Although the headlines proclaim a “new” thing, the presence of the religiously “Nones” and “Dones” among us, this is hardly new. The New Testament points to the same groups in its day, and there is much these writings can tell us about effective ministry in and through these groups of people.
Significant time, energy, and money have been expended trying to understand the reasons for this phenomenon. Yet, despite the prevalence and growth of such data over the last decade, church bodies have found themselves ill-equipped to respond to the challenge presented by Nones and Dones. Fixes to existing church programs and offerings—even those based on the relevant data and attempting to respond to concerns voiced by those in the research pool—have generally met with very limited success. Most congregations and denominations continue to lose members, regardless of where they are on the social-political spectrum. Tweaking programs to be more “responsive” to the reported concerns of Nones and Dones, while not irrelevant, seems to be a band-aid on a severed limb.

This spring, I was visiting a friend who is a professor at a Unitarian Universalist seminary. She is an exceptionally positive and energetic person, but as I told her about the work I do with congregations, she expressed the same angst and confounded gloom we hear from pastors and denominational leaders: Seminary enrollments are declining. Congregations are shrinking and often surviving by drawing on endowment monies to pay for upkeep of aging, historic buildings and even to pay for regular operating expenses. My friend said, “For a while everyone was saying the Nones and Dones were going to come flocking to us. We were more progressive and tolerant, not dogmatic, and that’s what they were looking for. That’s why they left their churches or never went to one. We were going to grow! But it’s not happening. We’re shrinking too. And we’re no better equipped to move into this new future than the Presbyterians or anyone else. We were built for a time that doesn’t exist anymore, and we have no idea how to be something different—or even what that ‘something different’ would look like.”

My Unitarian friend named precisely the situation of the Western church currently—sailing into uncharted waters with turbulent weather and rusty skills for exploratory navigating. The congregational and denominational structures and practices currently in place grew up to meet the needs of a cultural context in which church and religion were presumed to be key elements of civic life—and that is a culture that largely no longer exists. The practices and mind-set for how we “tell the story” have been similarly formed by a context that no longer pertains, a context in which the church had a central place and voice and could assume people’s interest in our message or at least a certain respect for its probable importance. People assumed the church had something to offer that could not be found elsewhere. While that is still the case in some areas, those are declining and likely to continue to do so.

The great blessing, however, is that we need not rely only upon the resources and practices we have developed and used during the Christendom period of the Western church. The church has existed in many places geographically and across

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1 For those interested in this research, see, for example, the work of the Hartford Institute (http://hirr.hartsem.edu) and the Barna Group (https://www.barna.com) and their relevant publications.

history where it was not socially central and where its story was not the dominant
sense-making *mythos* of the culture. The North American church can learn much
from those times in the church’s life, past and present, particularly the powerful
and theologically rich story of God’s people found in scripture.

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If we return to scripture, we see models other than Christendom for imagin-
ing the place of the church within the work of God—hopeful models where church
was not culturally central and the Spirit of God was moving most powerfully, not
just among the socially marginal, but among the religiously marginal—among the
Nones and Dones.

As we read the story of the spread of the good news of Jesus in the New
Testament—the paradigmatic narrative of “telling our story”—one of the most
consistent features of both the Gospels and the Epistles is the rather confound-
ing, holy surprise of the inclusion of the gentiles in the story of God’s saving work
through the Jewish Messiah.

The Gospels depict Jesus already beginning the process of transforming his
followers’ paradigm of God’s activity and of who are people of faith—decentering
the traditional “sons of the kingdom” and calling attention to the work of God in
those who were not traditionally part of God’s people. For example, in the heal-
ing of the centurion’s servant (Matt 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10), a Roman military
officer—certainly not one of God’s “chosen people”—is lauded as having more
faith because of his grasp of Jesus’s authority than those in Israel. Being on the
religious margins with limited access to knowledge about Jesus or the spiritual
tradition Jesus embodies does not seem to be a detriment to being approved of
by Jesus. On the contrary, the centurion is held up as a model, and Jesus says that
people like him (“many . . . from east and west,” Matt 8:11) will dine at the escha-
tological feast with the ancestors “while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown
into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt
8:12). The centurion exemplifies the religious outsiders who are welcomed as the
appropriate guests of Jesus’s future feast. The traditional heirs—with their scrip-
tural knowledge and faithful worship attendance—are shut out.

This is just one of many texts that show the first believers grappling with
the unexpected reality of the gentile response of faith in Jesus as the savior—a
response that showed that the Spirit of God had been at work among people whom
the apostles’ tradition had counted as, for the most part, outside the boundaries. In
the traditional texts of the prophets, if gentiles were to be included in the story at
all, it was to be by coming at the end of time to Mount Zion. Israel would be a light
to draw them to God, and Israel would be the host of the great feast. The stories in Gospels and Acts, and the insights we gain from the Epistles into the practice of the early apostles, however, show just the reverse. The gentiles do not flock to a physical Zion, but the messengers are sent away from Jerusalem to be hosted in gentile territory, where they are astonished to find God already at work.

In the book of Acts, the apostles and their message are portrayed, by and large, as receiving very little welcome throughout the wider empire from the Jews—those who are by heredity and tradition the tradents of the story—but being welcomed and heard by those whose story this isn’t: the gentiles. The movement of the apostles’ witness “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is depicted as preceded by the movement of the Spirit and directed by it. In these stories, those preaching the gospel only gain a hearing where God has already been and has prepared people to hear—and those most prepared to hear in these accounts are the gentiles, the religiously marginal in the apostles’ tradition.

One oft-remarked example is the story of Paul’s preaching in Athens (Acts 17). After he has “argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons” (Acts 17:17), he finds the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers from the agora interested in his ideas. They pursue him: “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means” (Acts 17:19–20). In light of these people’s assessment that Paul’s message strikes them as “rather strange,” when Paul addresses them, he reframes the story. He asserts that they have often been worshiping God unawares, and that God created all people “that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him—and indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’” (Acts 17:27–28). The story that Paul tells is not that of a “strange deity” but of a God whose Spirit has already—indeed always—been seeking these hearers; indeed, they have never been separated from him. Paul goes onto their “turf,” even to the extent of claiming that their own poets stand as witnesses to his message about this God.

While we are hearing in this passage a distinctly Lukan version of Paul’s approach to telling the story, it seems congruent with Paul’s approach as we see it displayed and reflected upon in his genuine letters. Paul’s insistence that the gospel goes out into the spaces of the gentiles (the Nones) and meets them where they are without requiring them to “come to Jerusalem” (either literally or metaphorically) is the hallmark of his mission. And he expects that God has been calling these people all along. This becomes clear in Romans 1:19–20, where, even though it is ultimately an indictment of gentile rebellion, the point (as in Acts 17) is that the God he is preaching about is not a “strange deity”; “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” Paul comes with a message

3 One who is responsible for preserving and handing on the oral tradition, such as a teacher or preacher or missionary, in the form of apophthegms or similar pericopae. (Editor)
that this powerful and invisible God has acted in Jesus to claim and free all people. As he says later, in Romans 10:6–8, that God-in-Christ is not far away:

Paul’s insistence that the gospel goes out into the spaces of the gentiles (the Nones) and meets them where they are without requiring them to “come to Jerusalem” (either literally or metaphorically) is the hallmark of his mission.

But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).

Paul goes into their space, makes himself vulnerable and in need of gentile hospitality, and uses language and images familiar to them to connect the story of Jesus and Israel’s God to their stories, shared, values and aspirations. And this is when the church expands.

The story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10–11) is perhaps the most elaborate and theologically rich version of this model. Cornelius, though a gentile, has been directed by God through an angel to send for Peter. Peter, through the direction of God’s Spirit, accepts the invitation to be hosted in Cornelius’s home and to speak to a group of gentiles. Peter shares the story of Jesus with them, and the Holy Spirit falls upon them, just as upon the first believers.

Rather than Peter coming with something completely new to these outsiders, his sharing of the story becomes the opportunity for God to bring to full expression what the Spirit had already been cultivating among Cornelius and his gentile friends. The mission of God had been happening ahead of the messengers. These gentiles were not outside the story, after all; they were where the story was being continued, and in a way that the apostles—those who saw themselves as the center of the story—found disconcerting and disorienting. But the movement of the Spirit and the presence of God were undeniable.

How is this analogous to the Nones of our time? Isn’t their own religious self-designation as “none” a testament to a lack of interest in God or things spiritual? Not necessarily. One of the intriguing aspects of those who tend to self-designate as None is that this does not correlate to lack of interest in spiritual questions or even a lack of spiritual practices. In fact, both statistical research and much anecdotal evidence point to Nones as extremely spiritually curious and open. For example, a recent article by the Barna Group on “The Most Post-Christian Cities in America” shared some interesting statistics. In the city they calculated to be

the most “post-Christian” in America, Springfield, Massachusetts, only 35 percent of those polled had attended a church service in the last six months and 60 percent had never “made a commitment to Jesus Christ.” Yet, only 11 percent said they do not believe in God, and only 40 percent said faith is not important in their lives. So, in the least Christian city in the United States, almost 90 percent of the people believe in God, and faith is an important part of the lives of 60 percent of those polled. What’s more, the survey results indicated that 53 percent had prayed to God within the last week! These do not sound like people disinterested in spiritual things but, in fact, people among whom God is already active and the Spirit is moving.

For us as the tellers of God’s story, one of the most essential tasks for our time may be reimagining our role and relationship toward the Nones and the character of the story we tell. If we imagine the story as a thing, as content or stuff that we possess, we will always be putting ourselves in the position of those who have, and the Nones as those who lack. Such an approach has been much and rightly critiqued as a colonizing mind-set in the history of missions—a mind-set we see God undermining in the New Testament. The story is never something we possess, but something in which we find ourselves and, indeed, the world.

But if we do not envision the story and message we bring as content that we have and that the Nones lack, how do we see it? I suggest we bring it as a framing narrative. That is, we bring it as a story that functions as narratives do: as a way to make sense of our experience. It does not come as new information, per se, but as a way of making sense of the disparate episodes of one’s life. We bring it as a lens by which to make sense of our lives—one lens among many possible, to be sure but, we believe, the truest lens. This assumes, graciously, that the whole of one’s life is a story of the Spirit’s work of calling us—sometimes met with our response and sometimes with our resistance—but it never assumes God’s absence in the life of a person.

And this narrative is a communal narrative. Research shows that while Nones are often quite interested in spirituality (hence, those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious”), it is often a highly privatized and individual spirituality. But the story we have to tell frames God’s calling activity not just as an individual experience but as a communal one, and one that is public rather than essentially private. Even though many Nones also crave deeper relationships and more community, this may be the biggest hurdle. Many Nones have avoided the church precisely because they have felt unsafe in those communities and have been unwilling to be publicly identified with Christianity because of the failure of many Christians to live in ways that reflect the God we see incarnate in Jesus, and so, as Paul says in Romans 2:24, “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” The early church understood the necessity of outsiders being able to see obvious congruence between the message that they as Jesus’s followers brought and the lives they lived (e.g., Col 4:5, 1 Thess 4:12, 1 Tim 3:7) if their story was to have a hearing among the gentiles. The church has much work
to do to recover the reputation for integrity that gave its message a platform in its earliest years.

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If the church’s failings have hampered the reception of our message among the Nones, these failings have many times become the exact reason for the Dones being “done” with Christianity. Those who have been part of the church and no longer are demonstrate the failure of the church to be a life-giving spiritual resource. It is not they who have failed by their leaving, but we who have failed by being the cause. They stand as God’s judgment on our individual and collective sins of faithlessness in omission and commission.

The book of Jeremiah tells a similar story for God people Israel. Because of the sins of the people of Judah and Jerusalem, God uses the Babylonians to conquer and carry them into exile—but not all of them at once. After the first exiles have been taken, God shows Jeremiah a vision of two baskets of figs, one full of very good figs and one full of very bad. The good figs, the Lord says, are the first exiles that have been taken away. They have been taken far from the traditional center of religious life—the temple, its priests, and its practices as a place of worship and atonement. They are in a land without the traditional spiritual space and resources of their people, but God promises in this vision to be with them in that place away from temple and priests and to draw them back to himself. The bad figs, however, are the ones who remain in Jerusalem: the political and religious leaders and the people. Because of their sins, God will drive them into other lands and bring famine and pestilence upon them so that they become a byword. After that, the Lord says, he will bring back the exiled “good figs” and reestablish Israel:

I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. (Jer 24:6–7)

Those at the center of the religious establishment, especially the more they became allied with political, economic, and cultural power—that is, the more they looked like the Christendom church—are consistently depicted as missing what God is up to. The more they try to preserve or enhance their religious and spiritual centrality, the more they become estranged from the movement of God’s Spirit among the religiously marginal and disenfranchised.
This should come as a sobering word to us in the church. It could be that we who remain in the center of the religious establishment are “bad figs,” and that the Dones are, in fact, the “good figs” who have been sent into temporary exile on account of our sins and failures. It could be that God’s Spirit is with them in their exile, and that we should be listening to them. Perhaps they have more to give us than we have to give them. Perhaps God’s gracious future has them at the center rather than us who think we still occupy “the holy place.” Maybe the growing number of Dones is actually a move of the Spirit to awaken and renew the church.

Whatever the case, as we envision the story it seems right to envision that God is at work among the Dones just as much as among the Nones. Whether they have left because of their own unfaithfulness or as a result of ours, the Spirit of God has gone with them. They are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. God is still at work in their lives. They have not exited the story. They may, in fact, be the main characters of the next chapter. They may have as much or more story to tell us of God’s graciousness and presence in their exile as we have about our remaining in the church. As the scripture says, “Even if we are faithless, [God] remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim 2:13).

So, while the growing numbers of Nones and Dones have many worried, it may be that the future lies with them. God’s Spirit rarely rests long in the center. The church as it has been is passing away, but God’s gracious future is sure, and the story that we tell of that future must include the promise of the Spirit’s continuing work among those who seem most unlikely, those who are outcast and on the margins, not just of society, but of the church.

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