

The Problem of **Plugging In**

Reclaiming an old metaphor to face today's challenges

Your church has problems. So does mine. It takes little observation to know this is true; a quick glance around any congregation reveals challenges, mistakes, and disagreements. Those of us who have participated for any length of time in church life are not surprised by these problems. We may actually interpret our issues as evidence of God's grace. After all, even our most complex problems are simply expressions of our own inadequacies and evidence of God's loving and mysterious choice to include us in his redemptive mission.

But despite this silver lining, problems need solutions. Apathy about evangelism is a problem that needs a solution. Stunted spiritual growth is a problem that needs a solution. Anemic worship, stingy stewardship, racial divisions, shallow community, disinterest in justice, and disregard for prayer are all problems churches face that need solutions.

Again, there is nothing especially interesting about churches with problems; it's the solutions—ministries, strategies, programs, and campaigns—that are noteworthy. Where do our solutions come from? What are the assumptions behind them? Are our

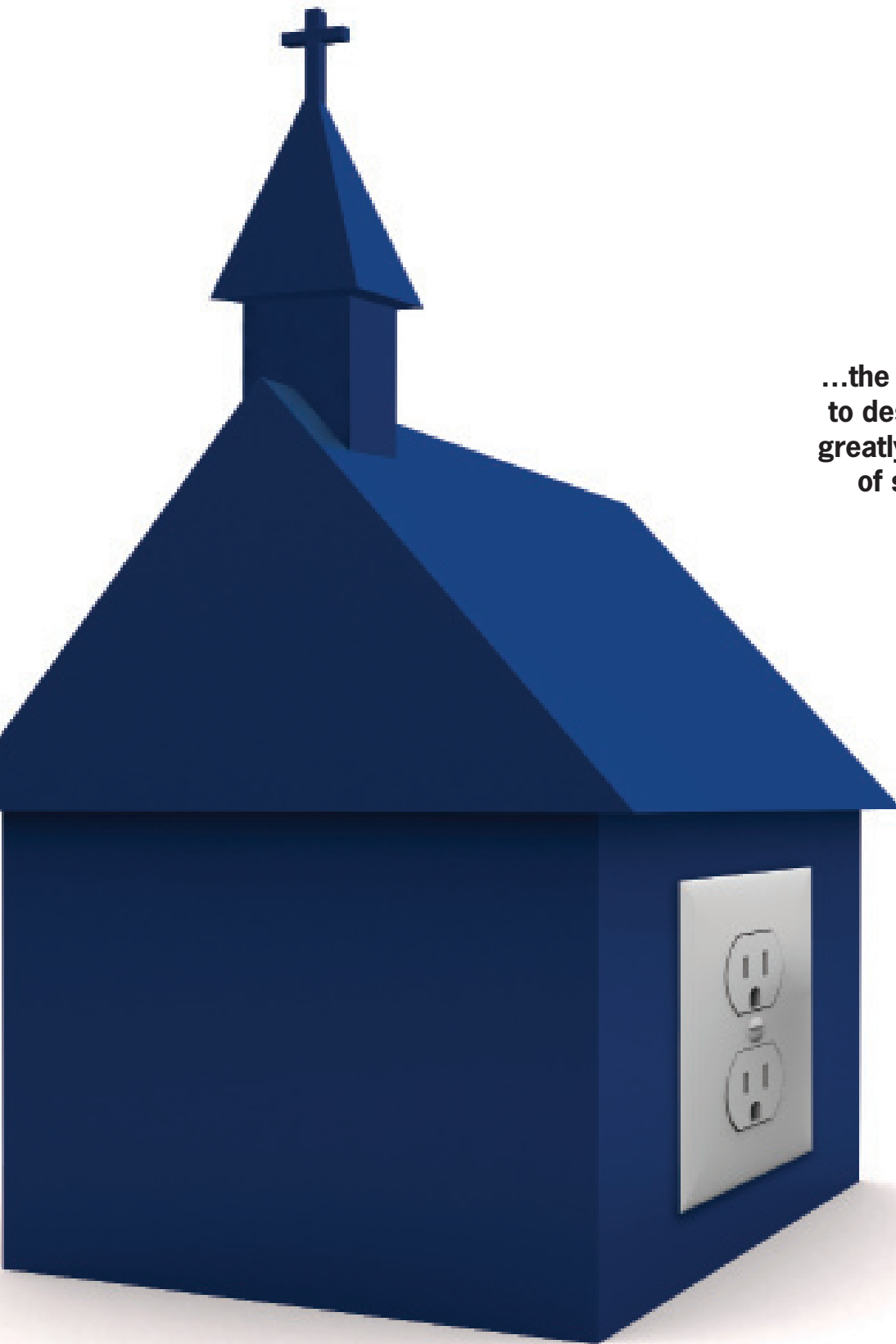
members well served by the ways we address our problems?

In 1978 writer and farmer Wendell Berry began his essay "Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems" with a discussion about the powerful ways our metaphors shape the solutions we seek. "It may turn out that the most powerful and the most destructive change of modern time has been a change in language: the rise of the image, or metaphor, of the machine." This industrial metaphor, according to Berry, replaced language that was "biological, pastoral, agricultural, or familial." He goes on to show how the industrial solutions favored by modern "agribusiness" can easily be traced back to a mechanical understanding of how the world works. This is a world of input, feedback, and efficiency.

Now I'm a pastor on the South Side of Chicago, so there are a few things in Berry's essay about farming that go over my head. Our family grows a few tomato plants and herbs behind our apartment and we're regulars at the neighborhood farmers' market, but in most respects I'm ignorant about agricultural life. Even so, I deeply resonate with the author's

claim that the language we choose to describe our problems greatly impacts what types of solutions we seek. Berry's insights are not limited to the farm; they apply to our churches as well.

Consider your own congregation for a moment. What language is used to describe the difficulties you are facing? What metaphors describe the way forward? For example, a friend recently pointed out that many churches seeking to deepen community talk about the problem of "connecting" people with each other, asking whether they have "plugged in." This is, as Berry would say, mechanical language. When we use such words to describe those who make up the church we are saying something important about how we understand them. Perhaps our metaphors betray that people are necessary components for the larger church system to run smoothly. Or maybe this language reveals the uniform mold into which congregants are expected to fit. When viewed through mechanical metaphors, the problems inherent to Christian community can lead to solutions that may, in the long run, deter that community.



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Once we see the power of our metaphors, one possible response is to search for spiritual words to replace our unhelpful language. Unfortunately Christianity does not provide any such special words. As Eugene Peterson writes in his book *Tell It Slant*, “There is no ‘Holy Ghost’ language used for matters of God and

salvation and then a separate secular language for buying cabbages and cars. ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ and ‘pass the potatoes’ come out of the same language pool.”

If we do not have access to unique language for our congregational life, then we better use our common, everyday language carefully. The

word pictures, language choices, and metaphors we employ are powerful, leading us toward solutions that may or may not encourage abundant life in Christ.

Perhaps I overstate the point. Is

David Swanson is pastor of New Community Covenant Church in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago.

language actually this important? The words we use for our faith, as Peterson says, come from a limited vocabulary, so why not simply exploit our culture's current vocabulary? Surely this would be helpful to generations of people who are increasingly detached from the language and imagery of Scripture. After all, is it not a church's *actions* that matter most?

It is Wendell Berry who again shows the immense importance of choosing our language wisely. As before, his concern is agriculture, but

plugging in—clearly point toward mechanical rather than theological solutions. Viewed through this lens, it isn't surprising how many conversations I've had over the years with Christians who feel as though they've slipped through the cracks, unable to fit within the program for community. Our mechanical solutions to the human problem of community can lead to people wondering why the fellowship they long for always seems out of reach.

Churches have struggled to rightly

phor is still powerfully descriptive: our attachment to Christ is what allows us to thrive in this life.

The Apostle Paul borrows from the biological world to explain the reconciliation between former enemies that resulted from Christ's death and resurrection. The Gentiles, Paul writes, "have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root" (Romans 11:17, TNIV). Paul's metaphor reminds me of the tree in a friend's California orange grove. Somehow this citrus tree had come to bear both oranges and lemons, not unlike Paul's image of an olive root that gives life to Jew and Gentile alike. As I consider the challenges within our racially diverse congregation, this metaphor provides both the rationale for our ministry and an unambiguous reminder that every reconciliation strategy must grow from the gospel's nourishing sap.

We can easily continue in this vein. Jesus is our good shepherd. The church is a new family. Our salvation in Christ leads us from death to life. Believers are living stones that are being built into a spiritual house. Jesus offers the Samaritan woman living water.

Again, the point is not to discover some unique spiritual language from which perfect solutions will quickly appear. Rather, implementing solutions that contribute to our members' growth and our church's vitality requires us to choose language that most clearly reflects what it means to be human beings created in God's image. Our culture's technological, mechanical, or industrial language simply cannot do this. Every time we replace the living metaphors of the Bible with the efficient but lifeless metaphors of our culture we risk implementing shortsighted solutions

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the implications are not bound to the farm. In his 1980 essay "Solving for Pattern," he writes, "Our dilemma in agriculture now is that the industrial methods that have so spectacularly solved some of the problems of food production have been accompanied by 'side effects' so damaging as to threaten the survival of farming." In other words, the deficient metaphors used to describe our problems lead us to deficient solutions. Berry worries that agricultural problems understood mechanically will inevitably lead to mechanical rather than agricultural solutions. Such problem solving will lead to more problems, the inevitable effect of alien solutions.

The same is true in our churches. Take my friend's example of churches that seek to "connect" people, "plugging them in" to ministry. The original problem is distinctly human and theological: the need to experience the reciprocal and loving community that reflects the God in whose image we are created. And yet the metaphors employed—connecting and

solve their problems since the beginning. We're not unique in this regard. The book of Acts reveals ethnic divisions, complications with food distribution, and leadership conflict. Like the farmers Berry is concerned for, it's not the problems that are new but our inappropriate and misleading metaphors. We can do better. As Christians our memory is drawn not simply from our immediate surroundings but from Scripture. These texts provide a trove of language that the church has used for centuries to navigate a complex world with complex problems.

In contrast to our current mechanical, technological, and industrial language, the Bible draws mostly from biological and agricultural imagery. For example, Jesus is perhaps envisioning a vineyard as he explains the abundant life. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, TNIV). Whether or not the members of our Chicago church have ever seen a vineyard, the meta-

which, in time, will only create more problems for us to solve.

Brushing up on our fluency in the Bible's life-giving language is an important starting point as we pursue life-giving solutions to the problems our churches face. And then? Simply exchanging metaphors will not solve our problems. I turn a final time to Wendell Berry who, in "Solving for Pattern," demonstrates how agricultural metaphors lead to agricultural—rather than mechanical—solutions to agricultural problems. Again, I believe there to be significant overlap with the problems faced by each of our churches.

Berry lists fourteen agriculturally appropriate ways of solving the problems faced by farmers. I've reworked five of these to show how replacing culturally relevant metaphors with a different set of biblically rooted assumptions can lead to surprising and life-giving solutions for our churches.

1) It is common to borrow or purchase techniques and strategies from well-known ministries and plug them into a local church, expecting similarly spectacular results. But when we view the church as a family—a biblical metaphor—we may be less prone to outsource our solutions, choosing instead the challenging but fruitful work of solving our problems together. As Berry puts it, good problem solvers are "people who will suffer the consequences of their mistakes."

2) In a similar vein, viewing each of our congregations as the body of Christ opens our eyes to every member, women and men who steward the Holy Spirit's gifts for the good of the church. While we can learn from other churches and benefit from their wisdom, might it be that God has given us everything we need to faith-

fully attend to the challenges we face?

3) A good solution for one part of the church shouldn't create new problems somewhere else. Berry points out that mechanical solutions to agricultural problems generally lead to new, and sometimes unforeseen, problems elsewhere. So too within our churches, the solutions we employ ought to be good for all areas of the congregation. An evangelism strategy, for example, shouldn't create problems with discipleship.

4) How much money should a good solution cost? Berry puts it provocatively: "Any solution that calls for an expenditure to a manufacturer should be held in suspicion—not rejected necessarily, but *as a rule* mistrusted." Are there solutions our churches shouldn't pursue because of their prohibitive costs? Curriculums, consulting, and conferences are not bad, but they are not always the right solutions for the body of Christ. We might also ask whether we are taking advantage of our people, overburdening them with the work of ministry such that they struggle to experience the rest of Sabbath. This too is a prohibitive cost and one that will be avoided when we consider solutions through biblical metaphors.

5) Any good solution, according to Berry, will seek to answer the question, "How much is enough?" While mechanical and industrial metaphors lead to solutions that seek unlimited numerical growth, biological and agricultural metaphors understand growth in more holistic terms. This is especially difficult for American churches where growth is typically measured numerically with mechanical precision. Reclaiming the Bible's language will lead us to solutions that aren't fixated on numbers, instead providing us with the imagination to envision communities of people who are grow-



ing up in Christ and bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

I close with this example of how our church plant is re-learning the language and metaphors of the Bible as we confront the many challenges and problems of a new church. Ours is a congregation made up of very busy people who often struggle to experience meaningful community. More than once I've wanted to initiate some sort of community-building process or program. Instead I recently preached about the practice of Sabbath and left time for a congregational discussion following the service. People shared honestly about their busyness and then began suggesting ways that Sabbath-keeping could be practiced in our church. A few weeks later, in response to my request for a meeting, I received an email from a leader in our church. "I'm sorry, Pastor," she replied, "I'm unable to meet because that's the day I've set aside for rest and community. Can we find another day?"

What a great reply! I expect our community-building problem will be an ongoing one for us, but it seems that employing the language of the Scripture is providing us with meaningful solutions. That is, church solutions for church problems. ■