours. The body politic is embodied and embedded in place: schools,

churches, local unions, businesses, business associations, tenants associations, farms, sports clubs, hospitals, fire stations, choirs and pubs. During the last forty years the body has been atrophied in favour of the mind, as profession replaced vocation, as the transferable was praised over the particular, money over work, and mobility over place.

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# AN INVITATION TO WRITE A NEW CHAPTER

These three plot dynamics are converging to create the possibility of a new chapter. This chapter will come through the renewal of the body politic which must redefine the meaning of society, and be pursued through the revival of the relationships that are not governed by power or money. It is a chapter that must address how we limit the damage to civic life by building up civic immune systems, an institutional ecology that will sustain belonging, place and meaning - all these human forms of association.

We must write this chapter because the body politic is emaciated. The church, which should be at the heart of this new chapter also finds itself reduced and in need of renewal. Vulnerability is pervasive. It defines the time of the virus. All are uneasy and unsure of where they fit into the new settlement, all are wrestling to understand the kingdom to come. Right now, virtually every aspect of the local economy is on life support.

Part of the unique vocation of the church as sign and foretaste of the kingdom is to participate in restoring the body politic, to revive the old bones so they can walk again. This is the task; the new chapter that is waiting to be written. The church must not enter this vulnerable space in order to seize power but to resist it, to hold capital and the state to account in their tendency to centralise and concentrate power, and to commodify human beings and the natural world. In writing this new chapter the church is called upon to uphold and defend fellow local institutions with whom it has built a relationship of trust - in defiance of

capital recouping its losses and the state administering the debris. In moving from host to neighbour, in recognising its own vulnerability and those of others, the people of the church can take a lead in extending the hand of friendship and building the common good between previously isolated or estranged interests.

The civic calling of the church in the world is to preserve the sanctity of creation itself, which is human beings and nature, which can never be owned by the worldly powers and used at their discretion. The parish commune is that set of relationships that eludes their control – The Kingdom of God.

In joining with others to write this new chapter, the church fulfils its mission by acting in the world to ensure that God's creation is not desecrated.

And, in a fallen world, to ensure that love is the end and goal of human society, that it is preserved in the actions of people in relationship, at home, at work and in community.

The preservation of love in faithful human relationships is the calling of the church as a civic institution. It passes on that inheritance to each generation and it is beyond price. It is its gift to all people. The beliefs and practices bring redemption, but the actions of the church in the world as a civic institution have the ability to disarm the inhumanity of capital and state through relationships - and this can only be done alongside other vulnerable institutions also in fear of capture and effacement. It is our gift to the world.

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This invitation comes out of a series of conversations between us and is framed by a generous and generative partnership between JMP, T4CG and CGF. It follows a trans-Atlantic webinar on 30 April 2020 featuring Maurice Glasman, co-hosted by Alan Roxburgh, Journal of Missional Practice and Jenny Sinclair, Together for the Common Good, in which a hundred church leaders participated via Zoom and many more via Facebook Live.



The Common Good  
Foundation







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Common Good



# **RENEWING THE COVENANT**

Churches and the Building of  
Local Relationships

**Dear Friends in Christ**, fellow travellers in these challenging times, we are wanting to follow up with you after so many of you responded to the publication of *The Plague and the Parish*. It was written just as the Covid-19 pandemic entered our worlds, in part, as a call for our churches to bring their vocation in Christ to the re-weaving of a torn social fabric. Since then the consequences of the pandemic have intensified. Uncertain, anxious times will continue for months to come, presenting us all with the challenge of caring for one

another and reimagining how to live faithfully. The pandemic has elicited a number of immediate responses. Our energy has been on understanding and managing this new reality and its impact on our social life, from isolation, to unemployment, to death. We're living with overwhelming questions about how we live as a society amidst the possibility of economic collapse and a growing sense that other human beings are now a threat. We are wrestling with the inadequacy of our institutions at national, regional and local levels.

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## A FAILED STORY AND LOSS OF CIVIC LIFE

Over these months our reactions have ranged from confusion and fear, to anxiety, anger, and exhaustion. Now, almost six months on, the overwhelming mood has become one of grief. This grief is certainly about mourning, isolation, and the fear of economic insecurity. Those of us in Christian leadership also have a sense that much of our formation and training has not prepared us for this moment. Yet there is a deeper level to this grief that is hard to put into words.

We find ourselves in a space where the primary stories for addressing our situation are being given to us either by science (trust the science and we will find a vaccine) or by government (our legislators will find the funds to keep us afloat until the vaccine is found). While these stories are important, they cannot

touch what is a much more profound sense that our collective hope has been reduced to crisis management, and that this is insufficient to sustain us. We are seeing the failure of a culture which has infected our way of living, and that is a culture which is based on *contract*.

This grief is a malady of the soul. It consists of two elements.

First, the presence of a story that is no longer working. Implicit in *The Plague and the Parish* is a critique of what the modern story has done to our civic space, to our parishes, and to the congregations that dwell in these spaces. The story of the modern West is about a society built around transactional exchanges, managed by contract, determined by globalized economics. The results are increasingly clear - the evisceration of civic life, the thinning out of local forms of a common life that would enable communities to work out their challenges with one another, and social isolation, even between people who live in the same neighbourhood.

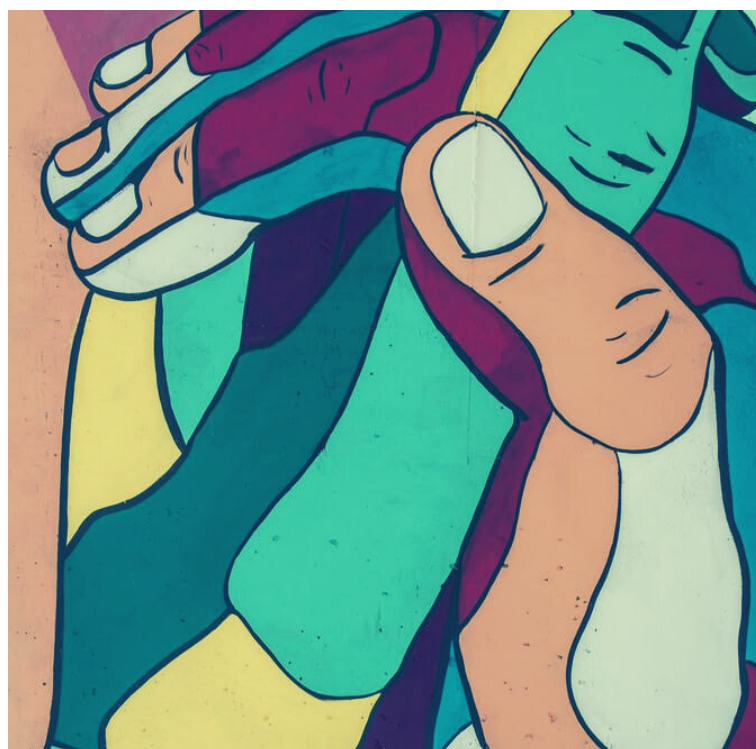


This overarching story has been shaped around the idea of “progress” and by the belief in radical individualism as the dominant operating system. In this context, our churches have complied with an unofficial social contract, and have continued to make “socially useful” contributions, but their influence has drained away. Our distinctive calling as witness to the sacred and as a faithful neighbour has diminished. This has left many church leaders confused about their place in society and even in their identity as leaders.

The second element is the absence of alternatives to this failed story. The dominance of this ideology has resulted in a loss of memory that things could be any other way. The result is the emptying out of civic life, the unravelling of our social systems and our confusion as followers of Christ in how to respond.

## FROM CONTRACT TO COVENANT: A FIRST STEP TOWARDS THE NEW CHAPTER

We are convinced that there is another story. There is within the memory of the church a story of being a people who do not need to be shaped by social contract, consumerism and individualism. Our vocation is rooted in the reality of Christ living in us and, therefore, by God's relationship with us. We know that apart from him we can do nothing. *Covenant*, not contract, is at the heart of our



vocational calling. Our vocation is not to be useful but transformative.

The Christian story breathes an alternative imagination expressed in the embodied Christ and through the language of *covenant*. This is an alien word for most of us. Simply put, as followers of Jesus, we know that human beings are not to be defined primarily by function or transaction, but by our inherent God-given dignity, and by relationships that are characterised by trust and mutual flourishing.

Covenant in Scripture has an expansive meaning which can have a transformational effect on our relationships, our churches and our civic communities. It is about God's unconditional promise to us in Christ. It speaks to the ties that bind us together in ways that lead to the remaking of social life. It re-weaves the bonds of trust between generations and interests. It requires a commitment to love one

another, and an accountability earthed in the place where we live - in biblical terms, the land itself is treated as a covenantal partner - and in our local institutions. Through our Scripture, we learn that our institutions are to be formed and judged on the basis of this covenant rather than on contract or economics. They are to be durable and faithful across generations. Historically, we can see that in their origin and intention, church, parish, trusts and endowments, the common law, Parliament and our liberties come from this covenantal understanding of Christian life.

## CHURCHES IN COVENANT WITH NEIGHBOURS

To heal the malady of our collective soul we need a bigger story. The transition to the new chapter ought to be led by churches but so far we have been largely absent from the field. Internal interests, such as financial imperatives, closures, social distancing and the shifting of worship online may seem to be requirements of survival but they obscure our ability to remember who we are called to be.

The emerging racial tensions of recent months also increase the risk that we fail to confront the implications of a culture that is fundamentally geared to dehumanising human beings. People look to churches to offer some resistance and to stand for human relationships in an increasingly inhumane world. We must point to a way forward that transcends division and brings healing.

A renewal of covenant as an essential part of our Christian narrative is a primary way our churches can write the new chapter. To do that we need to begin in the local, the parish, the neighbourhood. This will require us to be physically present, in relationship with people and with place.

It will involve congregations discerning how they might covenant with neighbours and other local institutions in their parish or locality in order to generate a renewed civic life. On a very practical level, a place to begin would involve taking on practices of commitment and love. Practices rooted in our bond with Christ, which make us available and vulnerable through relational engagement alongside the people in our communities.

There is no avoiding one-to-one conversation as the central practice.

As the economic fallout of the pandemic thunders on, as redundancy and eviction notices are handed out, the need for this new story becomes more acute. Our civic immune systems have been weakened by contract and they need strengthening by covenant. This is relational work.

A first step towards developing a *covenantal* culture in our local communities might be that we, as congregations, focus our vocation toward building local relationships. This means getting to know our neighbours in one-to-one conversations. It means loving friendships of reciprocity, being a good neighbour willing to stand in solidarity when it counts.

This is the shift from contract to covenant. Our humble churches diminished, but fulfilling an authentically Christ-centred, civic role alongside neighbouring local institutions, building a common good between different interests.

This would be one of the ways of living into the prayer “Your kingdom come”.

If you feel things don’t need to be as they are, you are right. If you can see that this contract culture is affecting the life of your church, your neighbourhood and your country, you are right. The threads of civic life cannot be re-woven based on contract. In the life of the Spirit, we are social beings, created and wonderfully made to live in relationship. As this pandemic proceeds, grief becomes more pronounced and the need for a bigger, more substantive story grows. Christian communities can become embedded in the local, in a life of covenant relationship. This is the nature of the radical renewal to which God is drawing us.



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Good Foundation and Together for the  
Common Good



# **THE POLITICS OF GRACE AND PLACE**

A Letter to the Local Church

**"Surely the Lord is in this place –  
and I did not know it"**

## **Genesis 28:16**

Over the last ten months we shared two 'thought pieces' with you, exploring themes that we feel are central to the challenges of our times and which speak to how churches could respond. The first was *The Plague and the Parish: An Invitation to the Churches*, and the second, *Renewing the Covenant: Churches and the Building of Local Relationships*. Now, as Lent begins, we want to share with you a third piece, attached to this overview: *The Politics of Grace and Place*.

All three letters centre on the recognition that we are entering a new era, and focus on how we can make a transformational difference within our own particular context. We have especially highlighted the importance of the places we serve, the difference between 'contract' and 'covenant' and the revitalising of the Christian witness through practical expressions of God's love. The fallout of the COVID 19 pandemic has accentuated the significance of these themes as we face the great task of civic renewal.

In our third letter, we want to share our sense that there is a political dimension to the local church's vocation. Not in a party political or campaigning sense, but rather in its call to transform civil society. Though we aim to be servants, churches are more than service providers and - though we strive to be faithful witnesses - we are called to be more than evangelists. Our belief is that God is leading us to deepen our relationship with people, and with place. Our suggestions are not intended to be prescriptive or comprehensive, but aim instead to inspire actions arising from a gospel of grace, based on one who did not offer a manifesto for change, but was himself the Kingdom made manifest.

We offer *The Politics of Grace and Place* in fellowship and solidarity during this present wilderness. It is our hope that what follows will deepen the church's reflection and discipleship.

# THE POLITICS OF GRACE AND PLACE

Dear Friends in Christ,

These hard months have pulled back the curtain on the fragile nature of our condition. The need for a life-giving story that can renew us around the common good is increasingly obvious, making this a moment of truth for churches and communities alike.

In our conversation, the same questions keep surfacing: *how should churches respond – and what is our role in the new landscape?* Something deep seems to be missing in our civic discourse, which is calling our churches, even in their vulnerability, to action. In our earlier letters, we spoke of a change of era, in which 'place' (whether nation state or local community) is taking a more important role than in the period of globalisation. We have pressed for a recovery of 'parish' as a primary way of mending our frayed polity, and the urgent need to move from a society built around 'contract' to one of 'covenant'. Covenant is a primary organisational principle for Christian community and a visionary basis for our political involvement, being nothing less than a call to participate in God's re-making of the world. Having written about these things, we want to spell out further what they might mean for practical change.

**"Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
You shall raise up the foundations  
of many generations;  
You shall be called the Repairer of  
the Breach,  
The Restorer of Streets to live in."**

**- Isaiah 58:12**

## THE SOURCES OF OUR VISION

There are many sources to this nourishing stream: The New Testament and Hebrew Bible, primarily - also Aristotle, Aquinas, and Catholic Social Thought. Alongside this, we have the witness and experience of countless Christian communities who, in the face of dehumanising powers, have upheld the image of God in every person. Pope Francis has returned to this theme - the relational power of love to resist domination - in his most recent Encyclical, [Fratelli Tutti](#).

The church is called to be the embodiment of love in a desecrated world: the Christian tradition, like the burning bush, is consumed with that passion without being extinguished. For all the endless churn and turmoil, despite



our deep flaws and divisions, this remains the same. Therefore, we are filled with hope: that, here and now, the promise of love can be redeemed; that the sacred covenant between God and his people can be renewed - right where we are.

No political or economic power formed nature or human existence. Creation is not a commodity but a sacred inheritance, and we have a high calling. As social beings we are made for neighbourhood and while the past year has bound us together in new ways it has also revealed our isolation from each other. We have rediscovered common bonds but seen too the deep need for co-operation across different tribes. The re-weaving of our common life must, we believe, be grounded in local presence.

## RELATIONAL POLITICS

This is not about party politics, but new forms of governance that restore dignity and agency to people in their concrete situation. It is about how we live together and negotiate our relationships in order to exert some control over the environment around us. We espouse, therefore, a politics of grace, based on God's covenant with place and people. Only this can resist the domination of worldly power, global capital and the desecration of the earth.

It is a politics of relationship, to counter the politics of abandonment - in which the sharing of vulnerability can be turned into a mutual strength and where time spent together resists the divisions that separate. It is, in the fullest sense, a local



politics that seeks to grow the ability of people to shape their life and realise the promise of their environment. It involves an alliance of institutions in order to shape a common good: drawing together those who may previously have been estranged or in conflict.

## THE CHURCHES' VOCATION

Many churches have fallen out of relationship with the place and the people where they are situated. The call to relocate our common life is not nostalgia but stems from a desire to restore the church's true vocation as a sign of God's coming kingdom. This is slow but holy work, requiring patient attention to our immediate context and prioritising time spent with neighbours - more accidental and in situ conversations than meetings with agenda. It means sharing meals, walking together, meeting for coffee,



hearing each other's woes. It will grow awareness of others' competencies and gifts and build trusting friendship across our beliefs, backgrounds and ethnicities, to the point where it is possible to speak freely as ourselves, rather than from our clerical or professionalised roles, and involve the whole people of God, ordained and non-ordained. In other words, it is a work of love that can form a bond that will be mutually strengthening and resilient enough to withstand events.

The gradual formation of trust with those we love and serve is transformed over time into an energy, an ability to act. It may begin as a series of conversations around a shared task, but from this, relational power flows. Building such local relationships, open to grace and new possibility is the basis of a new politics. Bound together in a mutual love for the place where we live, we become a people. This is so much more than 'community engagement': it is the process of *becoming* community – a people who formerly were not a people.

## BECOMING A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

If this common life is to be covenantal, it must be durable and its ownership must be local, represent neighbourhood interests and have a significant degree of autonomy. It must, therefore, also be *institutional* and sustainable. Dependence on grants can make institutions fragile and prone to being instrumentalised or compromised. Endowments, whether established by benefactors, investors,

popular subscription or by the state, can help to insulate against this vulnerability. In practice, it may be that a church congregation comes together with a neighbouring club, or other local associations to form an organisation or alliance. When centred around an asset, a piece of land or a building, this will be more durable. There is something shared to protect, to be inherited by future generations.

A relational, place-based civic politics restores power and responsibility to communities. De-centralising the state must re-personalise society.

## COVENANTAL PARTNERSHIPS

What might this all look like? Embedded and embodied, it will be different in every situation.

It might look like the imaginative repurposing of church buildings or land; maybe the shared governance of local endowment funds or housing associations. In every case, it will be rooted in neighbourhood and intergenerational in character, with broad-based governance that upholds the dignity of work and our stewardship of nature.

Amid the demands and immediacy of the COVID crisis, it is all too easy for churches to be drawn into the role of service provider. Nevertheless, genuine covenantal partnership resists conscription to any agenda other than that which makes for peace and builds up

our common life. State initiatives are characterised by short-termism and shallow roots: by contrast, the church is devoted to this place, echoing the promise of Christ: "I am with you always."

In practice, the state may take on an enabling role and operate in a partnership capacity. But the autonomy of local institutions is vital, in order to balance power, uphold distinctive customs, skills and character and to provide contexts where people are able to grow a sense of belonging and local pride. From this stronger civic ecology relationships of reciprocity emerge, not only locally and regionally, but which can grow international solidarity and co-operation.

## GRACE-BASED COMMON LIFE

It is a distinctive contribution of Christianity that it held every person – whatever their culture – capable of grace and renewal in the image of God. This new covenant baptised many tongues into one body and so we stand for an inclusive politics that acknowledges the sins of empire and privilege, but seeks a kingdom that is deeper than racial or cultural difference.

The possibility of society based on grace and shared space is fundamental. This must be sensitive to dynamics of power yet essentially co-operative, incorporating varied voices into one story. 'Parish' denotes common ground – a fellowship of those who once were alienated, in which the dignity of every human person is upheld. Our analysis of oppression needs



to cover both race and class, with a particular awareness of how economic power is manifested in each place. Land unifies us all, and our communities are interconnected as never before. A politics of grace calls us to explore new associations in which churches emerge as generous and honest brokers in building coalitions for the common good.

Times of crisis are invariably also moments of truth – and truth must liberate action. The churches' heavenly vocation starts under our feet and, amidst the tragedy of this extraordinary season, a gestation is taking place that presents a unique opportunity to find again our place in society. It is time for God's people to move beyond survival – or the anxious desire of returning to normal – and write our next chapter in pursuit of God's kingdom.

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Written jointly by Jenny Sinclair ([Together for the Common Good](#)), Lord Maurice Glasman ([The Common Good Foundation](#)), Alan Roxburgh, Martin Robinson, Sara Jane R. Walker, Mark Lau-Branson and Mary Publicover ([Journal of Missional Practice](#)), Rt Revd Andrew Rumsey and Father William Taylor.

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