



**Life, Death, and Why Am I Here?**  
**A Conversation with Robb Webb**  
**May 6, 2026**

Mark Ramsey: This is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, and it's my joy today to be talking to a partner and colleague, Robb Webb of the Duke Endowment. Hey, Robb, how are you doing?

Robb Webb: Hey, Mark. Doing great. Thanks for inviting me on today.

Mark: Yeah. Why don't you just say a little bit about what your role is?

Robb: So, I direct the Rural Church Program Area of the Duke Endowment. It's one of four program areas that Mr. Duke laid out in the Indenture of Trust, which he signed on December, 1924. So, we're a little over a hundred years old. We work in North and South Carolina. We work with four colleges. We work with not-for-profit hospitals in the two states. We work with the child well-being system in North and South Carolina, and we work with rural United Methodist churches in North Carolina.

And while that universe may seem small – rural, United Methodist, and one state – there are actually almost 600 churches that qualify. We are helping them do work, live into their calling to fulfill human community and economic advancement in the communities they serve. We want to clear the space, clear the hurdles so that they can live into that call, and, kind of, optimize all that's good about United Methodism, so that these churches can do all the good that they see in their communities.

Mark: Robb, as we've gotten to know each other over the years and work together, I think you both have an amazing 30,000 foot view of what's going on in church life, and also a very granular view: pastor to pastor, congregation, to congregation. Today, how would you define vitality in church life today, from your perspective?

Robb: Well, this is a place where I think rural churches have a real leg up, in that the vitality measures that they go for don't necessarily align with what the denomination's asking. So, I think in our denomination, in our tradition, there's an awful lot of statistical tables that are going to ask about baptisms, and confessions of faith, and these sorts of things, very numeric kind of responses. You're not likely to see an awful lot of that in a rural place just by the nature of the population. It's a smaller population.

But here's what you see. You see deep formation. You see the kind of growth that happens theologically. So, you have people asking deeper and harder and more challenging theological questions, and then that prompts them to do more interesting work. And to me, that's the real magic of vitality. So, you can look at a dashboard and see that we're getting all sorts of baptisms. And trust me, I want that, too. But the reality is this is not the McDonald's "Six Million Served" sign. This is about what happens once you come through the door, and the formation that happens.

And I think what rural churches are doing, all of us should take a look at, and I think many have. So in large churches, when you see small groups and you see small group studies, in many ways, that's the replication of what a rural church is or a small church is. It is a group of people working together through a set of theological questions, pushing and pulling on one another, having debate, and then living out

their faith in the world. That, to me, is a really vital place. And we see a lot of it across the state. Now, the district superintendents and bishops may look at the numbers and say, “Well, you’re not hitting your numbers.” It’s more than a numbers game. It is about formation.

Mark: Yeah. The Ministry Collaborative has been so fortunate to partner with you and with the Endowment as you’ve funded cohorts we’ve done in North Carolina. One thing that strikes me, and one of the reasons we are eager to work in North Carolina, is the diversity of mountains to ocean, and what it represents. Can you say a little bit about the challenges of that? I mean, one size never fits all in ministry, but what’s going on in Western North Carolina is not the same thing that’s going in Wilmington.

Robb: Thanks for that question, and for observing it. I think North Carolina, in many ways, is four states. It is Western North Carolina: so those counties that are more mountainous and at higher elevation, that’s one piece. There’s the Piedmont, the middle part of the state. And then the other two sections, I think, are the Southeast, which you’ve described, Wilmington area; and then the Northeast part of North Carolina, including the Outer Banks. And in each of these regions, there are different economic drivers. There are different political drivers. There are different universities that anchor each of these areas, and different climates, really, to be honest.

And in each of those inputs, because they’re so varied, means that you have a really varied interaction that churches have to have within these states.

So, what’s happening in Western North Carolina largely right now remains a lot of the Helene recovery. I want to give incredible kudos to all of the churches who have worked so diligently for so many years to get things up and running and back. And, it’s really remarkable what they’ve done. And yet, there is still more to do and our churches are stepping into that. And so you see this deep engagement.

In the Piedmont, folks are thinking about food insecurity. They’re thinking about educational attainment for their children. They’re working diligently to try to get that kind of work done. In both Northeast and Southeast North Carolina, there’s a great deal of thought around small scale entrepreneurship, and what that looks like. In some places in Southeast North Carolina, that might be agriculture-related, so – small food businesses, these sorts of things. And it looks a little different – maybe it’s more around hospitality, in Northeast North Carolina. Everyone is thinking about everything, but those emphases are unique to the geography.

Mark: Well, and one of the reasons I asked that was, I am always aware when anybody writing about church life or ministry starts indicating or even hinting that you can take one plan, one program, and put it anywhere, it never has worked, and it certainly doesn’t work now.

Robb: No, I totally agree with you. And I worry that foundations, so the sector that I represent, and to some degree, maybe judicatories, have promoted the fact that you can replicate or franchise. I think the sweet spot here is to say, “Find what’s working, create a framework, but allow for maximum local adaptation.” So, if we’re thinking about evangelism, and evangelism is the thing we need to work on, and there’s one or two things that we know we need to be true to our Wesleyan roots, for example, but there’ll be maximum flexibility at the geographic and local level. And frankly, our local churches, pastors, congregations, they know what’s best, and what’s needed in their place. If we can come alongside a really great program, this is where I think philanthropy should really operate: come alongside a really

great program, figure out what are the conditions that make it so great, put those conditions out there as a framework, and then allow for maximum flexibility at the local level to tailor for your situation.

Mark: Yeah. I'm fortunate to do a lot of congregational retreats and church board retreats across many denominations. And the very first thing I say after I introduce myself is, "Before I start, you are the experts of your congregation and its ministry. I'm going to show you some things. Some of it's going to be relevant, but if you think something doesn't fit, you're right, I'm wrong, because you must take ownership of what you see in a way that nobody from the outside can."

As a continuation of this. What do pastors most need right now as you interact with them?

Robb: You might not like this answer. I think what pastors most need right now is a break. Just to be honest. I mean, it's been a rough season between COVID, the lack of civility outside the church has made its way into the church. And I think pastors have taken on a great deal of burden navigating this.

And it's not just in my opinion. We've been running an 18-year longitudinal study of clergy health, and the United Methodist Clergy in North Carolina have been gracious, for 18 years, filling out a very long survey every two years. And what it shows us is: 2016 and ever since, the level of anxiety, the level of approaching burnout, these sorts of things have been on a significant rise; in fact, far greater than the general population of North Carolina. And I mentioned what pastors need as a break. Here's the thing. We know from Seligman and other folks, we're at our most creative, we're at our most creative, when that anxiety, when those sorts of things are all put aside, when the anxiety, when fear, when depression, when these things come to us, they act like blinders, and we see only one way out, and we're not as creative in our solutions. And imagine if you're a pastor: wave after wave after wave after wave of battles, you cannot be creative at the moment where we most need it.

We are sitting at this moment where there is a nascent revival, I would say. It's not a great awakening, and it's going to cry a great deal of work, but there's this nascent understanding that people want to ask a bigger question about why they're here, and what their purpose is about. You see people like Arthur Brooks, they're selling tons of books. Here's the thing: the questions they're asking are deeply theological. And I think folks are willing to take a look at faith and spirituality. They don't want any part of religion. They don't want all of the judicatory kind of rules. Well, to navigate that, we need really creative pastors. And to get really creative pastors, we need to figure out how to tamp down, or address, this anxiety and fear and everything else that they're facing right now.

Mark: Yeah. I see the same thing as I talk to pastors, and there's a yearning, I think both among pastors and congregations, to go deeper, to focus on formation. And then often what I hear from them is, "Yeah, but all the other stuff gets in the way." The other stuff being reports, keeping all the plates that have been spinning for 50 years, still spinning.

How do we help pastors and congregations say, "It's okay to put some of this down?" Because I think the intuition is right. Go deep. That's what the society is hungering for, what the church has, but it seems like people coming to church for the first time – or the first time in a long time – don't get the good stuff. What they get is the infrastructure.

Robb: Well, yeah, I think about that every Sunday; and I love my church, and I love my pastor, and I want to give a big shout out to them. And, I often wonder when I pick up the bulletin and I sit in the pew, if anybody new wandered through the door, would they understand what it is that we're trying to do

here? There's a lot of folks who haven't been in church in a long time, or never, and they wander in, and we've got to be more inviting, and get to that deep formational kinds of questions that they're after, rather than, "Here's where our budget is." Again, it's a both and. The budget's important, cleaning the carpet, that's all important. And it may not be the thing that you need to talk about in worship. Maybe that's not the announcement that you make.

You know, I...I'm struck by some time I spent with some college students back in February at an event, and these are college students who've come to Christianity as freshmen, sophomore, juniors. They're all in. And I was asking (this is unofficial and non-scientific, but I asked a series of questions like), "Why did you come to this event?"

And the general sense was, "We want to explore the big questions of life."

And my question back was, "Well, what are the big questions of life?"

And they said things like, "Life, death, and why am I here?"

And I said, "Well, what about the environment? What about social justice? What about these sorts of things?"

And they said, "You know, we can get that anywhere on campus. But the church is the only place that can tell us about life, death, and why are we here? And more importantly, how on earth could we possibly understand justice of any kind – economic, social, environmental – if we didn't understand the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?" That's a powerful statement from 18, 19 year olds.

So, on one side of the equation, I am thrilled that our younger generation is asking that kind of question. And on the second side of the equation, to your point, I'm worried to death that our churches aren't ready for that. These young folks are coming in with deep theological questions. They're not interested in the mechanics of the church. They want to know, "What does Jesus have to say to my life?"

We've got to be ready for that. I get nervous. Some days I wonder if we are. It's going to take a special kind of leader, and it's going to take a special kind of denomination to say, "Maybe we can put down some of the statistical stuff so that we can get all into formation." And I love to experiment with that in a couple of places, and see what we could develop.

Mark: Yeah. There's some acknowledgement of that, but then I hear very well-intentioned pastors and congregational leaders saying, "Yeah, but if we don't forefront social justice, they won't get there." Or, "if we don't forefront this..." The fact is deep formation will lead us there. Jesus goes there. If we follow Jesus, we'll get there.

Robb: Amen. Jesus is social justice. That's the thing. And these kids have recognized it. And I think young adults have as well. We, in the Christian church, have a very compelling story. Tell our story. We don't need to be a coffee shop. We need to be us, and we need to do it authentically, deeply. And I do think that will attract people in. Now, what that means at the judicatory level is, of course, we have to keep rolls in these sorts of things, but how do we do it in a way that's a little less onerous, and that frees up more time for the formation that so many people are asking for.

Mark: And so now, a really easy question. How are you helping congregations navigate the challenges of finances and property?

Robb: Well, I think property is one of the most interesting questions or details that we have in the church right now. United Methodism in North Carolina has enormous land that's owned or has been bequeathed. I think it's somewhere in the neighborhood of 7,500 acres – 1,500 of those are undeveloped. That's just one denomination. That's just United Methodism. Tens of millions of heated square feet of building space. That's the good news. And when you do an audit of its utilization, it's down in the 10, 12% each week.

So, then, this presents an opportunity. These are the kinds of things that if you think creatively about your church building, it could become an outpost for a community college. It could become a business incubator. It could become a temporary shelter. It could become a respite center for those taking care of elders. And we've seen churches do, actually, all of those things, and they're really beautiful integrations into their community.

So, in essence, these churches are learning how to ask the most challenging question of their community, and figure out a way to move forward, and that includes their property. I think property is a really important asset. We've too often looked at it as the deferred maintenance, and the thing that's kind of an albatross. In fact, it can be an incredible ministry source.

Mark: Last question, Robb. Again, another easy one. You are in philanthropy. You have money to give. What are your guiding lights in how that happens? I mean, I know you are in a system that has its own values and protocols, but personally, out of your faith, what are you looking for?

Robb: So, this is a question that has evolved for me. I've been at the Endowment now 20 years. For a long time, I thought of myself as a grant maker in the vein of Andrew Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth", which is a really thoughtful and insightful essay. But over time, I've become more inclined to Paul in 2 Corinthians 8-9, where he talks about giving as a gift. And he's trying to encourage the Corinthians to give as generously as the Macedonians. And the Macedonians aren't as well-heeled as the Corinthians, or at least that's the implication that he's giving. But over and over again, he uses *kairos*, the Greek word, grace, that giving is this grace. And so, I've tried to approach grant-making, and what does it mean to help foster a sense of an ecology of grace, through giving and through the investment of grant dollars?

And so, what that means, then, is a collaborative kind of approach. And so I think...I hope that the folks that we've worked with over time have seen us adapt, and invite, and lean into that deeper theological understanding of what it means to be in philanthropy – which the root of that is, the love of humans. That's what philanthropy is about. And so how do we then have a grace-filled kind of experience? And our hope is that, if we can do that, then that's the kind of posture that others will take as they think about their giving.

Mark: Yeah. Well, as one of the grateful recipients of your philanthropy, I would say you are achieving that. And it's exciting, always, to talk with you, to share insights. And this conversation is just one more evidence of that. So thank you so much, Robb.

Robb: Oh my gosh. Thank you for inviting me on. This was a great way to start the day. I love our conversations, Mark, and it's been another wonderful one. So, thank you.