

VESTRY PAPERS

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empowering congregations

To inspire, affirm and inform Episcopal leaders in their work

Feeding your soul in the small church

by Kevin Spears

Being senior warden is demanding, regardless of the size of your congregation. In a small congregation, though, the demands are magnified because church staff members are in short supply.

What is often done by paid staff in a larger congregation falls instead to the wardens and the vestry. There is an advantage in this — namely, that we, the members, are highly invested in and connected to the business of the congregation as well as to our worship, education and outreach. But there are also difficulties.

My greatest difficulty as senior warden has been this: that the church has become more a locus of endless projects, unmet administrative needs and personality negotiations and less a place of prayer and fellowship.

Ironically, deeper immersion in the business of the congregation has often left me feeling separated from the spiritual experience that drew me to the congregation in the first place.

I don't have the definitive answer but here are six suggestions that may be helpful:

- Focus on building an authentic relationship with the rector.
- Use this opportunity to work on your own personal productivity and time management skills.
- Get comfortable with unfinished business, incomplete projects and slow progress.

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*This Issue:
Small Church Ministry
Circulation 24,500*

This issue celebrates the ministry of small churches, appreciating the many gifts they bring to both their members and their local communities. There is much talk these days of the "emerging church." Such a term indicates vitality, flexibility, and an openness to the needs of members and non-members, whether they be found in the pews or outside the church's doors. Hmmm...that sounds a lot like many of our small churches — which actually make up half of the congregations in the Episcopal Church!

Inside: Blessings and Challenges of Small Churches

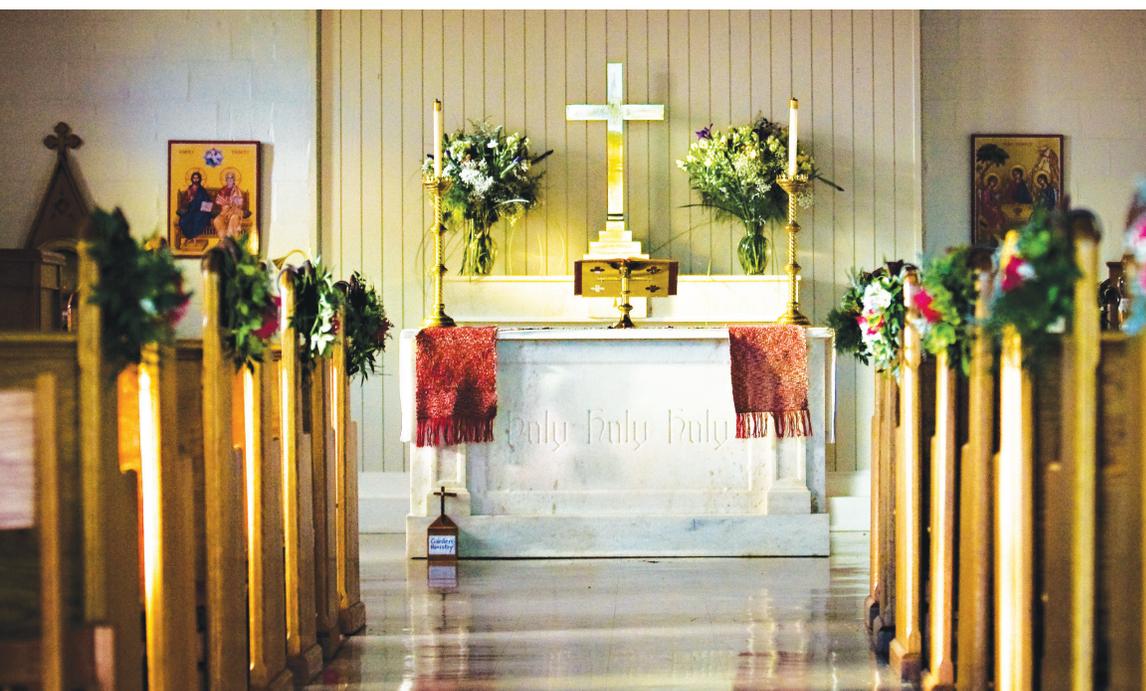


Photo: Kevin Spears

Church of the Holy Comforter, Atlanta, Georgia

What is a “vital small congregation?”

by Bob Honeychurch

They gather every week, just as they have done for over seventy-five years now. Different generations have come and gone, although the city in which they find themselves looks different than when their church was founded. What started as a church comprised almost exclusively of families whose backgrounds were from England and northern Europe has changed.

Now they are more diverse; they look a lot like the people they are called to serve. In those seventy-five years, although they have never grown larger than about forty people on a typical Sunday morning, they have

communities as a vibrant and driving force. Still, some small congregations thrive while others close their doors. Some congregations are vital and alive; others are not. Why? A vital congregation is a community of faith which:

- Invites people to become passionate followers of Jesus Christ
- Creates opportunities for personal and corporate transformation
- Equips and empowers people for gospel mission in the world

This definition says nothing about a congregation's mission, size or budget, whether it is rural or urban, whether it can afford the services of full-time clergy, or where it is located — yet all congregations have the potential to be “vital” congregations. How can that vitality be best understood? “Invites people to become passionate followers of Jesus Christ.”

Much is proclaimed about “forming Christian leaders” in the Church today. One of the great challenges we face, however, is that before we can form leaders, we must first form Christians. Christian formation is a life-long process. This invitation contains three necessary dimensions: teaching people how to pray; teaching people how to engage the Scriptures; and teaching people how to live in community.

Congregations which are intentional and strategic about forming Christians — at every step along that life path — create a culture

What is close to your heart as a vestry member? What's the hardest part of your job? How does faith make a difference? What do you need to know in order to do the best job possible? Let us know your thoughts so that we can best reflect your concerns in the 2010 issues of Vestry Papers. Write the editor at vestrypapers@episcopalfoundation.org



Photo: Bob Honeychurch

Diana Meyers, Community Wellness Director, St. Anna's Episcopal Church, New Orleans, Louisiana.

At the end of the day, it isn't about “me,” and it isn't even about “us.” It's about fulfilling the Great Commission to go out into the world.

remained a strong and visible presence in their community.

Everybody in town knows about them — knows about the ways they have responded to the needs of the town — knows that the church has always served as a clear voice and a beacon of hope, even as other churches went silent, dark.

This congregation's story is not all that different from the stories of many Episcopal churches across the land, for there are thousands of small, prospering Episcopal congregations that respond to their

where the deepening of every member's faith experience lies at the heart of the life of the community.

If our lives aren't changed by being a part of a faith community, then what's the point of being there? Communities of faith are places where my life can be changed, but they're also places where our life can be changed as well as the holy People of God.

Transformation is that process of being made new; it's about believing that the person that I am, and the community of which I am a part, is constantly being invited

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by Kevin Spears

- Pray for your congregation — out loud, in detail and at least once a week.
- Take every opportunity to express appreciation, encouragement and gratitude to people who lead and serve.

limited attempts, though, have given some hint that it is possible to feed your soul as senior warden — not in spite of the demands of the office but through them.

How, then, to serve as senior warden and not do temporary damage to your soul?

- As often as possible, find a way to ask the question, “What are we really about in this congregation?”

To be honest, I have only dabbled with each of these habits. I keep getting distracted by budget deliberations and choosing the finish on our new sanctuary seating. Even my

Kevin Spears is the senior warden at Church of the Holy Comforter in Atlanta, Georgia, where most of the 90 or so weekly worshipers come from personal care homes for people with mental or physical disabilities. In his spare time, he is a freelance consultant to organizations that serve the human spirit and the common good.

The median seating capacity of Episcopal congregations is 175 people. Some 20 percent seat 100 or fewer; some 13 percent seat more than 300 people.

The typical (median) congregation in the Episcopal Church has a total operating revenue of \$145,166.

(From Episcopal Congregations Overview: Findings from the 2008 Faith Communities Today Survey. C. Kirk Hadaway, 2009)

What is a “vital small congregation?”

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into a new relationship with God. Transformation is about believing that every

At the end of the day, it isn't about “me,” and it isn't even about “us.” It's about fulfilling the Great Commission to go out into the world. Vital congregations are those which give people the necessary tools — spiritual, technical, social, emotional, etc. — to “be the heart and hands of Jesus in the world,” for in the world where the church is ultimately called to be. We are not a cloistered community of prayer, defending ourselves from the assaults of the world around us. We are only the Church when we are fully integrated into the lives, the culture, and the daily experience of our wider community. It does, however, provide an opportunity to explore some real-life, incarnated examples of congregational vitality.

Considering the three characteristics named above, where are your own congregational strengths? Where might you continue to deepen and enrich your common life together? How might you even more fully live into the community which God is calling you to become? Seize the moment. Seize the day. With God, seize the opportunity to change the world.

Formerly the rector and vicar for several small congregations, the Rev. Bob Honeychurch is now the Program Officer for Congregational Vitality for the Episcopal Church.



Jim Steele and his daughter, Leslie. Grace Episcopal Church, Syracuse, New York.

time the Church gathers — whether it be for a worship service, a bishop's committee or vestry meeting, a Bible study, an evening at the local soup kitchen, or a summer softball game — every time the Church gathers, we do so with the belief that we will leave that encounter as different people than we were when we entered.





Ups and downs of small church ministry

By Tim Schenck

In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses says to the Israelites, "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse." He holds up the entire life of faith and offers his people a choice — to love and serve the Lord their God or to revolt and ignore the commandments of God. Reflecting upon small church ministry it seems that here, too, there is such a dichotomy. Though I would term it differently: there are blessings and challenges that are unique to the small church experience.

Would it be more beneficial if the rector of a small church was a certified electrician or had a PhD in church history? I'm not sure. But having served parishes both large and small I offer the following observations. I'm sure you could add your own blessings and challenges to the list and I encourage you to do so.

- It's like a family in all its familiarity.

Challenges of small church ministry

- The personality of the rector can be larger than life.
- The 80/20 rule (where 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work) still applies. In a small church that 20 percent is quite a small group which can lead to ministry burnout.
- Make it to church during a snow storm and you may be out shoveling the walk.
- Newcomers may find themselves on the fast track to the vestry, altar guild, etc.
- There's never enough money.
- It's harder to sneak in unnoticed when you're running late on Sunday morning.
- Constantly fighting against the "bigger is

It's harder to sneak in unnoticed when you're running late on Sunday morning.

Blessings of small church ministry

- The personality of the rector can be larger than life.
- Like *Cheers*, it's a place where everybody knows your name.
- There's a wonderful sense of intimacy; you can know people in ways that transcend the superficial coffee hour chatter.
- No one is more loyal to their church than parishioners at small churches.
- Near instant access to the priest during a pastoral crisis.
- No long waits at the communion rail.
- Many opportunities for children to participate in the liturgy.
- Ability to have a focused sense of mission.
- Coffee hour is one big party.
- Intergenerational relationships are life-giving.
- Healthy sense that the people, rather than the priest, are the most permanent element of the congregation.
- Newcomers are easy to identify, welcome, and stalk.

better" mentality can lead to a parish-wide inferiority complex.

- Susceptible to the "Father Knows Best" mentality which subverts collaborative approaches to ministry.
- There tend to be gaps in the ages of Sunday School kids (i.e. lots of middle schoolers but no 4th and 5th graders).
- You may have to resort to trickery to get enough people to serve on the vestry.
- If you like traditional Anglican chant, forget it.
- Danger of focusing exclusively on maintenance (of building, programs, liturgy) rather than mission.
- It's like a family in all its dysfunction.

The Rev. Tim Schenck is rector of St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts and the author of What Size are God's Shoes? Visit him on the web at www.frtim.com.

Sometimes we run across websites that are amazingly informative. Such is the case for St. Nicholas Episcopal Church in Darnestown, Maryland. Lots of material and vitality there, including resources that congregations of all sizes will find useful. Bravo to St. Nick's vestry and Ken Howard, rector! Check it out at www.saintnicks.com

Revolution brews in the baptismal font

by Herb Gunn

"You are troublemakers," charged Tom Ray, retired bishop from the Diocese of Northern Michigan, which has been on the forefront of the Total Ministry movement in the Episcopal Church for the past twenty-five years. "This is serious stuff."

Ray was speaking to a roomful of lay people from a dozen churches in one of the dioceses south of the Mackinac Bridge, which divides his Upper Peninsula diocese from the three other Michigan dioceses.

Christians are welcomed into the full life of the church and imbued with the call to ministry as a result of their baptism, not their education or ordination.

Since Ray's consecration in 1982, Northern Michigan has become the principal theater for developing, teaching, and living the model of Mutual Baptismal Ministry (aka Total Ministry). And since his retirement ten years ago, Ray has become a road warrior and advocate for this creative model of ministry. His Episcopal successor Jim Kelsey, who had served as the Coordinator for Ministry Development in the diocese before his election, kept the home fires burning until his death in 2007. Kelsey and the Ministry Support Team advanced the understanding and application of Mutual Ministry throughout the church, hosting a twice-a-year "visitors weekends" — for people to actually experience the process firsthand.

The Mutual Baptismal Ministry model — wherein members form teams to take up different pieces of ministry, including sacramental roles — has emerged as an empowering option for small rural and urban churches that can no longer afford full-time, seminary-trained ordained priests. Although financial challenges often serve as a catalyst for exploring Mutual Ministry, the model is not based on scarcity of resources, Ray insists. Rather, the theology that undergirds the model helps congregations recognize and nurture the plentiful gifts of leadership that already reside within a church community.

"Baptism is the transformational event," asserts Ray. "That's what changes you. But we have taken all the solemnity of baptism and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed everything out of it, and put it onto ordination, so that now ordination means

everything and baptism means very little. That is a prescription for paralysis and territorialism."

While some view Mutual Baptismal Ministry as a radical departure from the normative one-parish/one-priest model of parish life, Ray sees it as just the opposite — that the emphasis on ordained leadership has obscured the primacy of baptism in ministry development. This model restores it.

"In Total Ministry, the whole congregation is working together," says Jo Gantzer, ministry developer for ten congregations in the Diocese of Michigan. "We facilitate the congregations seeing themselves in a new way or finding ministries that they did not realize



Photo: Herb Gunn

Bishop Tom Ray, retired, Diocese of Northern Michigan.

are already embedded in them."

Ray also points to a consumer mentality about church life that leaves the ministry to church professionals and further sequesters the laity in the secular world — a breach that

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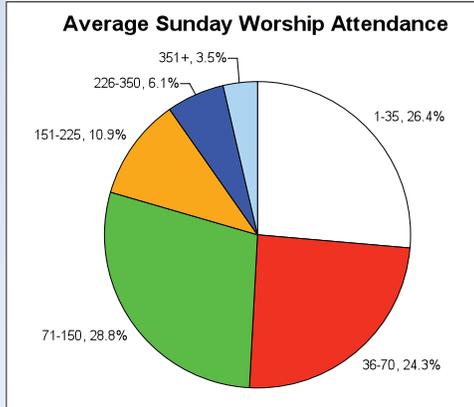


Total Ministry congregations, which pay particular attention to the ministry of the baptized, are growing in number rapidly across the Church. Google "total ministry Episcopal Church," and substantive examples pop up in Northern Michigan, Minnesota, Northern California, Newark, etc.



Editor's note

There are a few myths floating around about small congregations: they reflect the demise of the Church; they are poor; they are troublesome; and they are a minority in the Episcopal Church.



The majority of Episcopal congregations are small to modest-sized.

As with churches of any size, some of those things may occasionally be true, but the point about small churches being a minority is not the case. Half of our congregations (50.7 percent) are small or family-sized congregations, where average Sunday attendance is 70 people or less. (See chart above). Another 29 percent of congregations report attendance from 71 to 150 people. So, some 80 percent of our congregations have less than 151 people in worship on a typical Sunday. While 150 people may be a large number by some standards, it is modest by most.

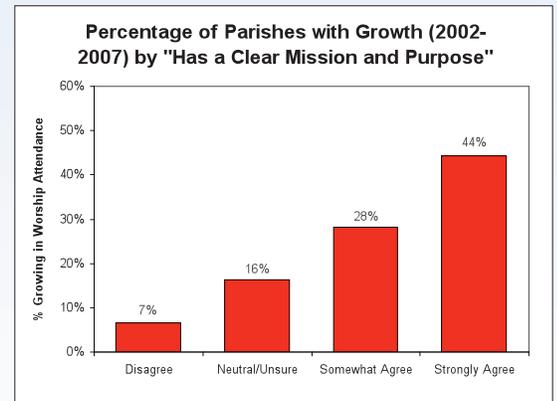
Whether large or small, stability and growth is achieved by reaching the hearts and souls of each person — through one-on-one work, small groups, good preaching or outreach. Here's the key for growth, at least according to Kirk Hadaway, (research director of the Episcopal Church and compiler of the research used here): growing congregations are most likely to strongly agree that "they have a clear mission and purpose, are a force

for positive change in their communities, and are spiritually vital and alive." (See chart below).

Bottom line: it's about Jesus. Is He present and are people in touch with and moved by Him? Does that knowledge make a difference and does it change lives of those in the church and in the community?

Size is not a predictor of success or failure. What predicts such an outcome are the factors above. And while the checkbook balance in small places probably has less cushion than in larger parishes, what smaller churches DO have is this: the close-to-the heart knowledge that the smallest community of all — the twelve disciples around Jesus — formed the body that changed the world.

Lindsay Hardin Freeman



A clear mission and purpose and sense of spiritual vitality help drive growth.

From Anne Brown, senior warden of Church of Our Savior at Mission Farm, Killington, Vermont. "All active members in my tiny congregation wear many hats to fulfill our primary mission of hospitality and to meet the challenges of maintaining an historic property. Wearing the senior warden hat, I love encouraging others' ministries and finding creative ways to be able to say, 'Yes, we can!'"

Next issue:
Vestry Retreats

Revolution brews in the baptismal font

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threatens the foundation of Episcopal Church principles of faith and practice.

"Our sacramental theology does not separate experience into sacred and secular," he says. "We do not separate spiritual and material, church and world, Sunday and the rest of the week. Rather they are inseparable."

Broadening a vision of ministry

The Church, Ray asserts, has lost its vision of ministry as something that can and should happen in every aspect of life, creating instead roles through which laypeople can contribute to church life without threatening the structures that have emerged to protect the institution. Ray appeals for broadening the vision of laypeople and their ministry.

"What about responsibility at home? What about responsibility at your workplace, day in and day out? What about your neighborhood and your community? This is where the deep, rich part of our life is. Part of the problem that we have is that we see Christian ministry and responsibility as what we do in church, in-house, institutional. And the institution always honors that which supports the institution."

Small congregations are often told, "You're not viable." But what's viable?" asks Ray. "Many poor congregations without money enough for a priest, are unable to break bread. They must await the arrival of some outsider to supply for them from somewhere else, so they are constantly reminded of their inadequacy and incompleteness as a community."

The Mutual Baptismal Ministry/Total Ministry model breaks out of that pattern, says Ray, helping the entire Episcopal

Church reclaim an essential truth of the Christian faith: that Christians are welcomed into the full life of the church and imbued with the call to ministry as a result of their baptism, not their education or ordination.

"If we can bring all that to help solemnize and energize our lives so that we can live



thoughtfully, sacramentally, diaconally, priestly, and apostolically — at home and at work and in the neighborhood — all of a sudden, our Christianity is not something we do on Sunday, but it touches us everywhere at all times and in all places."

Herb Gunn is editor of The Record, the award-winning newspaper of the Diocese of Michigan and former president of the Episcopal Communicators.

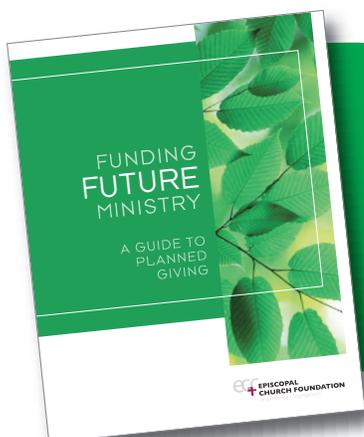


"How can I describe the Kingdom of God? It is like a tiny mustard seed. Though this is one of the smallest of seeds, it grows to become one of the largest of plants, with long branches..."

Mark 4:30-31

When two or three are gathered, I am in the midst of them.

Matthew 18:20



*Scheduled for publication in Fall 2009, **FUNDING FUTURE MINISTRY** provides a practical guide to planned giving and endowments for church leaders. Published by the Episcopal Church Foundation, this newly revised manual can be ordered through Forward Movement at 1-800-543-1813. Or go to www.episcopalchurchfoundation.org for more details.*



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To strengthen the leadership and financial capabilities of Episcopal congregations, dioceses and related organizations to pursue their mission and ministry.



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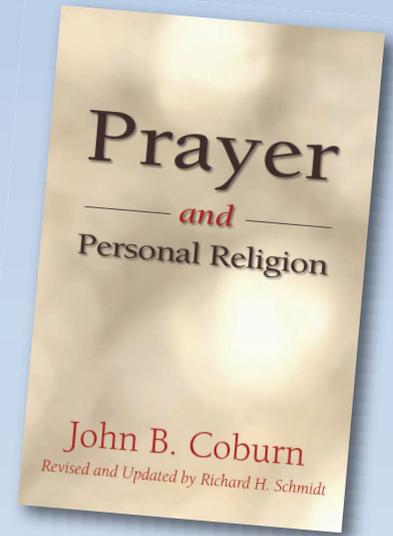
Reader's Corner

Prayer and Personal Religion

by John Coburn

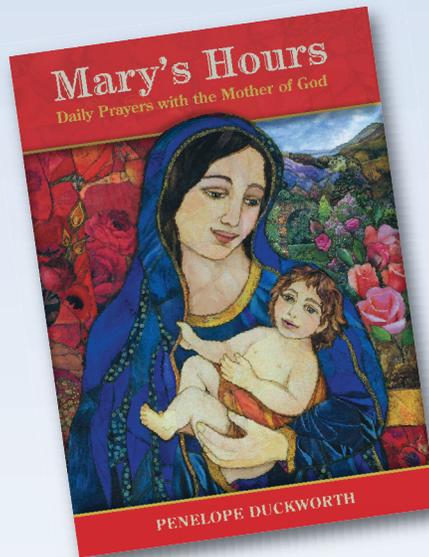
"Be natural before God. Do not pretend to be what you are not. Do not pretend to feel emotions that you do not feel. Tell him whatever is on your heart and mind with whatever words are most natural to you..."

It is good to hear John Coburn's voice again, for both this book and its author are treasures for the Episcopal Church. Coburn, now 95, retired bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts, helped see the church through the tumultuous '60s and '70s, serving as House of Deputies president when the vote for women's ordination passed in 1976. During his fifty-year ordained tenure, Coburn authored several books on spirituality, with *Prayer and Personal Religion*



emerging as a classic for both laity and clergy. This new version, updated by Richard H. Schmidt, keeps both the substance and style of the past while benefitting from a friendly, easy to read format.

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Mary's Hours: Daily Prayers with the Mother of God

by Penelope Duckworth

In *Mary's Hours* — a compilation of prayers, Scripture, meditations and chants — the reader will find solace and structure, quiet time and inspiration.

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The Words of Jesus: A Gospel of the Sayings of our Lord

by Phyllis Tickle

Tickle, author of *The Great Emergence*, takes up a tricky task here and succeeds — the words of Jesus, unencumbered by the surrounding material in the Gospels. Her comments up front add a strong base of scholarship and historical context, a classic mark of Tickle's work.

Wiley
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Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman

Editor, Don King

Fans of CS Lewis will particularly appreciate these writings from the hand of Joy Davidman, CS Lewis' wife, who died from bone cancer only four years after she married Lewis, the well-known author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

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