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Chapter One

SWAMP, RESERVOIR, OR CANAL

Are you a reservoir or are you a canal or a swamp?

—Howard Thurman

Are you a reservoir or are you a canal or a swamp?”¹ Howard Thurman posed this question in relation to our personal lives. He believed our personal lives can take on the characteristics of these bodies of water. And knowing which best describes us gives insight into our journey.

I believe the question is relevant to congregations as well. “Is your congregation a swamp, reservoir, or canal?” Some congregations may display traits of all three while exhibiting the dominant characteristics of one. Naming this aspect of a church’s existence helps determine how it can best move forward.

Swamp

Thurman describes a swamp as a place that hoards, is friendless, and where things decay.² Writing at a time that predates our modern understanding of a swamp as a complex, living ecosystem, Thurman draws on the popular parlance of his day to

describes a swamp as a scary place that swallows life. Swamps are often depicted this way in movies. The swamp is a dreary, lonely place that emits strange, eerie sounds. We imagine that things go into the swamp, but they do not come back out.

Applying Thurman's definition of swamp to congregations, a swamp church is one that hoards, is friendless (or only inwardly friendly), and where things decay. Hoarding can be loosely defined as stashing, keeping, and guarding things so that no one else can take them. Typically, hoarders are unwilling to let anything go. They seek to keep things from others. They guard their stash so no one can get it. A hoarding church is unwilling to share their resources or themselves with others. They instinctively guard what they have because they fear that letting go of anything will hasten their demise. They hold on for dear life to what they have out of fear of a bleak future.

Thurman describes the water in a swamp as having no outlet.³ Again, while Thurman may not have understood the ecosystem completely, he is describing a self-contained, inwardly focused system. The water in a swamp does not connect with other bodies of water. A swamp congregation is self-contained and seeks nothing outside of itself. They are happy with the way things are currently. Their idea of change is to add a few more folks like the ones they already have and keep going just as they are. Folks who do not fit their swamp-like characteristics will not feel welcome. There is little interest in reaching out beyond themselves. All connecting is done inside the church. The church is inwardly focused.

Thurman also observes that a swamp is where things go to decay.⁴ To decay is to rot slowly over time until ultimately there is nothing left. But it can take a long time for some things to

decay. Congregations that hoard and are not connecting with others are decaying. Ultimately, these congregations will cease to exist, but the decomposition can take a long, long time. A church with an endowment can go on for years even though it is decaying daily. Congregations in this state typically think the problem lies with others, not with themselves. They are slowly decaying but place the blame on everything around them.

If your congregation is like a swamp, it hoards all forms of resources. It does not seek to connect with outsiders. It is decaying slowly. Ultimately, the congregation will die, even if it is a slow and lengthy death. A swamp congregation exists merely to survive, helping a little here or there, but lacking a clear missional focus. Any congregation can have certain ministries or programs that are swamp-like. But the real concern is when this is the dominant characteristic of the whole church. And the truth is, far too many congregations today are swamp congregations.

Reservoir

Thurman says a reservoir “is a place in which water is stored in order that it may be available when needed.”⁵ A reservoir is a storehouse for supplies. It is a place where one can go and get something that is needed. Many of us have driven by or seen pictures of reservoirs that store water for a city or town. The reservoir is a source of comfort because the community knows it has adequate water in reserve. If the water supply in the reservoir runs low, it is cause for concern or even fear. A reservoir assures that water is available when needed, so it is important

that the water supply does not diminish to a point where the reservoir may run dry.

Reservoir churches are perceived as places that have resources. These congregations often focus on providing material resources to those in their community. They are involved in feeding ministry, clothing ministry, and so on. Unlike swamp congregations, they seek to connect with those outside the congregation. In most cases, they are more vital than swamp congregations because they are not entirely inwardly focused.

However, a reservoir congregation still faces challenges. While outwardly focused, that outward focus tends to take the shape of a pet ministry. For example, a strong feeding ministry is the primary point of connection with those beyond the congregation, but there is little effort to connect in other ways. If a person outside the congregation does not participate in the feeding ministry, it is unlikely she will ever come in contact with someone from the church. In some cases, even those who participate in the feeding ministry quickly figure out the congregation is happy to give them food but is uninterested in building relationships. The congregation may pray with the people they help, but the goal is not to help them to become disciples. It is simply to provide goods or services. The congregation operates more like a social service agency with repeat clients. It is still inwardly focused in that it perceives its worship life as separate from its outreach.

A key difference between a swamp congregation and a reservoir congregation is the intentional way in which resources are shared. But reservoir congregations can be at risk of developing a hoarder mentality. If they start seeing fewer resources coming in, they are tempted to start restricting the amount going

out. The congregation may view this as good stewardship, not hoarding. But when more and more is left in the storehouse and less and less is shared, the ministry starts to suffer and eventually decay because the church has taken on a swamp mentality. Reservoir congregations walk a fine line between putting things in reserve for the future and hoarding reserves in a way that will kill the ministry.

Thurman remarks that the inflow and outflow of a reservoir must be maintained well.⁶ What keeps a reservoir vital is maintaining the proper balance between what it takes in and what it gives out. For a congregation, the goal is to make sure an inwardly focused mentality does not dominate the approach to ministry. Unless a reservoir congregation stays outwardly focused, it will become a swamp.

Reservoir congregations have the potential to build on their ministry efforts and seek other ways of connecting outside of the congregation. But they typically resist this because it is perceived as a drain on financial or human resources. Reservoir congregations teeter toward stagnation when they are unwilling to move beyond a superficial level of outreach. The good news is, the congregation is getting outside its doors and reaching others. The bad news is, the outreach often is not focused on discipleship.

If your congregation is a reservoir church, it exhibits the traits of a social service agency and fails to focus intentionally on discipleship. The congregation is outwardly focused in terms of helping others, but often worries about running out of resources. Reservoir congregations are more vital than swamp congregations, but they can take on a swamp mentality if they are not careful. These congregations are at risk of taking a step backward if they do not move forward with boldness.

Canal

Thurman wrote that “the function of a canal is to channel water”—it helps water flow or move from place to place.⁷ He describes a canal as a connector. It is a body of water linked to things outside of itself.⁸ Imagine a canal congregation as a body that links to things outside of itself. It is outwardly focused because it is always looking to connect to things beyond its origin.

A canal congregation knows its transforming power is in the ability to move away from its center and not remain stagnant in one place. It seeks to touch others in the community and get them engaged in discipleship. A canal congregation realizes this may not always happen inside the church building. It seeks to reach people where they are and impact their lives. This may take the shape of ministries addressing people’s physical and material needs while also sharing with them the power of being a disciple. It may involve trying a new form of worship that connects with individuals who are not a part of the congregation. A canal congregation is always looking outside of itself rather than simply trying to attract people to come to it.

The beauty of a canal is that its fundamental purpose is relational. It exists not for its own sake but for the sake of linking together things that are in its path. Canal congregations do ministry for people but are intentional about involving them in building something that includes discipleship. Canal congregations see resources as a means of enabling better connections for missional purposes. They do not hoard resources or operate like social service agencies. They share resources all along the way and move them to where they can be of most use. As long as the canal congregation stays true to its fundamental purpose, it can

avoid an insider mentality. But if the congregation ceases to be a place that connects to things outside of itself, it risks slipping into hoarding or a social services mindset.

The dominant characteristic of only a very few congregations is that of a canal. Some of the ministries or missional efforts of a church may have canal traits, but it is rare for the whole congregation to be a canal. To be a canal, a congregation must dedicate its life to being relational like Jesus. Most congregations do this in bits and spurts or in particular areas of ministry. But it is rare for a congregation to commit itself completely to being a canal.

The challenge of being a canal congregation is a willingness to always be a connector—connecting with people outside of the church and connecting people inside and outside the church to Jesus. The work of connecting never ends and requires a constant channeling of resources. It is not dependent on the size of the congregation, but it depends rather on the congregation's level of commitment. If a canal congregation is not vigilant in maintaining an outward focus, it runs the risk of becoming a social service agency or a hoarding congregation.

If your congregation is like a canal, it is constantly connecting to others outside of itself. It is always looking to expand its network of relationships, while maintaining the network already in place. We need more canal congregations, but the reality is it requires a high commitment.

Sober Judgment

Is your congregation a swamp, reservoir, or canal? This is the question that all congregations need to ask and answer

honestly. Paul writes in Romans, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith that God has distributed to each of you” (Rom 12:3). These words remind us of the need to take a hard look in the mirror and be honest in appraising ourselves. We need to avoid the tendency to see all the good and think too highly of ourselves or to see all the bad and devalue ourselves. The goal is to use sober judgment and see ourselves as we truly are.

Thinking Too Highly of Yourself

The tendency in some struggling congregations is to overlook those areas where things are not going well. Think of the analogy of how we approach year-end job evaluations. When asked to evaluate our job performance, we tend to find ways to rank ourselves highly in every category. This is not necessarily a deliberate effort to pump ourselves up. But each of us tends to see things in a way that is slanted to maintain our favorable self-perception. For example, if I am a sales representative and I did not make my goal, I may still justify giving myself a strong evaluation by taking into consideration some of the reasons I did not make my goal. Perhaps another company started selling a more competitive product. It's not that I failed to do my part, but the circumstances were beyond my control. We easily find all kinds of explanations for our failure. And they can be 100 percent accurate. But it doesn't change the reality of the current situation when we take an honest look in the mirror. Similarly, congregations can think of all kinds of reasons why things are not going well for them. And all the reasons may be valid. But it

does not alter the image of their current reality when they look honestly in the mirror.

Every addiction treatment or recovery program begins with an honest admission of the addict's current situation. Many congregations are swamps, but it is challenging for them to admit it. They need to look in the mirror and be honest with themselves. Any hope of altering the situation has to begin with an honest assessment.

Here are some key questions in a process of honest self-appraisal to aid a congregation that tends to think too highly of itself:

How many visitors do you see on average in a month?

How are you modeling for those inside the congregation
what it means to be to imitators of Jesus?

How are you modeling for those outside the congregation
what it means to be imitators of Jesus?

How many visitors return a second time or continue
coming?

How many people do you connect with in the
community during the month?

How are these community connections happening?

Are these connections based on giving out food, clothing, and so on? This list is not meant to be comprehensive, but to help you take a serious look in the mirror. If you are not seeing visitors or they do not come back, that should raise a red flag. If you are making no community connections or the connections simply exist to hand out goods, that should raise a red flag. If

you are only being imitators of Jesus inside the congregation, that should raise a red flag. Reread the description of swamp, reservoir, and canal congregations after answering these questions. What do you see in the mirror?

Thinking Too Lowly of Yourself

Alternatively, some struggling congregations are prone to thinking too lowly of themselves. They pick on every single thing they do to the point of talking themselves out of a good thing. Returning to the analogy of a year-end job evaluation, they are like the person who scores themselves low on most things because they feel they do not measure up. The person always perceives something is lacking and that others are better suited for the job. It can lead to low self-esteem. A congregation with low self-esteem can lose hope and begin to live out a self-fulfilling prophecy. The congregation starts to say things like, “We can never be as good as that congregation down the street.” They get trapped in a game of comparing themselves to other congregations and feeling as if they continually come up short.

Here are some key questions to aid in a process of honest self-appraisal for a congregation prone to thinking too lowly of itself:

Do we feel as if we have to keep up with other
congregations?

Are we frustrated by the participation numbers when we
start something new?

Are we frustrated with the pace that things are changing?

This is not a complete list, but it will help you to determine where you may be so hard on yourself that you are becoming paralyzed. Heightened frustration with keeping up with other congregations and the pace of change should raise a red flag.

Whether a congregation thinks too highly or too lowly of itself, the danger is the same. In either case, a failure to view its situation objectively leads to paralysis. Neither congregation will do what is needed to restore vitality. Paul's admonition to exercise sober judgment is a good one, and we should take it to heart. Congregations need to look in the mirror and be honest about who they are. This means thinking neither too highly nor too lowly of themselves because both can leave a congregation mired in the swamp. Only when we are honest with ourselves are we in a position to start changing.

While congregations can take on a life of their own, they are also influenced by those in leadership. The pastor and key lay leaders will influence the way a congregation perceives its reality and what can be done about it. Leadership is discussed in depth later in this book, but with regard to assessing their circumstances, leaders have two key roles.

First, leaders must look in the mirror and hold the mirror for others. As leaders look into the mirror themselves, they must exercise sober judgment and be honest about their own role in a congregation. For instance, some leaders resist change. They seek to maintain the status quo because they don't want to rock the boat. Other leaders seek such sweeping changes that everyone may be left disillusioned and questioning why they chose to become followers of Jesus. Leaders must find a way to move people forward while helping them to stay in love with Jesus. This is not an easy task. But it is a critical one.

Leaders must also hold the mirror up for others in the congregation to see themselves. The leaders may need to encourage and even cajole those in the congregation to look in the mirror—to appraise themselves and their church honestly. This is not an easy task because we so often want to avoid seeing the truth. But only when we expose ourselves to the truth can we begin to move forward in a determined way.

Second, leaders must be intentional about the way they imitate Jesus. This gets at the heart of discipleship and that which we are called to do. Leaders help others to live missional lives that invite them into a pattern of discipleship. Leaders must model this pattern so that others will be able to see it. Jesus did not simply tell the disciples what to do. Jesus modeled for them a life of prayer, healing, worshipping, listening, and acting. The disciples were able to lead because they witnessed Jesus doing it. And then they went out and modeled it for others.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Whether a congregation is a swamp, reservoir, or canal, it can be trapped between a rock and a hard place. Swamp congregations are caught in the tension between the risk of extinction and the hope of becoming a reservoir congregation. Reservoir congregations exist between falling back to a swamp or becoming a canal congregation. Canal congregations exist between falling back to a reservoir and trying to stay a canal congregation. This reality shapes many congregations as they try to figure out how to be vital in a changing culture.

Just as so many congregations are between a rock and a hard place, so too are their leaders. They are caught between just

going along to keep everyone happy and upsetting the apple-cart in an attempt to become something new. To lead effectively, they must constantly navigate between these two choices. Leaders who give in to one or the other will look in the mirror one day and see that they have landed the congregation in the swamp. To steer clear of this trap, leaders must constantly examine themselves, while holding the mirror up to others as well. And they must be intentional about how they imitate Jesus. The next chapter explores the role that leaders play in helping congregations to be adept in making decisions.

Determine your church's best way forward, then get moving!

The Adept Church: Navigating Between a Rock and a Hard Place is a theologically grounded but practical, user-friendly guide for congregations who are feeling stuck. Author F. Douglas Powe, Jr. offers a methodical approach for strategic development and decision-making. He maps out a clear process for leading congregations to define their own reality, and then guides them to determine the church's best, most purposeful way forward.

Throughout his book, Powe explores Howard Thurman's powerful metaphors of reservoir, swamp, and canal, applying them in the context of a church and leading the reader through a process of self-examination and analysis. Congregations will gain extraordinary insight through this process. The story of Esther is layered between each chapter, providing an inspiring and pertinent scriptural foundation, and each chapter ends with a set of questions for the congregation and leaders.

This is an excellent book for pastors, church councils, leadership teams, or entire congregations to work through together. The result will be churches who are fully missional, serving with vitality, boldness, and confidence.

"Esther faces the annihilation of her people; are the church's circumstances equally dire? Douglas Powe brilliantly connects the biblical heroine with North American churches today, weaving the story of Esther's courage with skilled assessment of the characteristics and steps necessary to release a church from death's clutches. The result is a concrete action plan to bring more hope for such a time as this."

—**Dawn Weeks**, pastor, Connection Christian Church, Odessa, TX

"In order to be relevant and thriving in this present age, churches must learn how to navigate between a rock and a hard place. Douglas Powe uses profound theological concepts (like Thurman's reservoir, swamp, and canal) and translates them into practical tools to help churches self-evaluate. His exegesis of the book of Esther is remarkable, and integrating Esther's leadership example to assist church leaders makes this a must read."

—**Ronald Slaughter**, senior pastor, Saint James AME Church,
Newark and South Orange, NJ

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