

Differences of opinion abound on almost every topic, but I would wager that 95-100% of Christians in America will agree we are living in uncharted, challenging, and difficult times. The Church in America does not have the same place or significance it formerly did, even for many still within the church. In the so-called “Bible Belt,” congregations are forced to make difficult decisions. Do we change to accommodate the changes that are happening to us? How should we change? ... and must we change? Many are discovering there is great pain and resistance to change, and more are looking in all directions for ways to fix “the problem” and return to those glory days.

Our time is strangely reminiscent of the Israelites in the 8th century BC. The Psalmist laments, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.” While in captivity they remembered the glory days of the Davidic kings, the Temple that Solomon built, and the prosperity and security the nation enjoyed for generations. “There on the poplars we hung our harps. How can we sing the Lord’s song while in a foreign land?” We recognize their pain in our own pain. Like us, these displaced believers were anxious about the souls of their children and their children’s children, as well as their own souls.

Twenty years ago the Reverend Larry Williams, former campus minister at Meredith College and Pastor at Louisburg Baptist Church, launched the *Pastor as Spiritual Guide Program*, first with the assistance of Reverend Ted Purcell and then for many years with Sister Joanna Walsh, fcj, a Spiritual Director at Duke Divinity School. At that

time, the program focused primarily on the soul of the pastors amid the expectations and demands of congregational ministry. What was less clear then is readily apparent today. Now twenty years later, the focus must include the soul of congregations and the broader community. Father Thomas Moore has suggested, “The great malady implicated in all our troubles and affecting us individually and socially is the ‘loss of soul.’”

The concern of ancient Israel and our present day concern about our souls is not misplaced. The great social maladies of our time, e.g. the addictions, obsessions, violence, greed, and loss of meaning, reflect the neglected care of our souls. So many of our emotional complaints, such as emptiness, vague depression, disillusionment about relationships, unfocused longings and restlessness, obsession for material things, and excessive yearning for personal fulfillment, all reflect our “loss of soul” and our lack of soulfulness. Our pain reminds us that within all, a soul lies somewhere between understanding and mystery. The soul is more than mind or body. As another observed long ago, the soul holds our minds and bodies, our ideas, life, and inner world together.

The evidence is compelling. We “who are called the people of God” are living in strange and uncertain times. Many good people in many congregations are looking for a quick fix, for ways to restore former things.

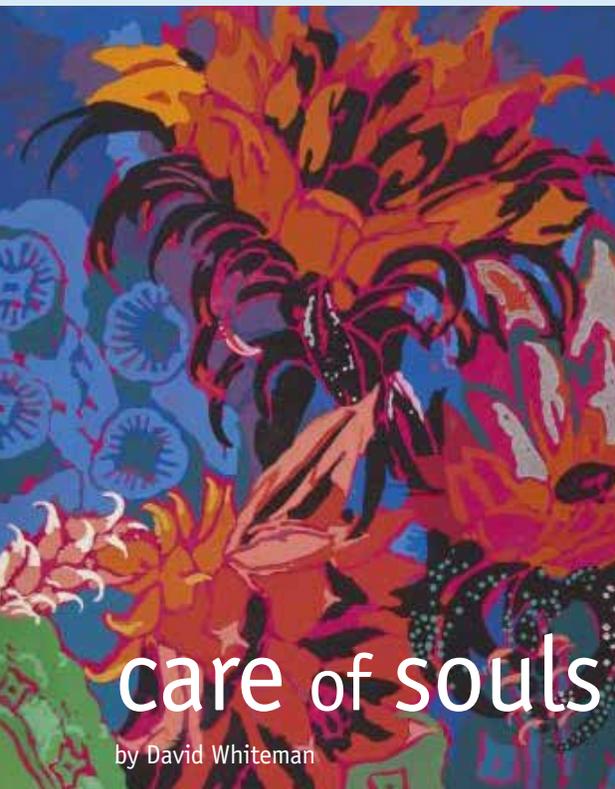
Hear the word of the Lord, “Forget the former things, do not cling to the past.” “Remember Me!” The hope and heart of the *Pastor as Spiritual Guide Program* is to remember and welcome “The Presence” of Christ Jesus who has taken up residence within our souls, who is with us and beyond us “working for good in all things.” Beginning September 2017 through May 2018, a new group of pastors will meet monthly in a retreat setting to rest and nourish our souls in

a communal setting through prayer, Bible readings, stillness, worship, discussion, and the practice of ancient Christian disciplines. As we journey, our focus will also be on the souls of others for whom we have been given care, and for the larger community of humanity. Specifically, we will pray, think, and talk deeply about those common tasks of ministry, such as worship, leadership, soul care, discipleship, Christian decision-making and group discernment, evangelism, and social justice, and for spiritual direction in how we might invite others to experience God.

The pastoral work of soul care is a lot like gardening. We prepare and participate in the seeding and tending of souls, we cultivate and train souls for growth, and we also wait and pray for fruitful lives. This is daily/yearly/life-long work that is never finished. Our souls are never made perfect but always becoming. The pastoral and congregational focus must be on more than sole survival or maintaining our traditions and institutions.

The faith of Israel was born in large measure through pain and struggle. The Babylonian-Persia Exile became the most formative and transformative faith experience they had ever known. If you listen, you will hear an echo from the prophets in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They helped prepare the way of the Lord. Isaiah declares, “Forget the former things, Behold I am doing a new thing.” Captive as we are to the cultures of our day and exiled from the former days, there is yet Good News: I am doing a new thing. Here is hope for anxious hearts and souls. The Lord is at work for good. The word of the Lord endures.

Learn more at [www.psgprogram.org](http://www.psgprogram.org) or e-mail David Whiteman at [dwhiteman46@gmail.com](mailto:dwhiteman46@gmail.com). A few spaces are still available for the upcoming retreat series at St. Francis Springs in Stoneville.



## care of souls

by David Whiteman