

“For millennia, Black and brown people’s prophetic imagination has revived the Church—and with this book, Rev. Dr. Jason Villegas carries forward this powerful and holy lineage. Timely, wise, provocative, practical—and above all, faithful—*When Methods Die* reads like a love letter to a church that has lost its way. Jason invites readers who also love the church to cast off the shackles of certainty, control, and death avoidance—and join him in bringing death and resurrection into cosmic and practical unity. May all who have ears to hear, hear!”

— CHRISTENA CLEVELAND
Author of *God Is a Black Woman*

“This young Latinx pastor brings the voice of a new American apostolate—with a sober eye on the legacy of the church and a heart for its future. He begins with a searing yet empathetic eulogy for a dying ‘Method of Church,’ then walks us through a labyrinth of decline and denial toward an expectancy of resurrection. A hip-hop poet exploring fraught terrain through language and metaphors both playful and poignant, Miller-Villegas serves the tradition he loves as hospice chaplain and midwife.”

—ELAINE ENNS AND CHED MYERS
Authors of *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization*

“In this book, Rev. Dr. Jason Villegas, ‘does not turn away’ but looks straight into death and loss, both of the church and its fading ideologies. While expressing both grief and a longing hope, he expertly weaves story, scripture, and insight. This is a book to be read, for all of us, who are actively witnessing our churches pass away yet are longing for resurrection. Jason will walk you through the loss, the grief, and the beauty of hope and God’s good care.”

—FATIMAH SALLEH
Founder, A Certain Work

“*When Methods Die* is a stunning, honest, courageous love letter to the church and its people. Jason Miller-Villegas reflects deeply on the church’s struggles and institutional brokenness with a yearning hope for resurrection. Through poetry and prose, with prophetic urgency and pastoral tenderness, he names our dying and weaves a hope-filled vision of renewal. This is a must-read for anyone longing to see the church reborn in love and justice.”

—STEVE TAYLOR

Home missionary, Spring Forest New Monastic and Missional Community UMC

“Jason Miller-Villegas writes with tender clarity and fierce wisdom, drawing for us a deep and enduring vision for the future of the church. We need to hold room for real grief in institutional church spaces, and *When Methods Die* helps us do that through the lens of deep hope. This book is about facing death as a transition to life and honoring the power of resurrection in a hurting world. I highly recommend it!”

—KAITLIN B. CURTICE

Award-winning Potawatomi author of *Native and Living Resistance*

When Methods Die



When Methods Die

The Writing on the Wall for a Fading Church

JASON MILLER-VILLEGAS

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

WHEN METHODS DIE

The Writing on the Wall for a Fading Church

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This book lives dedicated to anyone who walks as a faith leader in spaces where institutional death occurs, where nobody knows what new life will yet look like.

Are we death doulas and end-of-life chaplains?
Or are we midwives of a future awaiting its birth? Or both?

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Preface

Right then the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the king's palace wall in the light of the lamp. The king saw the hand that wrote. The king's mood changed immediately, and he was deeply disturbed. He felt weak, and his knees were shaking.

—DAN 5:5–6 CEB

“The Writing on the Wall”

If you squint and close your eyes, I wonder, can you see it, the writing on the wall, the 20-year-old fingerprints turned to gray smudges from the last children who were in the building, never washed off, because when the children left, the church could not afford a janitor, and the blessing of the fingerprints, like the young people who left them, was accidentally overlooked by the people suffering an identity crisis, thinking that the building and not they were the church?

Can you see it, the writing on the wall, the cracks between cinder blocks, that started small and turned into words, like tectonic plates, creating new worlds, continental rifts, dividing and separating edifices, pulling parishioners asunder into different camps?

Can you hear it, the writing on the wall, the voices of ancestors, whose names exist in brass plaques, whose voices are bastardized to make modern-day points that maybe they could and maybe they couldn't have imagined in their own rhetoric?

Can you hear it, the writing on the wall, the graphite on loose leaf scrambled and scribbled by the young adult visitor who came in for worship and, through stealthy shallow breathing, sat nervously, mindlessly, drawing

pictures of her safe space outside until the bell tolled and told everyone it was time to leave their hour-long weekly commitment?

Can you notice it, the writing on the wall, the “for sale” sign on all of the damned church buildings down the road, telling the tale of what happens when we don’t wake up to reality, as we pray for divine intervention, believing that the rules of God’s presence and presents should function differently for us than the Palestinian Christian at the bottom of a pile of bomb rubble, or the asylum seeking *campesino* from Central America crossing the Devil’s Highway?

Can you witness it, the writing on the wall, the words of mourning and warning and wanting and waiting and wailing that the disciples wrote in their cabin of solitude, hiding on Holy Saturday, right before Jesus Christ walked through the walls to surprise the hell out of them?

And then, can you abide with it, the writing that you come to see on all your walls, drawing you liturgical pictures on old ivory paint jobs, like flowers blooming in the desert, showing that new ideas can come in places that the world sees only as whitewashed tombs?

Can you behold it, the writing in the walls, a Word so deep that its wisdom intertwines and exists with us, like DNA, coming forth to remind us what was so deep that it had been forgotten, like a buried seed, awakened by heat, coming through scorched earth, to start afresh on a new day?

Can you name it, the writing on the walls, telling of death and new life, even if with your child’s mind, you cannot read what it says?

Can you dignify it, the writing on the walls, appearing in front of your eyes in a language, you can’t understand, necessitating that we find a prophet like Daniel to tell us what God is saying?

Can you feel it, the writing on the walls of our heart, vibrating your being—the Tattoo Artist’s gun, causing positive heartburn as the Word appears on the tablet of your inmost being, the Message that was and is and will be?

Can you hold it all, the writing on the walls, that began before you, that tells the story for you, and that will still be the story of God after you are dead?

Can you be held by it, the writing on the walls?

In the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament’s book of Daniel, chapter 5, we see the story of some wealthy royals who have inherited stolen objects from a place of worship, suddenly terrified out of their comfort zone by a heavenly hand

miraculously writing on the wall. It was a statement that the foundation on which the walls of that kingdom existed would be broken down. And it was a statement about the new life that would be inherited by someone else.

I could spend many pages writing about the social and religious differences between the royalty of Babylon and the church in the United States, but for all the differences, a couple of similarities pull my mind to this story as a starting point for this book.

Because of the connection between Christianity and the forces of empire created by the emperor Constantine in the early 300s, Christianity in the West has long benefited from wealth that empire has taken and built. And now we are at a place and time when that wealth is changing hands, when our social systems are experiencing death.

In a much different way, I think God is writing on the wall. It is a writing about how we have missed the mark and about what is dead, but, for us as people who believe in Jesus Christ, it is also a message about life and what will come next.

The main metaphor of this book is the funeral, the “service of death and resurrection.” But also, as you read on, I hope you can encounter this message as I have—like inconvenient words, interrupting everyday life, written where they have not been invited, like graffiti from God’s holy hand on the walls of the edifices we inhabit.



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MANY THANKS: ELIZABETH, THANK you for being a constant companion and hearing many of these thoughts in verbal form before they were written down; to the Murfreesboro United Methodist Church for giving me space to write this; to Debbie for the idea of naming our method of church in a funeral service; to my doctor of ministry cohort for being conversation partners during a crucial part of this book; to Aunt Ruth for planting the seed of writing a book a decade ago when I had hope but not confidence as a writer; and thanks to all of my many mentors, pastors, parent figures, and guides along the way, especially Mari, Fatimah, Laura, Steve, and my friends in The Remnant, Stubborn Hope, Little Band, and the Church of (Star) Trek. Y'all, like me, have likely struggled with the burnout that comes from serving God, or the Greater Good as you understand it, and working with a people who experience the agony of institutional death and the longing for resurrection. An immeasurable thanks to those who have helped me with editing, especially Adam, who helped me complete my manuscript in May 2023; Ben, who swooped in to assist with citations; and Nicole from Wipf and Stock, who has shown immense patience with me throughout the editing process. I remain grateful to the Holy Spirit for her tenacity in all the aforementioned people reigniting my fire each time it has gone out.

List of Abbreviations

AARP	American Association of Retired Persons
AUMC	Ahoskie United Methodist Church
CEB	Common English Bible
MUMC	Murfreesboro United Methodist Church
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NIV	New International Version
RHUMC	Rose Hill United Methodist Church
UMC	United Methodist Church

Introduction

“YOU KNOW PASTOR, YOU are really good at funerals.” This sentiment, echoed in various ways throughout my career, often catches me off guard. While sometimes about the sermon, other times about my aura, and yet other times about my pastoral care, it always nudges me toward a profound realization—our encounters with death reflect the most authentic manifestations of our faith. These moments of grief, intertwined with an enduring hope for the promise of resurrection, have time and again made me question, reflect, and wonder about the complexities of our mortal existence.

In the United Methodist Church, funerals symbolize the paradox of death and resurrection, mourning the loss while affirming the promise of new life. This duality has profoundly shaped my pastoral service and deeply influenced my perception of the church and my understanding of faith.

But as I’ve grown in my faith and service, I’ve come to realize that our encounters with death and resurrection aren’t just personal experiences. They are deeply woven into our collective existence. In a broader sense, they influence our societal structures, cultural norms, and even the institutions that we cherish and hold dear. Among these institutions, the church, particularly the United Methodist Church, has held a central place in my life. As a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and a member of this church, I have felt increasingly called to contemplate this paradox in the context of the church itself.

The challenge of this contemplation is that it arrives at a crucial time for us. We find ourselves standing at the crossroads of a new era where the once familiar church landscape has dramatically shifted. We are faced with the stark reality that the church, in its traditional form, is grappling with a loss of efficacy. It struggles to resonate in an increasingly diverse, rapidly evolving society, struggling to maintain its relevance and influence. This predicament, however, is not unique to the church; it mirrors a broader societal transformation that we are witnessing today.

For example, we live in a time when racial dominance, a long-standing aspect of our societal fabric, is being challenged and transformed. The old structures that perpetuated this dominance are being critically reassessed, questioned, and dismantled. And the church is no exception to this broader societal upheaval. Yet, as people of faith, we should not view this transformation as a crisis but rather as an opportunity—a divine invitation—to reimagine our church.

There lies before us a unique prospect to break free from the shackles of an antiquated past and construct a more equitable, inclusive sanctuary for all of God's children. A place where every person, regardless of their race, color, or creed, can find solace, acceptance, and the love of Christ. More than a building, we have an opportunity to again become that place, to reimagine who we will be as the church of Jesus Christ.

Embracing this opportunity, however, is not a passive act. It is not a journey to be embarked upon with complacency. It is not going to happen to us or without us. Like my father used to say, "It's not a spectator sport." Instead, it's a journey fraught with complexities, questions, and, at times, discomfort. It demands from us a willingness to examine our traditions, question our assumptions, and embrace the reality that things have died and live in the possibility of a transformative resurrection. Our opportunity to live into death and resurrection calls us to recognize that our mission isn't just to those within our immediate congregations but extends to all of the people. The mission statement of my church has long been, "Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." And the current moment requires of us that we live as disciples for the transformation of a church that cannot live into the future without transformation.

I am writing within the context of a historically white church. Robert Jones, in his well-researched book *The End of White Christian America*, uses broad data to dissect the decline of the white church's influence. Jones's work has springboarded this conversation, and I invite you to join it. This book reflects my ten-year pastoral career marked by witnessing the death of outdated methods and the potential for their transformation.

Through serving four churches and as a high-level youth director, from my master of divinity to receiving my doctor of ministry degree, the death and resurrection of attitudes, beliefs, and traditions within the church have profoundly influenced and embraced my pastoral journey. This embrace extends back to my three years, from 2010 to 2013 as a youth pastor, when my grief at death in the church began to grow, when I began to notice that the staid ways of inviting youth to come and be entertained in the church basement were not working.

This book attempts to navigate the intricate tapestry of these experiences, beliefs, and attitudes that I've encountered in my service to God and the church. It revolves around one extended reflection about our service to God and the world through the church. The word *service* holds particular significance in my Christian tradition. It means "to serve," and it is also the name of the event of worshiping God, known as "a worship service." This dual meaning of service—serving God and the world and worshiping God—encapsulates the essence of this book.

Structured as a series of reflections and conversations, this book journeys through different phases of death and resurrection in the church. Because it is about the institutional church, I am not going to be talking about heaven and hell or the afterlife. It begins with a chapter that invites us into the attitude of lament, something for which my tradition has a good method but which we do not practice well when tragedy strikes.

The first chapter, titled "Funeral for the Methods of a Fading Church," focuses on grieving the death of traditional church practices rather than individual lives. The subsequent chapters delve into recognizing death in different aspects of our lives in the church, returning to mourning and lamenting, and considering these Christian postures in specific ways.

Further along, the book discusses attitudes that need to die in the church—dispositions that have themselves caused death. Once these attitudes are acknowledged, the book invites you to adopt a prophetic stance, a brave posture of truth-telling about death and resurrection in a time when it's often easier to create convenient countertruths. With this prophetic posture, the book revisits the theme of beliefs that need to die—white supremacy, which many Christians, myself included, view as the original sin of the church in the Americas.

The discussion on death and resurrection within the church cannot be complete without acknowledging the experiences of racially minoritized¹ people. Many have often experienced death from ideas like white supremacy, often at the hands of the white church. This experience resonates with

1. The term *minoritized* has emerged in recent years as a more nuanced way to describe individuals and groups who have been systematically positioned as minorities through social, political, and economic structures. Unlike the term *minorities*, which can imply an inherent identity or attribute of the individuals themselves, *minoritized* emphasizes the external processes and systems that actively marginalize and diminish the collective power of these groups. This shift in language seeks to highlight how historical and ongoing practices—such as colonization, enslavement, segregation, and discriminatory policies—have created and sustained these inequities. By using *minoritized*, I'm trying to acknowledge the agency of those affected while focusing on the structures and actions that perpetuate their marginalization. It broadens our understanding beyond numerical representation to consider the power dynamics at play.

the story of Jesus Christ's death during Holy Week. The period from Good Friday, his death, his remaining dead on Holy Saturday, and then his resurrection on Easter Sunday is a poignant reminder of the journey of minority people who often live in the space of "Holy Saturday," where they do not know if new life can come again.

The book further explores the "Holy Saturday Silence," offering a posture of waiting and hoping. Without rushing through our necessary grief, it finally arrives at the last chapter, which discusses "Resurrection's Dawn: A Step Toward Renewal." This chapter doesn't attempt to cast a robust vision of what resurrection will look like but instead tries to talk about postures for living into resurrection as the new life that God surprisingly brings amid death.

As we traverse the space between death and resurrection, different structures guide us. The structure of this book is akin to stepping stones, seemingly disjointed solid places that keep us from falling and being inundated by the chaos, which do not at first glance seem to be connected to each other. This structure invites you to consider that the process of transformation is not always linear; it's a sequence of moments that challenge us, enlighten us, and ultimately transform us.

In essence, this book serves as a mirror reflecting the beauty, the flaws, the challenges, and the potential of the church. It's a call to introspection, a guide to consider transformation, and an affirmation of faith. As we delve deeper into this shared journey, my hope is that we not just witness the death and resurrection within our church but actively participate in it. We are, after all, people of the resurrection—and that, I believe, is our highest calling.