
When Church Stops Working

Discussion Guide



By Wesley W. Ellis and Andrew Stephens-Rennie

Introduction

We've always really enjoyed "ambiguous art"—those pictures that are kind of two things at once. When you look at it, at first you see a duck, and then you realize it can also be a rabbit if you change your perspective. Or maybe it's that one that looks like a white vase, but then you realize it's also a silhouette of two people facing each other.

When Church Stops Working is a work of ambiguous art. This is not to say that it's difficult to understand or that it's too abstract. In fact, that can be said of many works of theology, but not this one. This is a work of ambiguous art insofar as it's two things at once. It is, indeed—as the title suggests—a diagnosis for why the church has stopped "working" in so many lives in our society. It seems that the church and its practices have resonated with fewer and fewer people. Church attendance in the West continues to decrease, and the budgets are showing it, having huge impacts on the church's ability to be effective. Root and Bertrand diagnose the church with an infection of secularity.

But if you look at it a little longer, this book is not only a diagnosis but also—as the title suggests—a prescription. It's also a call to the church to stop "working" so hard on the problem of "decline" by seeking "more and better." It's an invitation to stop working, to wait, and to allow God to work. When we see that our crisis is not a crisis of effectiveness but a crisis of faith, we can also see that we are in need of an encounter with the living God, the God who is God.

We are caught in the ambiguity of a church that has stopped "working" but, if it is to be faithful, must also stop "working." If what Root and Bertrand have argued in these pages is true, then these ideas deserve to be processed in the church, not merely in the heads of church leaders. To that end, we have worked together to offer a discussion guide for each chapter of this book to be used in church council meetings, small group discussions, staff meetings, and anywhere else that groups of people are trying to digest this work and apply it to their own ministry context. These questions can also be helpful to individuals, but it is our hope that they will be put to use in order to help congregations become "waiting people."

Having worked in churches as ministers and denominational leaders in a variety of contexts, and having worked closely with Andrew ("Andy") Root and Blair Bertrand throughout our careers, we have tried to provide questions that will help you bring this book even closer to the ground and give you confidence in processing these ideas with others. Both of us have seen how the ideas in this book can transform ministry, and it is our hope that these questions will help transform yours.

Warmly,

Wesley W. Ellis

Andrew Stephens-Rennie

A Discussion Guide for Groups

When you gather to discuss this book, we encourage you to tend to the space and the atmosphere in which you gather. Some groups, especially if it's your church's board, council, or session, might be trying to have this discussion as a part of a meeting in which you need to tend to pressing church business. The challenge is real. In discussing this book, as with so many other vital discussions in the life of the church, we need to be reminded to posture ourselves and our groups in ways that help us to slow down, listen to one another, and listen for God.

While you could sit around a large table or any other utilitarian space, the focus of this book is listening for God with others. So maybe, just maybe, consider something other than placing one person at the front facing row upon row of chairs. Circles may be better than rows. Keep your own context and participants in mind as you set the stage for brave conversations in which you listen deeply to one another and for the God who still speaks today.

Consider setting up the space in a way that allows each member of the group to see all the other members of the group. Seek to create a space with a focal point. Perhaps a candle. Perhaps an icon. Perhaps a cross placed on a table in the center. However you do it, seek to connect *how* you gather with the reason *why* you gather and the one in whose name you gather: discerning God's present action in the world, in your congregation, and in your life.

Start each gathering with a ritual that allows people to enter into the particular space you are creating. Here are some examples of practices you might choose to use or adapt:

- Light a candle at the center of the group as someone reads a portion of Scripture. Because it's invoked throughout the book, Acts 1:1–11 may be a good choice.
- Sing a simple, repetitive chorus of expectation, such as “Let All Who Are Thirsty Come” (Taizé) or “What We Need Is Here” (Music that Makes Community).
- Ask each member of the group to check in by answering one of the following questions:
- How is it with your soul today?
- Where have you seen God in your life or in the life of this community this week?
- As you've listened for God in prayer throughout the week, what have you heard that might offer a gift to this group?

Preface / As You Begin

Pages xi–xv

- What drew you to reading this book in the first place?
- What questions do you hope it will help you and your congregation address? Why are those questions important to you?
- What are some things that your congregation does that seem to have stopped working?
- The authors write, “There are no quick fixes. As a matter of fact, the very assumption of a quick fix misinforms and malforms the church and the church’s leaders” (xiii). Considering what’s going on in your congregation, what wonderings does this bring up about your current situation? As you go around the group, notice how these wonderings are similar/different for other members of the group.

Chapter 1

Why Your Church Has a Problem, but It Isn't What You Think

Pages 1–18

- What do you think is the biggest problem the church is facing today?
- What problems have you or your congregation spent the most time trying to solve?
- What do you see as the most important challenge your congregation needs to face?
- Andy and Blair describe the vicious circle that many congregations face: “If we had more resources, we could be more relevant, but we can’t be more relevant without more resources” (5).
- Where have you seen this vicious circle play out in your experience of the church?
- Do you agree that “effective innovation actually worsens the crisis by driving us deeper into the secular age we find ourselves in” (7)?
- Andy and Blair suggest that three challenges congregations face (influence, attendance, belief) are symptomatic of a larger problem. “Your church is sick, but the problem is not decline. The problem is that the secular age has infected it” (9). Have you seen these symptoms at play in your church?
- The authors go on to suggest, “If the church needs more of anything in the crisis it faces, it is more *resonance*. More resonance brings about deeper relationships and a clearer purpose” (17).
- How does this prescription sit with you? What does it add to your understanding? What’s missing?
- How might you move away from searching for more (influence, relevance, people, money, resources) to experiencing a deeper connection to God and each other?
- The authors suggest that one of the antidotes to the current crisis is a “shift from privately held dogmas to open discussions about God’s actions in [our lives]” (17). How comfortable are you talking about God? In what circumstances?
- Think about one aspect of your church’s life (perhaps it’s a council meeting, your worship gatherings, a particular ministry or program). What are some ways your community might use those gatherings as an opportunity to openly discuss God’s action in people’s lives and the life of your congregation?

Chapter 2

Busy People, Busy Church—A Killer Cocktail

Pages 19–36

- “Like every superhero, your church has an origin story” (20).
- What is the origin story your church community likes to tell?
- If it were a movie, whom would you cast as the main characters?
- What difficulties and challenges did they have to overcome?
- What is the story your church defaults to telling today?
- Is it the story of journeying with God in the present moment?
- Is it the story of some moment in the congregation’s distant past?
- What hope, despair, longing, and joy are represented in the story?
- The authors suggest that “the real origin story of the church does not start in Acts 2 with progress and growth. The real origin story starts in Acts 1 with waiting for God to act. God is the hero, and the church waits,” the authors write on page 23.
- What practices does your congregation engage in to actively wait on and respond to God’s action?
- What assumptions and activities come between you and this practice of active waiting?
- How would your church look different if you focused your attention on God’s action, letting God be the real hero of the story?
- As you scan the faces of the congregation in your mind’s eye, who jumps out to you as someone who is skilled and practiced at actively waiting for and discerning God’s action in their life, the life of the church, and the life of the world? What might they have to teach you or others in the congregation?
- The secular age directs our attention to human action—what we can do and what we should do to get more in order to solve the problem of “not enough.” This leads us to think that being busy is better, or even that being busy is a moral imperative.
- Do you think the people of your church are too busy?
- Does the church help with this? Or does the church make it worse?
- Talk about one recent experience in your church community that has moved you to connection and joy.

Chapter 3

Stop All the Having and Just Be

Pages 37–60

- This chapter talks about the fall of comedian Aziz Ansari and the way in which it reframed his appreciation of what he has right now.
- While we celebrate many things in the past, what is something about your congregation that inspires gratitude in you right now?
- What do you appreciate about the community you're a part of and the way God is journeying with you right now?
- What aspects of your congregation's life fall into the category of *accelerating church*—a church that leaves the present for whatever's next? What aspects of your congregation's life fall into the category of *waiting church*—a church that breathes the joy of connection and the beauty of the gospel? As you look at those lists side by side, what do they tell you about your congregation and its relationship to God?
- Writing on the sixth-century *Rule of St. Benedict*, Esther deWaal talks about the practice of seeing “these people, in this place, in this moment as being the way to encountering God.”¹ Similarly, Andy and Blair address “the sin of not living in the moment” (49). How might your congregation rewire its gatherings and ministries to help people faithfully dwell in the moment with God through presence to one another?
- “The busiest church is the best in town. . . . The busiest pastor is the best pastor” (42).
- Do you believe this?
- Have you ever compared your church to other churches in your community?
- Do you think your pastor feels pressure to stay “busy”?
- In this chapter, Andy and Blair invite us to become a “waiting church” through humility, confession, and gratitude.
- Do you think your church values humility?
- What is the difference between an apology and a confession? Is your church a confessing church or an apologizing church?

1. Esther deWaal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 57.

- “At the root of gratitude is connection, in being with these people in this place, in vulnerability, in need” (50).
- Is there space in your church for true gratitude?
- What are some of the ways people might tend to avoid vulnerability in church?
- “He [Aziz Ansari] served himself, used people for his own gain. . . . He made what’s next more important than the moment of being with his audience. It all became about what’s next, not what is” (47).
- Have you ever been too distracted by “what’s next” to see “what is”?
- How can your church move away from being an accelerating church and toward being a waiting church?
- How do you see the role of your church’s board, council, or session? Is it, as Andy and Blair suggest on page 51, to focus on relationships and “to lead their congregations by confession and gratitude,” or does it look somewhat different? What does this question bring up for you?
- Reread the case study titled “Red Paint” on pages 57–59. What should they do? How might the practices of humility, confession, and gratitude inform the congregation’s response?

Chapter 4

It's Time to Wait, but for What?

Pages 61–80

- The books of Luke and Acts were given their titles hundreds of years after they were written. If you were going to give those books new titles, what would they be?
- Andy and Blair describe waiting in three stages: (1) you try to distract yourself; (2) you try to find the cause; and (3) you move to anger and blame.
- How do you relate to these three stages?
- In what ways have you seen churches go through these stages?
- What are some ways you find personally helpful in waiting for an encounter with the living God?
- In what ways does your congregation intentionally cultivate spaces and times to wait together for an encounter with the living God? What do you value about the ways in which you gather, eat, tell stories, pray, remember, and rehearse the story of Jesus's life and its meaning?
- "Jesus gives the command to wait. . . . The Apostles will act, sure, but only out of their waiting. Only after waiting and receiving a gift will they act. Their action is only in response to God's action" (66).
- Do you agree with the authors' claim that "the church doesn't need go-getters" (67)? Why or why not?
- Do you ever think people use "church administration" to distract themselves from waiting?
- What are you and your congregation waiting for?
- The authors write, "The title of Luke's sequel is all wrong. It's not the Acts of the Apostles but the Acts of God" (70).
- If titles shape stories, and stories shape us, and how we're shaped by stories has a direct impact on the life of the church, what stories do we need for a moment such as this?

- Who is the star?
- How do the supporting characters relate to the star and to one another?
- According to Andy and Blair, anxiety comes from seeing ourselves as the “stars of our own stories” (73). “With its origins in Acts 1, we can see that the church cannot be the star of its own story” (74).
- Does your church ever operate out of anxiety? Anxiety over the “decline” of the church? Anxiety over money, numbers, relevance, effectiveness?
- Has your church ever operated out of joy instead of anxiety? What came from that?
- Think about the agenda of your council meeting, your annual general meeting, and your other gatherings.
- How much time do you spend focusing on the church’s actions or its anxiety over survival?
- How much time do you invest in attending to God’s action in the world or God’s action through the church for the sake of the world?
- How would shifting your attention shape your community?

Chapter 5

Waiting Brings Life, Not a Slow Death

Pages 81–100

- “Everything now is smooth. We love smooth. We expect smooth. We need smooth to the point where frustration, conflict, and negativity become debilitating” (82).
- Can you share a story of a time you found yourself frustrated with technology?
- Have you ever been similarly frustrated with your church?
- Andy and Blair write, “Tension, discord, and even crisis, though uncomfortable, are signs of life” (83).
- What do you think of their critique?
- In your congregation, whose job is it to “fix” the crisis of decline? Is there someone whose responsibility is to “eliminate glitches and do away with tensions” (83)?
- Does your church have an aversion to conflict?
- Where can you imagine tension, discord, and crisis as a source of life?
- “To finally name it: the real crisis is encountering a living God who is God. God is real. God is God, and we are not. To encounter this real God as humans constitutes a crisis” (88). How might you help people focus on and respond to the right crisis?
- When you think about the last five to ten years, where has your congregation been pushed to its limits, needing to rely deeply and solely on God to make a way?
- What was that experience like?
- What did you learn about God and one another in that time?
- What lessons do you carry with you to this day?
- The authors argue that we always need to be a waiting people because “God comes to us in very backward ways. . . . God comes in these odd ways, in suffering and yearning, so that we know we do not conjure up or control God” (97).
- Have you or your congregation ever experienced God in such a way?
- Would you consider sharing this story with others now?

Interlude—Waiting on Crisis

The Rev. Thomas Broad, priest at Grace Episcopal Church in Randolph, New York, arrived at the church one morning to find these words spray-painted in blue on the side of the parish building: “Can I still get to heaven if I kill myself?”

You can imagine the conversation that followed. You can imagine how the church’s leaders went back and forth about what to do. How should they respond? Should they paint it over and move on? Should they write a letter to the editor in disgust? Or was there, perhaps, an opportunity to respond to this cry of anguish and despair?

After a day of reflection, the parish leadership of this church, built in 1859, responded to what they understood to be a deeply valid existential and theological question in a town experiencing a rise in youth suicide. Rather than writing a letter to the editor (would the vandal ever see it?), the priest grabbed a spray can and responded in two-foot-high green letters on the side of the church building: “God loves you with no exceptions!”

When interviewed by the *Post-Journal* in nearby Jamestown, New York, Rev. Broad shared, “Our response was to not treat it so much as something awful that we needed to cover over, but as an opportunity to minister to a person that maybe was hurting, and also to the wider world that may be looking for answers. Hopefully this is the beginning of something and the blossoming of a new understanding in the community of us all being connected and God being right in the middle of all of us.”

In response to one crisis, the congregation leaned into an even larger crisis. As Andy and Blair write, “The crisis the church faces is that it worships and serves such a God who is so great, so other, that we cannot say, or even know, anything about this God. And yet—here is the crisis—we nevertheless must speak of and witness to this One who is God” (94).

Sometimes we’re called to bear witness “to the God who reveals Godself in the world in the backward ways of love” (97). These backward ways of love don’t always, but might from time to time, involve spray cans. Meeting this congregation in its waiting, God sends them to minister in less-than-expected ways, igniting an important conversation about mental health and suicide in their local community, all the while pointing toward the ever-present reality of God’s unconditional love.

For Discussion

- Think back to the story about Red Paint at the end of chapter 3. How was your response to the story above similar to or different from your response to the story about Red Paint? Why do you think that is?
- What do you think Grace Church’s response says about the congregation and the God they are waiting for?

Chapter 6

Forget the Mission Statement—Get a Watchword

Pages 101–20

- “Mission statements alone will only enforce immanence, acceleration, and burnout. It’s no wonder that since the 1980’s the stress level of workers has continued to escalate and burnout has become common” (103).
- Does your church have a mission statement or something like it? What is it, and what do you think of it?
- What’s the difference between a mission statement and a watchword?
- What role does waiting play in your church’s sense of mission?
- According to the authors, a “watchword is a story or slogan of how this church, this community, has encountered the living God” (106).
- Where do you see God in your life and in the lives of the people around you?
- Where do you see God working in your midst for the salvation of the world?
- Andy and Blair tell the story of Dr. King receiving the watchword “When there is no way, I’ll make a way” (107). This watchword arrives only when he comes to the end of his own ability and experiences a crisis of reality, leading him to cry out for God’s help.
- Do you think it’s possible to receive a watchword in a way other than through crisis?
- When looking for a watchword, what posture do you need to take?
- How could (or did) your church go about finding a watchword?
- Ask, “Where do I see God in my life and in the life of the people around me? . . . Where do we see God working in our midst for the salvation of the world?” (109).
- The authors suggest that we can listen for watchwords through encountering one another and waiting in ways that allow us to encounter God.
- What practices do you and your congregation have for fostering genuine, deep encounter with one another?

- What practices do you have that create space for open-hearted encounter with God?
- In discussing ways of encouraging encounters, the authors talk about the PEEL Project in the United Kingdom.
- What intrigues you about the project?
- If you don't already have such practices, what are some activities you might consider to create space for vulnerable human encounters in your congregation?
- Where do you see opportunities in your common life to help people in your congregation encounter God and bear witness to those encounters?
- The authors write, "When we believe that God acts only in the church, we think our mission is to bring to others something that only we have" (119).
- How can our watchwords be "in relation to the world" (120)?
- How might a watchword "condition" or enrich your church's mission statement?

Chapter 7

Out of the Family Basement

Pages 121–40

- What is the strangest food you’ve ever experienced at a church potluck?
- “Small churches see themselves as a family. While this is theologically sound—after all, Jesus calls us brothers and sisters—it is sociologically complicated. At times it is too true” (122).
- How have you seen this idea of church as “family” play out in your experience?
- Has it ever been “too true”? Explain.
- What other metaphors besides “family” could you use to describe your church right now?
- “Queenston UCC experienced a profound moment of God acting in the life of God’s people. We shouldn’t lose sight of that fact” (139). A watchword “comes in a moment of death” (140).
- Has your church ever had to face death? If not an actual closing, perhaps a crisis that felt like a death? How did God bring you through it, or, if you’re still in it, what are some ways you can see God moving even now?
- How did “Feed My Sheep” serve as a watchword for Queenston UCC?
- Why didn’t “You are loved and you are enough” work as well for Queenston UCC? How could it have worked better?
- Do you agree or disagree with the concerns about “You are loved and you are enough” raised on pages 134–35?
- If you have a hunch about a watchword—a word of comfort or challenge, a word that comes out of death and leads to life, a word arising out of a time and place where “God showed God”—how will you and other leaders in the congregation test it in your context?
- How do you respond to the idea that attracting more young people actually speeds up the dynamics that lead to decline?

Chapter 8

Nothing Can Separate You

Pages 141–54

- Do the Jurgensons remind you of anyone in your church or in your experience?
- What strikes you as the most important part of the story of Pastor Mike and the Jurgensons? Why? What might this story have to offer your congregation in its current situation?
- “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39 NIV).
- How does this passage speak to you about your own relationship with God?
- How does this passage speak to you about your congregation and its ministry?
- As you think about a path forward for your congregation, are you more naturally inclined to do more or to do less? Is this the same for all members of your leadership team? As a group, share together how you’re feeling about doing less or doing more.
- The authors write, “The job of the pastor—or the job of the board, session, or council—is to allow such a word [a watchword] to run like water into each crack. A church must say it again and again, not as some annoying team chant. Not as a catchphrase for T-shirts and beer cozies but as a confession of God’s movement from death to life” (148). How would embracing this change shape your congregation’s understanding of its ministry?
- Andy and Blair write, “What the church needs is not your creativity at all, but your listening and waiting” (152).
- Are you with them?
- In what ways do you agree?
- In what ways do you wrestle with what they’re suggesting?

As You Conclude

- At the beginning of the study, we asked, “What questions do you hope this book will help you and your congregation address?” Thinking back over the course of this study, how has discussing this book contributed to your own understanding of the current moment and the crisis the church is facing?
- How has taking part in this discussion helped you to deepen your encounter with others and with the God who promises that we are never alone? What are you going to take with you from this experience?
- “When we focus on survival or on how things were done in the past, we can’t see what God is doing in our midst” (130).
- As you turn your attention to the present moment of your congregation, where do you see God at work in your community and in the wider world?
- Is there anything blocking your view?
- How might you get a better view of what God is up to?
- How can you “develop your ear” (151) for a watchword?
- Where is God inviting you to go from here? What are your next faithful steps?