

## BOOK REPORT

### "READING WHILE BLACK" ("African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope")

July 10, 2021

Title of Book: Reading While Black" ("African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope")

Author: Esau McCaulley (PhD, St. Andrews-Assistant Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, and a priest in the Anglican Church in North America, and a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times, who has published other books, including *Sharing in a Son's Inheritance*, and who has authored numerous articles for *Christianity Today* and the *Washington Post*.

Publisher and Publication Date: IVP Academic, 2020.

First Impressions: I have authored other book reports at the request of a mentor. This report, however, is one which I have not been asked to prepare. I have prepared it because I have found Dr. McCaulley's book to be fascinating and informative, but more so to be one which is convicting. It has caused me to search my mind, heart and soul in order to try to search out what my true attitudes and convictions towards Black Americans, particularly Black American Christians are and what they should be. I believe that every Christian, of every race, particularly Christian Pastors and Leaders should read and carefully study this book. I can almost guarantee you that it will change the ways in which you view, not just our Black American Christian Brothers and Sisters, but also the challenges which they have confronted and must confront today, primarily the challenges of reading and interpreting and applying Scripture in order to have it make sense in, and have any application in a world, and yes a country where their anguish and rage seems to have been historically ignored. Why, for example, should a Black American Christian place any trust or faith in a Bible which does not seem (at least on its face) to condemn slavery, and which contains texts telling slaves that they must honor their masters? (See 1 Tim. 6:1-2) This question was most eloquently stated some 130 years ago by abolitionist James W.C. Pennington who stated (and is quoted at page 138 of Dr. McCaulley's book): "*Does the Bible condemn slavery without regard to circumstances or not? I, for one, desire to know. My repentance, my faith, my hope, my love, my perseverance, all, all, I conceal it not, I repeat it, all turn upon this point. If I am deceived here-if the word of God does sanction slavery, I want another book, another repentance, another faith, and another hope?*" Fortunately for Christians, and in fact for all of us, both Mr. Pennington and Dr. McCaulley were each able, after agonizing, patient examination of Scripture, conducted under painful circumstances, to affirm that the Bible does condemn slavery without regard to circumstances. That said, however, Black Americans who are the descendants and heirs of those who suffered under the horrendous yoke of slavery

and a constant dialogue between Scripture and such questions and issues and the circumstances of Black Americans an oppressed people generally. Dr. McCaulley, in this unique book raises and confronts some of these questions and issues and then seeks to respond to them as he (after a lot of patient work and research) believes the Bible responds to them.

This powerful, easy to read but very well academically researched book presents a unique study and lesson in hermeneutics, and particularly in the manner in which a culture, and its unique issues, questions and problems, and Scripture can dialogue, each with the other, with each of the culture and its questions and issues and Scripture mediating and refining the other. So, while Dr. McCaulley's book particularly addresses Scripture's response to the unique (and yes terrible) questions and issues of Black Americans, it also presents a shining example of how a dialogue can be conducted between a culture and Scripture with each actually refining the other.

So, again, this book is, for a number of compelling reasons recommended for all American Christians, particularly pastors and leaders who want to struggle with finding appropriate paths towards bridging cultural gaps among all Christian peoples, of every culture, race and ethnicity who make up the marvelously diverse body of Christ. In particular this book hopefully provides our Black Christian American Brothers and Sisters with Hope and with ways to deal with their unique challenges, while it provides valuable lessons for all of the rest of us American Christians who want to better understand the powerful uniqueness of Black Biblical exegesis and application.

#### Overview of Book's Contents (What is the Author Doing With What He is Saying and the Book is Saying):

I will come back to this point later, but the reader needs to understand from whence the author comes, and from whence the history of American Black Churches, pastors and leaders come. So, as the author recommends, in his first Chapter, that it is appropriate to continue your reading at the end of the book with what is referred to as the "Bonus Track" in which the author relates his personal history and briefly describes the origins and evolutions of America's Black Churches and their leaders. In this Bonus Track the author describes how he was raised by a deeply devout Christian mother, who brought him up in, and kept him in a strong Black Church, and how he, during his early years, was a part of a largely black culture. As he matured he was confronted with the interfaces (actually conflicts) between the black people and the white man, particularly including the police. He was a victim of "Driving While Black." He was otherwise victimized and stigmatized as black man. He had every reason to abandon his Christian Faith, as have many of other black men, not to mention black women who, as he points out, are victims of three "isms", racism, sexism and classism. But the author did not abandon his faith, the faith of his mother who he wants to honor with this book. As he points out Black American Christians, including those who were actual slaves and those who immediately followed their enslaved

ancestors have not abandoned their Christian Faith, although they have been presented with numerous reasons to do so. Rather they developed unique churches and a unique practices for interpreting and applying the Bible to the unique questions and issues confronting Black people. They developed a unique Biblical hermeneutic which gave (and continues to give) Black American Christians a reason for Hope while in the throes of despair. Dr. McCaulley, our author, refers to this unique practice and hermeneutic as "*Black ecclesial interpretation.*" To quote the author: "*I contend that a key*

*ecclesial interpretation."*

So the author, Dr. McCaulley, seeking to honor his faith, his devout Christian mother and the American Black church and its unique approach to Scripture seeks to describe in this book the Biblical message of hope which is presented to Black American Christians (and frankly oppressed people generally) by the unique "ecclesial interpretation" of, and practice of the Bible developed by the American Black church, and by the author. He does so by confronting the interface between those hard questions which Black Americans and their culture must address to Scripture and the patient dialogue between such culture and Scripture which can lead to Godly answers to such questions. While this dialogue, as presented by the author, is unique to the Black American culture and its questions directed to Scripture, the author's descriptions of such dialogue presents a very strong example of how there must be a dialogue between any particular culture and its questions and problems and Scripture, a dialogue which is encouraged, not just by our author, Dr. McCaulley, but also by other strong theologians including David Clarke in his *"To Know and Love God"* and Stanley Grenz and John Franke in their *"Beyond Foundationalism"* where it is stated that "all theology is local or cultural", meaning that theology and Scripture are not of much use if they do not assist every culture in dealing with its unique issues.

So, what are the unique, Black American cultural issues which the author addresses using the Black Ecclesial Interpretation. They are:

- 1) Does the Bible have a word to say about the creation of a just society in which Black people can flourish, free from oppression?
- 2) Does the Bible speak to the issue of policing-that constant source of fear in the Black community?
- 3) Does the Bible provide us with a warrant to protest injustice when we encounter it?
- 4) Does the Bible value our ethnic identity? Does God love our blackness?
- 5) What shall we do about the pain and rage that comes with being Black in this country?
- 6) What about slavery? Did the God of the Bible sanction what happened to us?

Our author, D. McCaulley, addresses these difficult questions, which are unique to the culture of the communities of Black Americans, and particularly Black American Christians in well crafted, well thought out, very well stated separate chapters, each of which separately addresses one of these questions. I am not going to try to summarize Dr. McCaulley's answers to

these questions, but can state that his patient work in seeking answers is excellent work, and that I believe he provides a Biblically appropriate response to each question by using his stated Black Ecclesial Interpretive Method. While, arguably, the Black Interpretive Ecclesial Method is a unique method for Biblical hermeneutics, I believe that it is but a marvelous tweaking of the exegesis methods outlined by David Clarke, Stanley Grenz and John Franke in their books referenced above, and the Redemptive Movement Method furthered by William Webb in his books, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, and *Corporal Punishment*, and *Bloody, Brutal and Barbaric*. Each of these authors, together with our author here, Dr. McCaulley emphasizes the need for the Christian people of each of the unique cultures, traditions and ethnicities who make up the mosaic of a diverse Christian people to address each of their unique questions and issues to Scripture, and to then work through the entirety of Scripture, in a canonical manner, in order to determine whether Scripture directly addresses such a question or issue, and, if not, whether the canonical approach (taking into consideration the cultures

intended original audience and of the peoples of surrounding nations) establishes a trajectory towards what can be found to be God's intended ultimate ethic or society. So, while I cannot say that the Black Interpretive Ecclesial Method presents a completely new and unique method of Biblical exegesis, I can say, without reservation that it provides for a unique application of long accepted methods of Biblical exegesis to the unique issues of Black Americans.

However, in this book Dr. McCaulley does provide for several unique interpretive conclusions and methodologies which are worthy of note and of future use, as follows:

a) In his chapter two, *Freedom is no Fear*, he addresses passages with which many of us have struggled. Those passages are found in *Romans 13:1-8*, wherein Paul seems to state, on the face of such passages, that Christians should submit to any and all governmental authorities and pay taxes to them. These passages become particularly difficult to interpret, or at least apply in view of the fact that the dominant governmental authority in place during Paul's time was that of the brutal Roman empire, an empire which had occupied Paul's home country and was hated by its citizens. Does this passage mean that a Christian must submit to a brutal, totally wrongful government? Does it mean that a Black American Christian must submit to any and all governmental actions, regardless of how right or wrong, just or unjust such actions might be? Dr. McCaulley, using his Black Interpretive Ecclesial Method responds to these questions in somewhat negative fashion, with some caveats. His conclusions might be of help to each of us who struggles with these passages. His caveats are: a) In most cases violent resistance of governmental authority is not authorized, and b) We do not have the discernment of God in determining when overthrow of what we believe to be an unjust government is appropriate, and must, therefore, exercise patience in peaceable attempts and protests to bring about governmental change. God will lead to the actions for replacement of a government when He, in His Wisdom, discerns that such replacement is appropriate. We do not have His discernment in these respects and have to trust His discernment.

b) When he looks at provisions of the Mosaic Law he seeks to use what he submits to have been the hermeneutical practices of Jesus. He seeks to ask whether a particular provision of the Law was put in place in order to bring about *God's Creational Intent*, or, to the

contrary, was put in place in order to accommodate for a broken world in an attempt to limit the damage that we do to one another. In particular, he refers to the passages in which Jesus discusses the then ongoing dispute about divorce with a group of Pharisees who came to question him on the subject. (Mt. 16:21, and Lk 24:25-27) Jesus therein, in effect stated that God's Creational Intent is revealed in Genesis (i.e. "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh and that, therefore, what God has joined together let no one separate"), and that Moses allowed for certificates of divorce "...because you were so hard-hearted that Moses *allowed* you to divorce your wives, but *from the beginning it was not so.*" Jesus's hermeneutical method was on in which He distinguished between those provisions of the Mosaic Law which identified God's true Creational Intent for mankind and those provisions which God allowed to be put into place, simply in order to allow for a broken world and in order to limit the damage which one person might do to another in such a world. Dr. McCaulley states that the divorce question is similar to the slave question as it was handled by the antebellum slave masters, and that Jesus would have stood for human freedom. In Dr. McCaulley's words: "Jesus shows that not every passage of the Torah presents the ideal for human interactions (but) instead some passages accept the world as broken and attempt to limit the damage that we do to one another (and, therefore this means that) when we look at the passages of the Old Testament we have to ask ourselves about their purpose:

the damage arising from a broken world?" I find this conclusion of Dr. McCaulley to be one that can be very helpful in seeking to determine the current day applicability of any provision of the Law as found in the Torah. Does that provision describe what God wants us to do or be, or was it simply intended to prevent the damage of the broken world that then existed and still exists? This is a helpful hermeneutical tidbit of information.

c) As does William Webb, Dr. McCaulley reviews some of the Old Testament slave and slave beating texts, and compares what they allowed to the much more vicious and oppressive actions allowed in the societies and nations surrounding Israel, and finds that such texts provide for far more humane treatment of enslaved people and that they, therefore, provide for the start of a trajectory towards freedom for all enslaved people when such texts are viewed canonically, with the New Testament.

d) Dr. McCaulley directly confronts the problematical text of 1 Timothy 6:1-3 wherein Paul tells slaves to submit to their masters. I cannot, in a summary do justice to Dr. McCaulley's conclusions about this text but he does an absolutely masterful job of showing that Paul did not intend to endorse the practice of slavery and that he did not do so, and that his epistles, taken as a whole (which the author reviews in detail) and particularly with the paradigm shifting text of Galatians 3:28 stand against the institution of slavery.

c) While we White Americans tend to think that Christianity somehow originated, or achieved some level of maturity in Europe (white nations), in fact many of the historical figures of the Bible were individuals of color. Christianity was, from the very early years, growing and flourishing in Africa (e.g. Ethiopia-remember the Ethiopian eunuch). Dr. McCaulley argues that these historical facts clearly demonstrate that any belief that Christianity is a white religion is historically false.

5

Any further attempts on my part to summarize Dr. McCaulley's Biblical exegesis, from a Black point of view would detract from his book, which, again, I urge upon all Christians, particularly Christian leaders. However, I don't want it to appear that somehow black biblical interpretation abandons orthodoxy. It does not. Dr. McCaulley states in summary that "Black biblical interpretation can be:

- unapologetically *canonical* and *theological*,
- socially located, in that it clearly arises out of the particular *context* of Black Americans
- willing to *listen* to the ways in which the Scriptures themselves respond to and redirect Black issues and concerns,
- willing to exercise *patience* with the text trusting that a careful and sympathetic reading of the text brings a blessing,
- willing to listen to and enter into a dialogue with Black and white critiques of the Bible in the hopes of achieving a better reading of the text.

These are statement which can be made about the interpretation and application of Scripture to the particular issues of any culture or social group.

Personal Musings/How Did This Book Benefit Me: While I am mindful of Dr. McCaulley's intention to describe how the Bible can be used in order to deal with huge issues that are unique to the community of Black American Christians, and I am greatly helped in achieving some understanding of that matter, I find that this book provides me with help in a manner which Dr. McCaulley likely did not intend that it do. To me this book provides a wonderful case study which demonstrates or supports conclusions or lessons, as follows:

- a) Christianity is made up of a mosaic of peoples of vastly differing ~~ages, cultures, ethnicities and traditions~~

NCSC Quick History

Phase 1. Proving the Concept	Phase 2. Developing and publicizing the concept	Phase 3. Stabilizing, perfecting, expanding...
Hospitality	Coordinating large and complex activities	Regular large-scale hospitality
Large partnership events that telegraphed priorities (Veritas)	University engagement	Capital campaign
Student Development	Back office growth (Communications + Dev)	Back office growth (Administrative coordinator)
Alumni/Parent Engagement	Volunteers	Multi-year Fellows program
Close staff culture	Prototyping regular, rhythmic formation	

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Budget	\$130,000	\$377,000	\$485,000	\$600,000	\$680,000	\$750,000	\$815,000
Revenue	\$148,458	\$514,389	\$632,000	\$1,810,127	\$1,360,709	\$2,227,743	-
Avg Students / Day	50	75	100	175	200	100	-
Staff	2	3	5	7	8	7	-
Move-In-Day #s	200	600	1000	1400	1800	-	-
Est Total Student Encounters	12000	20000	24500	41100	30825*	-	-
Major accomplishments and new programs	Successful launch	First Wilberforce Conference	After Virtue discussion group	Fellows program; Carolina Way Camp; Lecrae Veritas forum	Dir of Spiritual Formation; Covid pivot	Complete capital campaign; Wilberforce Leadership Program; weather Covid; begin construction and find temporary location	
Programs / positions eliminated		Carolina Compass (student advising program)	4D dinners (weekly faith and vocation dinners)	Ministry Fellow position	Student residential program; Civic engagement summers		

Observations

- Unique property well-financed
- Driven staff
- Active and engaged board chair and distinguished board
- No early angel investor for development purposes (which for us would have been a person who gave > 15% annual budget)
- UNC fit: good alumni and parent base (high % Christians who love UNC and want to see it grow)

**Study Center Strategic Growth** (Madison Perry - Consortium of Christian Study Centers 2021 Annual Meeting)

- Emphasis on convivial aspects of a college
- Prioritized relationships with ministries and churches, external communications that reflected our whole priority set, parent engagement
- Experimented with: residential program, student development programs, topic-based seminars v relationship-based seminars, staff structure
- Appreciation of the role of Hillel and the as a hub for community and intellectual formation
- Some of many regrets: more thought given to hiring, established an alumni council earlier, development of a student leadership team earlier, hiring an Administrator Coordinator earlier
- Limiting factor of formation: student leisure time
- Hospitality → Formation → Hospitality → Formation ...

What is your mission?

What is your vision?

What are your chief programmatic priorities?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

*Of these priorities, which is the most important to your mission? Which is most important to your donors? What would you like to include but can't yet?*

How do you assess success?

Ideas:

- participant impact (qualitative)
- participant impact (quantitative)
- revenue
- campus influence
- local presence
- national presence
- staff health
- group size (more appropriate for campus ministry/church/etc)

What would growth look like for you?

What programs, staff or volunteer roles, facility changes do you need for growth?

What are the limitations on your growth? Is there a cap to it given your context or given the limited upward potential?

Example: context (no good locations / inadequate local or national support/etc), staff capacities, fundraising, breadth/appeal of mission as currently framed, hostile culture, failure to take risk, failure to execute mission



**Study Center Strategic Growth** (Madison Perry - Consortium of Christian Study Centers 2021 Annual Meeting)

Will your current organizational and staff commitments lead to this kind of growth? Are you trying out programs and initiatives that will push things forward?

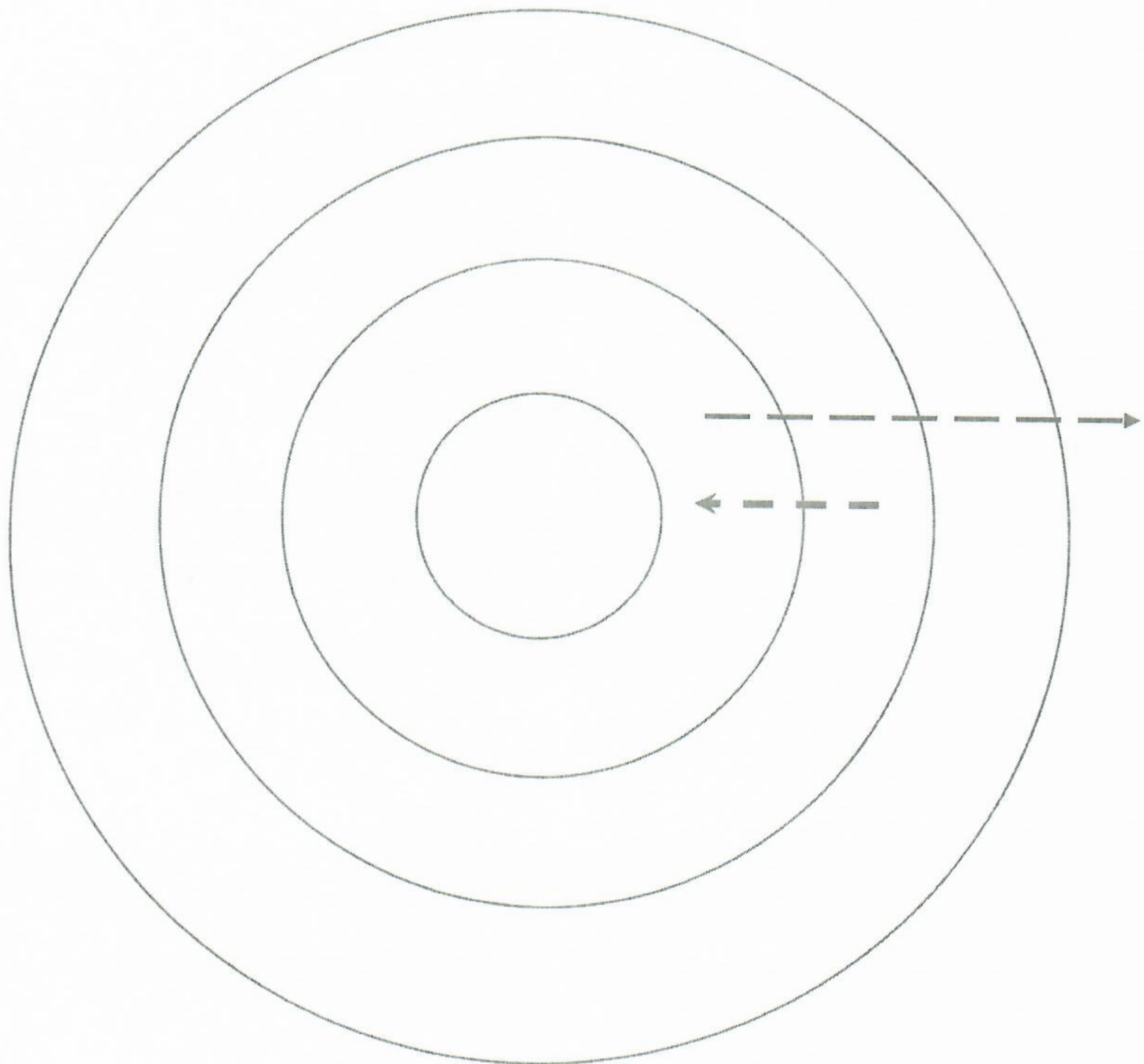
What are the moments that you expect will happen when this growth has been realized?

### Organizational Fit Reflection Tool

List all your programs and initiatives and place them at the appropriate level of organizational fit. This should include any regular program like Fellows. Think about everything that you do – hospitality, speaker series, major development efforts, residential program, committees, etc. Sort them by: 0 – Core || 1 – Central || 2 – Peripheral || 3 – Experimental.

**Over time, programs/activities should either be moving in or out.** Questions to ask:

- What will it take for this to move further in?
- What will it take for us to discontinue it?
- How has this program/activity's place changed over time?



## Explanation of Levels of Organizational Fit

0: Core: Given our priorities, who we are and who we want to be, we will always will do this. It is core to our identity. Our staffing structure is built for this, so even if it is hard this is something we can run well. This is fitting well with our other work or operates in a well-understood silo.

*Example: our residential program is key to our work. Donors love it, we have a facility for it, and we have permanent staff with set hours on it. Because of our work with it, we openly say that one of our missional priorities is to create an option for wholistic, residential formation. I can't imagine that we would ever give this up.*

Are there unaddressed risks about this that you have ignored that need to be solved? Are you underappreciating/celebrating this part of your work? How does this fit together with your other top priorities? Does your staff, board, donor community understand and appreciate this? Is this something that you mostly want to continue as is, or is there some way to make it even more impactful by reframing it, growing it, adding more staff or volunteers to it, etc?

1: Central: It is very important that we do this, and close to core identity, but not something we know we will seek to do long term. We are already known for doing this, and we do expect to continue it for > 1 year. This feels mostly sustainable, but it doesn't seem to fit yet with everything else we do or with our staff structure. There is still room to improve and understand what a realized version of this will look like.

*Example: we have someone on our team who leads a faculty advisory committee. The committee is pretty new and is still figuring things out, and we are still looking to see if the work of the advisory committee meshes well with our student educational work. We also need to see who the primary donors are who will be excited to support this going forward. However, the committee's work thus far has been extremely important in gauging what we should do on campus, and we are very positive about its impact.*

If this becomes a 0, how will your permanent staffing structure and self-understanding/articulation change? What difficulties need to be solved before this can happen? What would need to happen for you to give this up? If you did give it up, how would this free you up to do something else?

2: Peripheral: We are trying this out and think we really like it, but it hasn't proven itself. It is hard, risky, or significant enough to do to be more than just an experiment. We aren't sure whether we will continue it, and if someone from our team is doing this, it is clear that this is something we are just trying. It takes significant resources (or else it would be a 3), but we are trying this out. It's hard to say if we will keep this for more than 1 year.

*Example: we are trying a student leadership team this year. Our programming officer Alice is running it, and he will have weekly meetings with them and they will run two public events this year. It would be great to have students more involved and to give them a voice. Because Alice is doing this, she will have to give up one event per semester that we would normally do, but that is OK for now.*

How hard is this for you to do for the coming year? Is your staff ready for this? What scares you the most about this? What donors and community members are you letting know about this? What is the minimum that you will need to see from this and from your team to keep this around?

3: Experimental: This is a small experiment for us, or it is something that is very easy for us to do that we don't mind doing. It is not core to our work or self-understanding. If this is something we have been doing for a while and is still a 3, we only keep doing this because it is very easy for us to do and because we have ample margin.

*Example: we do this every year because we know that a supporter loves it and it really isn't a problem. OR we are leading a small discussion group on art to see what the student appetite is like for this kind of a seminar.*

If you have been doing this for a while: why haven't you cut this already?

If you don't have anything at either 2 (substantial experiment) or 3 (low-effort experiment), consider starting something that fall in either