



Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Reconciliation
Volume 55.4

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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music*

Volume 55.4
Reconciliation



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Introduction

Kimberly Bracken Long

With both humility and hope we offer this issue devoted to the topic of Reconciliation. I do not use the term lightly, nor do the authors whose work is represented here. To speak of reconciliation too quickly is to misunderstand what is required. And yet, not to speak of it at all invites despair.

Some of the articles in this issue address traditional aspects of Christian liturgy that have been called “reconciliation” through the ages. Martha Moore-Keish, in her usual clear, wise, and grace-filled manner, helps us to understand the depth of profundity in confession and pardon—a liturgical act in which most Reformed Christians join every week, so often that we might sometimes forget its significance. Gail Ramshaw unfurls the surprising history of the passing of the peace—including kisses, handclasps, and the occasional slap!—and then reveals the deep holiness of the ritual.

Other articles consider how artistic forms might lead to acts of reconciliation. Lim Swee Hong explores a vast array of musical genres, offering insights (and music!) from New Zealand, Turkey, Sweden, the United Kingdom, South Africa, South Korea, and more. Denise Anderson shares her provocative paintings, titled *Pietà: Woman, Behold Your Son; Son, Behold Your Mother*, and in her artist’s statement considers both the pain of Mary and that of Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till.

Still other articles address broken places in both church and society. Slat Toole offers wisdom on healing the wounds the church has inflicted on LGBTQIA+ Christians. South African scholar Martin Laubscher reflects on how hearing the Belhar Confession while approaching the communion table caused conflict in his church—and revealed the need for reconciling work. Leah Schade counsels preachers on how to proclaim the gospel in politically divided congregations, offering a new

way forward. Finally, Andrew Wymer tells the brutal history of the eucharist and colonization, urging us to dismantle the boundaries, assumptions, and inequities that are passed along in liturgical form. As if that were not enough, there are also creative ideas for enhancing liturgy and music in your churches and insights from our gifted columnists.

After the Cathedral in Coventry, England, was bombed in 1940, the words “Father Forgive” were written on what was left of the sanctuary wall. Ever since, the cathedral has undertaken a ministry of reconciliation. The following litany is prayed every weekday at noon.

*All have sinned and fallen short
of the glory of God.
The hatred which divides nation from nation, race
from race, class from class,
Father, forgive.
The covetous desires of people and nations
to possess what is not their own,
Father, forgive.
The greed which exploits the work of human
hands and lays waste the earth,
Father, forgive.
Our envy of the welfare and happiness of others,
Father, forgive.
Our indifference to the plight of the imprisoned,
the homeless, the refugee,
Father, forgive.
The lust which dishonours the bodies of men,
women and children,
Father, forgive.
The pride which leads us to trust
in ourselves and not in God,
Father, forgive.
Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving
one another, as God in Christ forgave you.¹*

Although we have more names for God than only “Father” . . . although we know that asking, or granting, forgiveness does not mean forgetting injustices . . . although the work of reconciliation involves the dismantling of long-standing systems . . . this prayer helps to hold us accountable, to keep our need for mercy and true repentance before us, and to remember that ultimately, reconciliation

comes from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Kimberly Bracken Long, Editor

Note

1. <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/wpsite/litany-of-reconciliation/>.



Why Have You Forsaken Me?

Hannah Garrity

Pain, fear, and helplessness overwhelm Jesus as he declares, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In this portrayal of that moment, I was drawn to depict these critically human emotions. In previous years, Easter has been full of beauty, joy, and wonder—eclipsing the devastation of Good Friday. Here, I surrounded Jesus’ head with a halo of lilies, causing beauty and pain to collide.

Feature Articles

Confessing Church: Why Do We Keep Doing These Prayers of Confession?

Martha Moore-Keish

Merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you
with our whole heart and mind and strength.
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
In your mercy, forgive what we have been,
help us amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be,
that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways
to the glory of your holy name.¹

This prayer of confession is one classic example of a declaration and a plea that many Reformed and Presbyterian Christians offer up every week in worship. Together we confess that we are sinners, that we have turned away from God and harmed our neighbors, ourselves, and the earth itself. Together we ask God to forgive us and help us to change so that we might live more faithfully. Since the sixteenth century, Reformed and Presbyterian Christians have included this kind of prayer near the beginning of corporate worship, as we gather to encounter the Word in words and at table. Over the centuries it has sometimes been spoken by a minister on behalf of the people, sometimes by all the people together. But the focus is the same: we are sinners, and we need to confess this and receive words of forgiveness when we gather to worship God.

At Columbia Theological Seminary, where I teach, this practice elicits both appreciation and curiosity. Many Presbyterian students name the prayer of confession as one of the most meaningful parts of

worship for them—and this is true both for lifelong Presbyterians and for those new to the tradition. Students and colleagues who are not familiar with this practice tend to wonder why it is so common. Some even point out (rightly) that repeated prayers of confession and declarations of forgiveness, week after week, without clear repentance and change of life, becomes empty ritual.

Why is confession important? What is it about this action that can be so powerful, and how can we keep it from becoming empty performance?

One place to begin is to recognize that in prayers of confession, we name a vital aspect of what it means to be human—but it is neither the first thing nor the last thing that we say about ourselves. Human sin is always framed by God's grace.

Four Stories

Each semester since September 2004, I have co-taught the two-semester introductory course in theology at Columbia. Every time I teach about what it means to be human, I draw on a conceptual framework that I picked up long ago from Serene Jones to talk about the complexity of the human condition. There are four basic stories of humanity, I say to students, and all four are simultaneously true:

- We are created good in the image of God
- We are distorted (individually and collectively) by sin
- We are forgiven and redeemed
- We are drawn toward the future in hope for a day when all creation will be made new

When we ponder the mystery of what it means to be human, it is vital to attend to all these dimensions to avoid major pitfalls in dealing with other humans.

Martha Moore-Keish is J. B. Green Professor of Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

If we do not affirm that *all* are made good, in God's image, we can invent division and hierarchy among different groups of humans, some imagined as more valuable than others. If we affirm that we are all made in the image of God but fail to grapple with the reality of sin, we do not tell the truth about the way that we wound each other, ourselves, and the world that God so loves. If we confront the reality of sin but do not also proclaim God's forgiveness and transforming grace, then we have no hope. If we affirm that we are forgiven now but do not also announce the eschatological promise that God is not done yet, then we can lapse into complacency. We are complicated, fragile, wondrous, beloved, and unfinished creatures. Our theological anthropology needs to say at least this much.

To confess our sin, then, is to tell an important truth about who we are, individually and collectively. It is not the only story, but it is an important story. We have not loved God as we ought, and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We make destructive decisions, sometimes by "what we have done" and sometimes "by what we have left undone." And the results of our unholy actions are visible all around and within us.

Israelite and Jewish Recognition of the Problem

The mystery of human sinfulness is not new, nor is it unique to Christianity. Old Testament scholar Carol Newsom offered a series of lectures at Columbia in 2013 in which she explored the moral self in ancient Israelite and early Judaic literature. She focused on questions such as how do humans choose between good and evil? Can we do this on our own? Can we really know and do the good ourselves? And if so, why do we make so many bad choices? According to Newsom, the earliest layers of Hebrew Scripture show a fairly positive view of human nature, as capable of choosing good or evil, and suffering the consequences (over and over) for the bad choices that are made. By the time we get to Noah, however, God is realizing that humans seem to have an inbuilt problem, a tendency to be "all bad all the time," so it will not help to destroy all humankind again, since, like crabgrass, they will just come back the same way. Thus, God promises, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done" (Gen 8:21).

Over the course of time, this "inclination to evil" becomes a stronger and stronger emphasis in Hebrew Scriptures. The exile leads the people to a massive failure of confidence in their own ability to do the right thing, even if they know what they are supposed to do. So, prophets like Jeremiah declare (in the voice of God), "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'know the LORD,' for they shall all know me" (Jer. 31:33f). Jeremiah and his fellow prophets of the time describe a state of humanity that can only be addressed by divine intervention. People's hearts simply do not work right; they seem incapable of knowing and making good choices.

The prophets thus describe a dual aspect to being human: we are created good, with the theoretical capacity to make good choices (and the responsibility that goes along with that capacity), but at the same time we consistently make bad choices, suggesting an inherent flaw, or "evil inclination," that comes along with being human. This is precisely the puzzle that Christian theologians have also noticed from the beginning, along with our rabbinic Jewish siblings and early Jewish writers of Scripture. How do we account for the situation that we observe around us, both in ourselves and in the wider human social world: that we are capable of greatness, and yet repeatedly turn away from virtue, wreaking havoc on ourselves, one another, and the world God gave us to tend?

Confession of Sin as Truth Telling

This mysterious truth is what we name when we come to confess our sin together. It is not an explanation of *why* this is so, but simply confession *that* this is the reality in which we live—and that we need help. Theologian William Dyrness calls the confession of sin "orientation to reality,"² an explicit acknowledgement of the way things are. This is a theological reality first, not an emotional one. We may not feel like confessing sin, but the point is to acknowledge that this is simply true: we turn away from God and one another, causing damage to one another, ourselves, and this world. Naming this regularly not only acknowledges what we already know, but it also brings us to deeper awareness of the way things really are. Over time, as we confess, we understand more deeply who we are as sinners, as well as the graciousness of God who has forgiven our sin.

Years ago, a pastor friend of mine shared a story about a person in his congregation who had gotten into deep financial trouble. Ashamed, he could not find the courage to admit the situation to anyone—not even his family. After using up his bank accounts, he maxed out all of his credit cards, and then proceeded to use his own young adult daughter's credit cards, without her knowledge. At last, those too were maxed out, and he had to admit the terrible fact that he had bankrupted not only himself and his wife, but also his own daughter. My pastor friend did not know about this as it was happening, but the man later came to him and said that he had been tempted to commit suicide because of his shame and despair. The thing that saved him was the ability to come to church week after week and confess his sin, to tell the truth about his dishonesty and the harm he had done to others—and to do this in the company of others. Telling the hard truth about our sin, and doing so with other people, was for him literally life-saving.

In our contemporary world, confession of sin can be particularly important to counteract simplistic narratives that say we are simply good—and nothing more. It allows us to recognize and name that we are complicated creatures, with more than one story. With an eye to systemic racism in particular, scholars like Kerry Connelly describe the story that many white Americans tell ourselves: that we are basically “good” people.³ “Good people” do not intend to harm others. They mean well. More insidiously, as Connelly describes it, good people are “nice and never disruptive, and they value peace and comfort and the status quo.”⁴ I often say this about people I know, to highlight their positive intentions even if a particular behavior was hurtful. “They’re good people,” I might say. “They did not mean any harm.”

Though there is important truth in valuing the goodness of all people, any simplistic insistence on goodness is obviously problematic, for many reasons. It can reduce “goodness” to “niceness,” which has often gotten twisted into “whiteness.” It confuses fundamental human value with nondisruptive human behavior that conforms to the status quo. In addition, it fundamentally masks the complexity of who we are as human beings—yes, created good in God's image, but also deeply warped into patterns of behavior that harm ourselves, one another, and the earth.

Serene Jones writes movingly of the insidious nature of sin in her theological memoir *Call It Grace*. Reflecting on her own growing-up years in Oklahoma of learning from her beloved grandfather deep-seated patterns of racism as well as sexual abuse, she comes to realize how she is caught up in webs of deceit and harm, despite her own best intentions. To name and analyze this, she finds wisdom in Calvin's theology of original sin. “I felt Calvin's theology in my bones,” she writes. “He described the theological meaning of this ongoing sin better than anyone since. He strongly rejected the old-fashioned view that original sin referred only to Adam's original sin of having sex with Eve . . . for Calvin, original sin was alive, active, and constantly churning in the lives of everyone, today and every day.” And “to complicate matters more, Calvin held that even though we do not choose to be born, let alone to be born into sinful social systems, we are still wholly and completely responsible for its effects in our lives.”⁵

It is this complicated truth that we seek to tell when we confess our corporate sin in worship. Sin is not just a matter of choice, of conscious intent. It is a way of naming the distorted world in which we live, telling the truth about it and seeking God's gracious intervention.

Confession of Sin and Confrontation with Shame

This past spring, I had an experience in teaching that brought me face to face with my own complicity in systemic racism, and the vital importance of confession.⁶ Visual images that I had chosen for a recorded lecture online harmfully associated white bodies with creation, forgiveness, and hope, while associating a black human body with the doctrine of sin. When students called me out, I suddenly saw what I had not seen before. I followed up with a public apology, which included the words, “I am ashamed at my own failure to see the harm in the images I had chosen. I have displayed my own racism. I am sorry for the harm I have done, and I pledge to seek to do better.” As I wrote this confession, and for weeks afterward, I had a sick feeling of shame at what I had done.

Merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you
with our whole heart and mind and strength.
We have not loved our neighbors as
ourselves. . . .

To be sure, confessions of sin, and feelings of shame, can be damaging. For people who have suffered oppression and abuse to be told that they are sinners who should be ashamed can reinforce harmful self-hatred. Those who plan and lead worship need always to keep in mind who is in the room, and what words are being put in people's mouths when we choose or compose corporate prayers of confession. However, I am convinced that in my own experience, the shame I felt taught me something vital, about myself and about race and racism. I think that at least in some cases, and especially for those of us who carry privilege, shame is what we must face. Shame as a deep-seated, embodied encounter with my own failing is still the best name I can summon to describe what I experienced, and it revealed something I need to know. To call this simply "guilt" would be to reduce the problem to a single incident, an example of an act that I committed that I need to confess, make amends for, and move on. "Shame," on the other hand, signals depth and endurance of a problem in which I am implicated, for which I am partially responsible, and from which I cannot completely extricate myself. In this case, shame welled up as I confronted my own racist entanglement. It is precisely shame that reveals an important truth about who I am—and who we are. Wrestling with painful shame offered me a dim awareness of the horrific pain endured by members of the Black community—including the real pain of my own students, which I had exacerbated by my thoughtlessness.

I am starting to think that "shame" is another way of naming what some Christians have called a deep awareness of original sin: the truth that human beings are infected by inexplicable tendencies to harm ourselves, others, and the world around us, to turn away from the holy and loving Mystery we call "God." In my case, shame shocked me into recognition of my own complicity in the sin

of racism, as well as offering a tiny hint of the destructive kind of shame experienced by Black people and other marginalized persons. Shame, in at least this case, can be an engine for empathy and change. And regular confession of sin, in community with others, can provide a space to encounter and wrestle with the reality of shame in a way that leads to transformation rather than paralysis.

Cautions about Confession

Having said all of this, it is important to acknowledge that confession of sin must be handled with care. To begin with, we need to consider the way our prayers of confession describe sin itself. Too often in the Christian tradition, sin has been associated with pride, with thinking too highly of oneself—and thus confession has focused on the need to curb that pride, to be humble and self-effacing. Yet as many feminist and other liberation theologians have pointed out in the past fifty years, sin does not only take the form of wrongful self-admiration, but wrongful self-abasement. John Calvin, in his discussion of self-knowledge in *the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, acknowledges that there are two dangers we must avoid: both valuing the self too much, so that honor is taken away from God, and valuing the self too little, so that one does not even try to seek the goodness of God. Both forms of self-deception are to be avoided. If we already value the self too little, then we do not need confession of sin to reinforce that problem.

Related to this is the question of how we talk about sin among those who are victimized and oppressed, some of whom have been damaged by the very term "sin" itself. Some theologians have proposed a category of the "sinned-against," to name those who are primarily harmed by others—through war, abuse, slavery, or sheer neglect. How can we confess the reality of the world's brokenness, our corporate failure to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, without retraumatizing those who are most harmed by the actions of others?

When we gather to confess sin as a community, we are always a mixed assembly, with various kinds of responsibility for harm and various experiences of having been harmed. As we bear this in mind, it is also important to remember that the prayer of confession is not simply a confession of individual sinful actions, but an admission of the basic distance between ourselves—*all* of us together—and God, an acknowledgement that we are not of ourselves able

to do the right thing. It is not just that we confess that we have good intentions but sometimes do not follow through completely; confession of sin involves admission of the gulf that exists between the human community and God that we cannot bridge ourselves. At the same time, as I have learned from experience, confession of sin rightly attends to particular sins that separate us from God, because unless we recognize our own particular failings, we will not repent and receive God's grace to change our ways.

A final caution about confession: sin is neither the first nor the last word about who we are as human beings. Sin is always framed by grace—and so should our worship frame prayers of confession with declarations of forgiveness, which precedes us. In fact, as Karl Barth has suggested, we do not even understand what sin is until we know that our sin is forgiven. The *Book of Common Worship* offers some calls to confession that make this clear:

The grace of God overflows for us
through Christ Jesus
who came into the world to save sinners.⁷

The proof of God's amazing love is this:
While we were sinners Christ died for us.
Because we have faith in him,
we dare to approach God with confidence.⁸

Even before we join our voices to tell the truth about our sin, we hear the deeper truth about God's forgiveness. "*While we were sinners*, Christ died for us," we remember. Not because we confessed so articulately; not because we felt such deep shame; not because we repented. While we were yet sinners. Christ came.

Confession of Sin as Opening to Grace

In the end, confession of sin can open us to grace. Once, years ago, a colleague about whom I had some concern was hired. It was not initially clear to me that this person was well qualified, and (if I'm honest) I wasn't particularly excited about the kind of work he was called to do in the first place. Because my mama raised me right, I reached out to welcome him and tried to be a good colleague. But I did not carry a lot of respect for him, and I am sure that my snarky thoughts came through in subtle ways in our interactions. After a couple of years, I came to see that I had been wrong in my assessment. This colleague was remarkably gifted in

his work in ways I would never be, and he was able to build connections with communities to whom I would never have access. I was convicted. One day I walked into his office, confessed my own sin, and asked for his forgiveness. He readily gave it, and it was a turning point in our relationship—from mere colleagues to friends. "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). That was for me a moment of healing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book back in the 1930s called *Life Together*, and in it he reflects on the power of confession and mutual prayer in community. He said, "It is grace that we can confess our sins to one another. Such grace spares us from the terrors of the last judgment. The other Christian has been given to me so that I may be assured even here and now of the reality of God in judgment and grace. As the acknowledgment of my sins to another believer frees me from the grip of self-deception, so, too, the promise of forgiveness becomes fully certain to me only when it is spoken by another believer as God's command and in God's name."⁹

Confession of sin is vital to life together, in individual encounter and in public worship. Together we acknowledge the truth that we have not loved God or one another as we ought. We say these words, and we hear others saying them as well, and even in the most bitter truth-telling we know that we are not alone. Corporate confession of sin can inspire courage to face the pain in our world, and the pain in our own lives, because we bear it together.

Confession of sin is a vital story about who we are, but it is not the only story we need to tell. We are, all of us, made good. *And*: in sin we all wound each other, ourselves, and the world that God so loves. *And*: we are transformed and forgiven. *And*: God is not done with us yet. We are complicated, fragile, wondrous, beloved, and unfinished creatures.

Confession of sin helps us to know a part of this, in the context of the whole. *And also*: in confessing our sin together, we lean into the grace of God who has already loved us in spite of our worst selves. While we were yet sinners. Christ came to save us. Forgiveness is already present, even before we speak a word.

Notes

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 20–21.
2. William A. Dyrness, “Confession and Assurance: Sin and Grace” in *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 40.
3. See Kerry Connelly, *Good White Racist? Confronting Your Role in Racial Injustice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020).
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. Serene Jones, *Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World* (New York: Viking, 2019), 57.
6. I reflect on this experience for the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion in the following blog post dated November 1, 2021: <https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/11/racism-shame-and-the-complexity-of-human-nature/>.
7. 1 Tim. 1:14–15, *Book of Common Worship*, 20.
8. Rom. 5:8; Heb. 4:16, *Book of Common Worship*, 20.
9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 113.

Reconciliation and Song: Being God's Message to the World

Lim Swee Hong

Reconciliation doesn't happen somewhere else. It doesn't happen outside of you but rather it begins inside of you. Begins in your heart and your mind.

—Hon. Steven Point¹

Reconciliation is an ongoing participatory process, especially for those of us who follow Jesus. Looking through Scriptures, we are reminded that “when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23–24). Pointedly speaking, this ministry of reconciliation is our existential ethos when we become aware that we are recipients of God's reconciling love through the salvific work of Jesus Christ. Consider Paul's assertion that

all this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:18–21).

How, then, might our music making support this important work? Often, sacred music making embodies corporate praise, personal worship, and creedal or proclamatory functions. Its embodiment in the work of reconciliation is less obvious to the

church despite what is known in academia about music's efficacy in community building. As New Zealander music education scholar Felicity Laurence notes,

Music, along with all its other functions and effects, indeed offers a specific potential to enable, catalyze and strengthen empathic response, ability, and relationship, and that it is this potential capacity which lies at the core of music's function within peace building.²

This community building work takes place within a sociocultural context with its specific cultural vocabulary. To that end, music is one form of sociocultural expression. It contains cultural vocabulary as its social capital to undertake this work of reconciliation.³ Turkish musicologist Umut Albayrak asserts, “Cultural events, products and heritage are the main terms in reconciliation dialogues and play key roles.”⁴ In this essay, I will offer a few examples in their sociocultural contexts to demonstrate how the work of reconciliation can be supported through music making. Naturally, this is not a comprehensive survey but merely a glimpse of how this art form has been harnessed to speak on the work of reconciliation.

Being involved with the ongoing work of planning the worship for the 11th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, I would like to share one of the theme songs created for this ecumenical gathering. Following the decision by the leadership of the World Council of Churches to adopt the theme “Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity,” Swedish Lutheran pastor and composer Per Harling crafted a song that was then selected to be one of the theme songs for the 2022 assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany⁵ (example 1).

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Example 1

Christ's Love Moves the World

To the 11th Assembly of the WCC

Words & Music: Per Harling, Sweden
Spanish trans. Gerardo Oberman, Argentina

♩ = 90

Christ's love moves the world to rec-on-ci-li-a-tion and u-ni-ty.
Cris-to nos im-pul-sa/en a-mor a rec-on-ci-lia-ción y a la u-ni-dad,

God is love, where there is no fear. It moves us to be bold and free!
no/hay te mor en Dios que/es a-mor, nos da su fuer-za y li-ber-tad.

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Christ's love moves the world
to reconciliation and unity.
God is love, where there is no fear.
It moves us to be bold and free!

Christ's love moves the world
to recognize each person's dignity.
Grace is given grace to share.
The Spirit moves us to a common we!

Christ's love moves the world
to care for God's creation's integrity.
Life is holy, life is whole.
The groaning Earth now needs our empathy!

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Cristo nos impulsa_en amor
a reconciliación y a la unidad,
no hay temor en Cristo y su amor
su Espíritu es fuerza y libertad.

Cristo nos impulsa_en amor,
a ver en cada ser su dignidad,
dar de gracia es nuestra misión
su Espíritu nos mueve a la unidad.

Cristo nos impulsa_en amor
a darle integridad a la creación,
sana y plena la vida es,
la tierra clama nuestra compasión.

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On the other end of the Christian spirituality spectrum but asserting the same message about reconciliation is the 1996 Contemporary Praise and Worship song “The Reconciliation Song” by Morris Chapman, Buddy Owens, and Claire Cloninger.⁶ This song was featured in the Live Worship event of the Promise Keepers.

From the United Kingdom is this cowritten song by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, “Kyrie Eleison.”⁷ On his website Townend offers a brief background about the song: it was commissioned for the 2010 Lausanne Conference on Evangelism, and he drew inspiration from the practice of intercession found in the *Book of Common Prayer*.⁸ Most striking to me are the following lyrics:

For our words are many yet our deeds have
been few,
Fan the fire of compassion once again.⁹

Sadly, this is what I have observed in various efforts in reconciliation worldwide. May we who are called to be instruments of peace building choose to be different, to have fewer words and more action in our efforts of community building.

May we who are called to be instruments
of peace building choose to be different,
to have fewer words and more action in
our efforts of community building.

Voicing the work of reconciliation in the South African sociocultural context is the song “Reconciled” by the group Table Music.¹⁰ Their ministry objective is to “dream of original songs that unite people with Jesus and each other.”¹¹ In their brief write-up about this song, Table Music noted that this song came about when they gathered to pray on the occasion of South Africa celebrating the Day of Reconciliation on December 16, 2020.¹²

Many of us are familiar with the song “Ososó (Come Now, O Prince of Peace)” by South Korean composer 이건용 (Lee Geon-yong). At present, it is entirely appropriate and common to use this song on liturgical occasions such as Lent or Advent. What might be less familiar is that this song was originally crafted as the processional song for the

opening service of the World Council of Church’s Consultation on Peaceful Reunification of the Korean Peninsula, held in Inch’o ūn/Incheon, South Korea, in April 1988.¹³ In this song, the Prince of Peace is invoked to mediate the work of reconciliation between nations observing armistice.

Between 1968 and 1978, Fred Kaan took up the work of ministry-secretary of the International Congregational Council in Geneva where the task was centered on issues of human rights and interchurch relationships. This concern for justice and human rights can be found in his texts, particularly “For the Healing of the Nations.” According to Kaan, “it was first used in 1965 in a worship service at the Pilgrim Church, Plymouth [where I was then serving as pastor], to mark Human Rights Day [December 10].”¹⁴ When the hymnal *Lift Up Your Hearts* was being created, I received an invitation from the editors to create a new setting for Fred Kaan’s text “For the Healing of the Nations.”¹⁵ In my approach (example 2), I reflected on the obstacles that needed to be overcome to achieve a breakthrough for healing, justice, and reconciliation. Hence, I chose a minor key to musically speak about the difficulty of this process and titled the tune HUACO. The word is the Native American word for Waco [in Texas], where I was situated when I composed the tune. It was an attempt to point at the reconciling work that is still needed in the United States with its historical colonial relationship with Native Americans.¹⁶

The painful legacy of colonization remains an open wound on the Canadian national psyche, in particular, the recent news about the discovery of numerous unmarked graves in residential school sites.¹⁷ It calls for a need to strengthen the ongoing work of implementing the 2015 report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in our society. Here I offer an example of raising this awareness. In 2016, Canadian master of divinity student Jason Meyers wrote a hymn text, “Two Boats of Kin,” as an assignment for my hymnology class, matching it to the traditional French folk tune UNE JEUNE PUCELLE, which is used for the oldest Canadian Christmas song, Huron Carol (“’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime”).¹⁸ In his text, Meyers wrote about the effort of reconciliation in Canada by incorporating content from the formal apologies of the United Church of Canada to the indigenous populace and the responses from indigenous leadership (example 3).

Example 2

For the Healing of the Nations

$\text{♩} = 100$

Gm Dm/F Eb(sus4) Eb Bb/D

For the heal - ing of the nat - ions, Lord, we pray with one ac - cord, for a
 Lead us for - ward in - to free - dom, from des - pair your world re - lease, that, re -
 All that kills a - bun - dant liv - ing, let it from the earth be banned: pride of
 You, Cre - a - tor God, have writ - ten your great name on hum - man - kind; for our

Cm Gm/Bb Cm⁶ D(sus4) D

just and e - qual shar - ing of the things that earth af - fords. To a
 deemed from war and hat - red, all may come and go in peace. Show us
 sta - tus, race or school - ing, dog - mas that ob - scure your plan. In our
 grow - ing in your like - ness bring the life of Christ to mind; that by

Gm Dm/F Cm/Eb D Gm

life of love in act - ion help us rise and pledge our word.
 how through care and good - ness fear will die and hope in - crease.
 com - mon quest for just - ice may we hal - low brief life's span.
 our re - sponse and ser - vice earth its des - ti - ny may find.

WORDS: Fred Kaan
 MUSIC: Lim Swee Hong

HUACO
 8.7.8.7.8.7.

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Example 3

Two Boats of Kin

Two boats of kin a quest begin, across the
river deep.
With bounty shared it was declared, a course
that each would keep.¹⁹
But one boat thought they should have more.
Cracked covenant squeezed one to shore.
Let us relearn our script, own our whole
truth, in the life the Spirit gives.²⁰
With wind and waves and sacred flames,
embodied from the land.
Though same in heart, you could not see
trace of Creator's hand.
Through cross and pen you sought remake;
our names and children you did take.
We say repent your acts, respect our voice,
in the life the Spirit gives.²¹

We tried to make you be like us;
we basketed your light.
We did not heed the cries of babes;
abused the gospel's might.
Our role in pain we must accept;
apologies through justice kept.
We'll now confess our deeds, open our eyes,
in the life the Spirit gives.²²

Two boats of kin a quest begin, across the
river deep.
Awareness shared, it was declared joined
vision they would keep.
What we do now in strength and love,
our children see and rise above.²³
Let us unite our hearts, unite our minds,
in the life the Spirit gives.

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Recently, I received a text message from Jonathan Maracle, a Mohawk Canadian singer-songwriter. He is also the founder of the indigenous Contemporary Worship Music group Broken Walls. Maracle shared with me his latest composition, "Healing in Our Land,"²⁴ which was released on the eve of Canada's first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, September 30, 2021.²⁵ From the video, Maracle recalled that this work was created just two days before the public announcement about the discovery of the unmarked graves of indigenous people

linked to the residential school trauma. Rather than expressing anger, it bore the heartfelt message of justice, peace building, and reconciliation.

The song "Draw the Circle Wide" was written in 2008 by Canadian singer-songwriter Gordon Stanley Light, who cofounded The Common Cup Company with United Church of Canada ministers Ian Macdonald and Jim Uhrich.²⁶ In reviewing Light's songs, one can readily detect his concern for justice and peace building within the overarching themes of Christian spirituality and the liturgy. This is not surprising given that he was an Anglican priest who was then elected bishop of the Anglican Church in Canada from 2004 until his retirement in 2008.²⁷ In 2011, Mark Miller, the well-known United Methodist composer and professor of church music at Drew University, created a new setting for Light's text. Here are the two examples:

Gordon Light (<https://youtu.be/IiM0flTqD6s>)
Mark Miller (<https://youtu.be/PcIQrWOYug8>)

In his article "Racial Reconciliation: No Handholding Kumbaya," United Methodist minister Brian A. Tillman offers his perspective on the process of reconciliation in race relationships. He observes,

Reconciliation must always be pursued in a working relationship. Therefore, justice should never be the goal. Justice is the *means* to the goal. The goal is community. When I use the word "reconciliation," this is what I mean. Reconciliation is not something we hold hands and pray for God to do—no Kumbaya. It is work that God has given to us to do.²⁸

This focus on reconciliation through building community is precisely what congregational song does well. For through singing, people are drawn to actively participate in the work of reconciliation—particularly if the oft-adapted maxim *lex cantandi, lex vivendi* (the rule of singing is the rule of living) holds true.²⁹ Music making nurtures community building and increases social capital that makes reconciliation possible.

For this essay, I sought to provide a glimpse of different types of congregational songs from various parts of the world that can play their part to nurture the process of reconciliation. As I have mentioned earlier, these songs, birthed from

specific sociocultural contexts, have the necessary social capital to build, transform, and strengthen communities. They can accompany the work of reconciliation that is an essential expression of Christian spirituality. May we so sing and be God's message of reconciliation to the world.

Notes

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12. Ibid. For lyrics of the song, see https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m71S0gqmQwCbH_Mlhh5MiIsu5vbzzlHg/view/.
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19. Reference is to the Two Row Wampum belt, believed to be the first agreement between Europeans and Haudenosaunee peoples. It was a commitment to peace, friendship, and living parallel to each other (i.e., not intruding on each other's way of life). Source: Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign website, <http://honorthetworow.org/learn-more/history/>.
20. The last line of each verse is inspired by Mrs. Edith Memnook's (a representative of the All Native Circle Conference) response to the 1986 United Church of Canada (UCC) apology to First Nations people. Her exact wording is "In the new spirit this apology has created, let us unite our hearts and minds in the wholeness of life that the Great Spirit has given us."
21. Reference to Alberta Billy's call to the UCC General Council Executive in 1984 to apologize for the church's role in residential schools.

22. This stanza incorporates words and themes from the UCC's 1986 and 1998 apologies to First Nations peoples. Source: <https://united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/marking-journey-apology-towards-reconciliation>.
23. This line is inspired by Alberta Billy, who said, "When you do something, someone will come behind you." Source: United Church of Canada, "Making the Journey from Apology towards Reconciliation," September 27, 2016, <http://www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/marking-journey-apology-towards-reconciliation/>.
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29. The original maxim is *lex orandi, lex credendi* from the liturgical theology discipline.



Resist

Lisle Gwynn Garrity

While in the wilderness, Jesus resists the temptation to provide only for himself . . . to obtain unlimited power and control . . . to prove God's power . . . to rule above the earth instead of from within it. In this image, a flash of red, symbolizing evil and temptation, snakes around Jesus' head as if to suffocate him. But a halo of gold, emanating from his steadfast expression, protects him from evil's destruction.

The (Broken) Promises of Baptism: How the Church Might Reconcile with the LGBTQIA+ Community

Slats Toole

Do you, as members of the church of
Jesus Christ,
promise to guide and nurture this person
by word and deed,
with love and prayer? **We do.**
Will you encourage them to know and
follow Christ
and to be a faithful member of his church?
We will.

—Baptismal Liturgy, *Book of Common Worship*

I remember my baptism. Unlike many of my peers, I was baptized as an older child, shivering in the baptismal pool of the Baptist church my family attended when I was born, and where (very unfortunately for me) the water heater had recently broken. As the child of two church musicians, I had a mosaic of a liturgical background. Before I had reached an age of reason for baptism, we'd moved for my mother's new job at a United Methodist church, where all the kids my age had been baptized as infants. I sat in a pew as they all went forward for communion, feeling the ache of being in the church, but not a full part of the church. I learned all I could, hoping that it would make me feel like a part of the whole. (To this day, the only team I've been picked first for is Sunday School Bible Trivia.) It was my zealous reading of Scripture that made me insist on going back to my first church to be baptized, because ten-year-old me felt that immersion was much more biblical.

I remember my excitement as the day of my baptism finally neared. In his sermon that day, the pastor compared my energy about being baptized to Roberto Benigni climbing on chairs at the Oscars in excitement for *Life Is Beautiful* winning Best Foreign Language Film. Baptism was never abstract

for me. I knew what it was like to be the only one sitting back, unable to receive the sign of grace of communion. There was no greater joy than to be a full part of the church, the priesthood of all believers, the body of Christ.

It was not long after my baptism that I started to realize that my sexuality was not what I'd assumed it was. My attraction was not limited in any way by gender, and I began to come out as bisexual in the next couple of years. In many ways, I was extremely lucky in this coming out process. I had a supportive immediate family, friends who stood by me, and even pastors who affirmed my belovedness when I came out to them. But there was no escaping the reality that many people, even within my own church, believed my identity was "incompatible with Christian teaching."¹

Stuck between what I had always been taught (that I was made in the image of God) and what I had always heard the church say (being anything other than straight was sinful), I did what I always did; I studied. I learned more about Leviticus than any middle schooler should know about Leviticus. I learned about translations of ancient Greek and the nuances that do not come across in English. I learned about cultural practices and context; I memorized verse after verse as my own ammunition to throw at those tossing the same six verses at me.

I wish I could say my experience was unique, but it was not. Those of us in the LGBTQIA+ community who have stayed in the church have frequently stayed despite how we have been treated. I also wish I could say that this experience is in the past. As I left the United Methodist Church and joined the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I hoped that the days of debating my worth as a child of God were behind me. But it was around then that I began

Based in Minneapolis, Slats Toole (they/them/theirs) is a writer, activist, and board member of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.

to find the language to describe the disconnect between the gender I'd always been told I was and my own experience of myself and the world. As liberating as it was to realize that my gender is non-binary (outside the realm of "male" and "female"), it was also debilitating to realize that once again, I was going to have to fight for my space and recognition within the church.

As I participated in the sacrament of baptism one Sunday, I found myself fixated on the questions asked to the congregation, the promises to guide and encourage with love and prayer as this new Christian continued in their journey of faith. My heart broke as I realized that so many in the church had not fulfilled this part of their vow to me. During all that time I was spending defending my right to even be in the church, my straight, cisgender peers were able to focus on furthering their relationship with God. They were encouraged while I was challenged.

Talking with other queer Christians, I've noticed a common exhaustion runs through many of us. We have frequently been on our own, trying to learn how to follow Christ more fully with little support from our churches, while also trying to educate those same churches in hopes that it might be easier for the next LGBTQIA+ person who comes along. We are tired. We are hurt. We are trying to heal. To be frank, it is hard to talk about what reconciliation might look like because many of us have spent our lives trying to reconcile our identities and our relationship with the church.

But I do not believe it is impossible. In my work both with churches trying to become better at extending welcome and with LGBTQIA+ folks processing religious trauma, I believe there are three key things that churches can do to contribute to this reconciliation.

Honestly live your belief in God's transformation.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

One of the strongest barriers to opening up our churches to a wider welcome is our own inability to admit when we have harmed others. We do not want to acknowledge our complicity in white supremacy, because it is hard to admit that we have acted in racist ways. We do not want to open up conversation about including people of all abilities

because we don't want to examine the assumptions we make about others based on what they can and cannot do. We shy away from the work of actually examining our beliefs and practices around gender and sexuality because it is difficult to admit that our churches have contributed to the trauma experienced by many LGBTQIA+ folks.

I have never been to a church that is fully ready to embrace me for all of who I am. I am not trying to attend more "conservative" churches. If a church uses the word "traditional" in a way that indicates they have a narrow view of marriage or believe in one specific interpretation of Scripture, I am not going to go and try to change their minds. I enter churches that wave rainbow flags, that have clear welcome statements on their websites, that affiliate with denominational organizations that work towards full inclusion. Still, I have never been to a church that is fully ready to embrace me for all of who I am.

While I hope that these flags, statements, and memberships indicate a willingness to grow, I've frequently found the opposite to be true. Churches that make these commitments to LGBTQIA+ people put a fair amount on the line themselves—some have flags ripped down or stolen by people in the neighborhood; they risk members leaving; some even face mistreatment from their denomination. They face these risks because they believe that witnessing to God's love for all is a vital calling, and being an "open and affirming church" becomes an important part of their identity. When being welcoming is a core part of your identity, it feels terrible to realize that you are not as welcoming as you thought. It is a hard reality to face.

I had an experience in a church like this where the worship language was repeatedly excluding me as a non-binary person. Week after week I sat in the pews, hearing language that did not acknowledge my existence. When I finally spoke up about the harm that was being done, one of the pastors admitted that they knew the language was not affirming of me and told me they had plans to change it at the start of the next liturgical season. While I was grateful for the eventual change, I did wonder what took them so long. Was it for some kind of liturgical continuity throughout that season? Was it so the change to broader language would slip by mostly unnoticed by the congregation (and therefore anyone who would object to the change as "political correctness run amok")? Whatever

More than a “welcoming” or “open and affirming” church, I long for a transformational church. A church that is always reforming, if you will. A church that does not pretend to have everything right, but a church that knows that it never will, and keeps working to change, grow, and get a little bit better every day.

the reason, the result was that I bore the pain of feeling excluded until the church decided it was appropriate for them to change.

I say this knowing that I am not innocent of these transgressions. I am haunted by memories of times when I have doubled down and insisted that I was just being “misunderstood” when I’ve said something racist. I have said people are “overreacting” when I have used casually ableist language. Moments when I have been rightfully called out for (even unintentionally) causing harm to others through my language and behaviors sit in a pit in my stomach and still fill me with shame. I would like to think that I am not the kind of person who would do such things. But I am. We all are. We will all mess up.

This is where our theology and worship practices can truly lead our way. As we gather for worship each week, we practice the act of confession: admitting where we have gone astray and asking God to help us move forward in a way more aligned with God’s call of how we should act in our lives. This practice helps us both acknowledge the impact of our errors and release us from their weight so we can move forward. The grace is that all of us have messed up and God forgives us all.

Where to begin: Use the time of confession to name these realities. I often frame confession as a time of honesty when we are able to admit what we are afraid to name. Once we are honest about our behaviors, once we release them from the shroud of shame, we are much more empowered to change them. God meets us there with mercy and helps us change our ways. Name that we have not, individually and as a church, lived our beliefs of true welcome. Name that sometimes we would rather hide behind the rainbow flag than actually change our practices to do what that flag promises we will.

Of course, language about sin and confession can be fraught for many LGBTQIA+ people. It is language that has frequently been used against us as our identities, behaviors, thoughts, and desires have been labeled “sinful.” But this doesn’t mean

a welcoming church should shy away from it in worship. Refocusing the time of confession as a move towards positive transformation rather than negative punishment can be helpful in and of itself. But as we seek reconciliation, it can also be healing for LGBTQIA+ people to hear the church confessing for the ways it has sinned against *us*.

More than a “welcoming” or “open and affirming” church, I long for a transformational church. A church that is always reforming, if you will. A church that does not pretend to have everything right, but a church that knows that it never will, and keeps working to change, grow, and get a little bit better every day.

Reach beyond your defaults.

You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .
(Matt. 5).

One of the most pervasive forms of aggression that LGBTQIA+ people face is centered around language. Not only do we still encounter various slurs hurled our way, language is used as a way to indicate that our identities are not acknowledged, believed, or welcomed.

Particularly in transgender and gender non-conforming communities, the practice of indicating one’s pronouns is increasingly common (whether that be by including pronouns in an introduction or through wearing a pin or nametag with pronouns listed). It is a simple practice that gives others the information they need to know—nothing less, nothing more—by telling them which pronouns they should use when referring to us in the third person. Many of us have suggested that those who believe it’s “obvious” which pronouns they use also adopt this practice to reinforce the idea that gender identity (how you feel inside) and gender presentation (how you look on the outside) are different. As often as this suggestion is met with consideration and change, it is also met with derision.

I wear a pronoun pin almost every day. While some people smile and compliment me on my pin, I’ve had many others meet it with scorn, scoffing,

“Really?” As someone who uses they/them/theirs as my pronouns, I have often had people cite grammar as a reason for not using my pronouns, even though the singular “they” has been in use for centuries, including by the likes of Shakespeare and Chaucer. I have even had my pronouns changed and edited out of my bio without my permission when publishing articles.

It is one thing to slip up on someone’s pronouns now and again—even I have occasionally messed up a friend’s pronouns before! I promise you, those of us who are frequently misgendered know when it’s an honest mistake or you are still working to retrain your brain to use the correct pronouns for us. (It does take time and practice.) But the fact is, language is frequently used to exclude, ignore, and erase our identities from public space. It can look like an upfront refusal to use our pronouns or our chosen name. It can look like using the proper language but with an eye roll or a scoff. It can look like using our former name or pronouns then saying, “Oh, you know what I mean!” while making no attempt to change behavior.

The most common issue is unintentional, stemming from not realizing that anyone who identifies outside of the gender binary is in the room. Phrases like “ladies and gentlemen” or “sisters and brothers” used as the generic forms of address to a group indicate that a person or organization does not acknowledge our existence.

The most common issue is unintentional, stemming from not realizing that anyone who identifies outside of the gender binary is in the room. Phrases like “ladies and gentlemen” or “sisters and brothers” used as the generic forms of address to a group indicate that a person or organization does not acknowledge our existence. That might not be nefarious or personal, but I know coming into those spaces that the burden will be on me to educate the community.

The advantage that churches have in this situation is that many churches already have experience

broadening the language used in liturgical life. The inclusive language movement that worked to move away from the masculine-neutral and specifically acknowledge women in the life of the church has laid a strong foundation for the work that is to come. In fact, I’ve found the people who are most adept at avoiding gendered language for me are pastors who are used to avoiding gendered language for God!

The next step is to continue the expansion this movement has begun to include people of all gender identities. While I am a major advocate for gender-neutral language, I do not believe that we should eliminate all gendered language. Language specifically affirming women is still particularly important, as we have not yet reached parity within binary genders. Language based in the gender binary is not wrong, but it is incomplete, and when we want to truly include all of God’s children in our proclamation, we must be intentional with the language we use.

Where to start: Try adding the word “siblings” into your liturgy: “Sisters, brothers, and siblings in Christ.” Some people find the word awkward—I did, at first. But the more you use it, the more natural it becomes. (I see people from all walks of life celebrating “National Siblings Day” on Facebook in April.) Adding this word sends a signal to those of us who do not identify as brothers or sisters that this community is aware that people like us exist and is willing to name us as part of the group.

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Being specific and intentional with our language also helps us move beyond some default words and phrases that we lean on by challenging us to find appropriate language for the liturgical moment. Many of us default to familial language when addressing the congregation. While there are good familial options beyond the gender binary of “brothers and sisters” (“children of God” and “family in Christ” come to mind), family is not the only worthy metaphor for worship. Perhaps during the assurance of pardon being called “beloved” is

a powerful statement of who we are in God's eyes, despite our sins. As we are sent into the world, maybe being sent as the "body of Christ" will help focus us on our mission for the coming week. As we affirm our faith, we stand united as "people of God."

Remember your baptismal vows and be thankful.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God (1 John 4:7).

While I did suffer a fair amount of trauma by growing up queer in the church, I was also very lucky. Despite the anti-gay messaging of many churches around me, I was fortunate enough to be in a church where I knew I was loved. As the denomination continually debated my validity, my congregation gathered for lunch to have hard conversations where we would not all agree, but we would come to the table together. At that table, we would meet each other with love, even in our deeply held disagreements. One of my friends at seminary was someone who wasn't sure where he stood on LGBTQIA+ identity and Scripture, but he was meticulous about using my pronouns correctly; he was better at it than some of the self-proclaimed "progressive" students. While he wasn't sure about the theological details, he knew that he cared about me and respected me, and this was a way he could show that. If I am honest, his actions challenged many of my own prejudices about those who come from a different theological background than myself.

I still remember coming out to members of my youth group for the first time. I was on a choir trip and had just gotten off the phone with my girlfriend. My roommates, catching my love-struck tone of voice and excited at the idea that the quiet, church musician's kid might have a crush, asked me if that was my boyfriend. Despite my fear that they might see me as a creep or predator, I stuttered out, "No, but it was my girlfriend." They immediately reacted with unbridled excitement, asking me a million questions: "What's her name?" "How long have you been dating?" "How'd you meet?" It was the same reaction as if I'd said I had a boyfriend, just with different pronouns.

These are all marks of people and communities that put love at the center of their interactions. A love that meets us where we are and walks alongside us, putting care at the forefront, seeking to understand each other.

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There are now two images that come to my mind when I am asked to "remember my baptism." I still remember shivering while standing on a cinder block in a very cold baptistry as a child. But now I also remember a particular reaffirmation of baptism from a few years ago. As I transitioned away from the name I was given at birth and towards my chosen name, I felt a longing for this change to be acknowledged liturgically. While the wounded child still inside me cringed at the idea of taking up space for my queerness within worship, my pastors embraced the idea wholeheartedly. Together, we crafted a liturgy for reaffirmation of baptism in a way that acknowledged my new name. I would come to the waters to be seen as I have realized I am, the unique child that God made me. I would come to the waters to remember that God has always known who I am, even when I have not. I would come to the waters to know that I am part of this community of believers, just as I am.

I had no idea how much I needed this service. It was part of the normal Sunday service for this worshiping community. The reaffirmation of baptism was part of the response to the Word, fully integrated into the service as a witness to God's love for all people in whatever transitions they find themselves in. It felt absolutely a part of a service of Christian worship, which is part of what made it so powerful—it was full inclusion. The other part of what made that service so meaningful was looking around at the people who had gathered to say wholeheartedly, "We see you. We support you. We are your cloud of witnesses, and we will guide, nurture, and encourage you."

Where to begin: Periodically, include a reaffirmation of baptism in your worship. Instead of putting all the focus on gratitude for God's gift of grace and salvation, however, reaffirm the whole of our baptisms, including the vows we make to God, and the vows we make to each other as the congregation present. If you can, stand in a circle,

or encourage the congregation to look at each other as you remember and recommit to these promises:

Do you, as members of the church of
Jesus Christ,
promise to guide and nurture each other
by word and deed,
with love and prayer? **We do.**
Will you encourage each other to know
and follow Christ
and to be faithful members of his church?
We will.²

These promises root us in our lives together as members of the one body. These promises, once broken by and to so many, have the power to guide us towards healing and reconciliation if we dare to try to see them through. May it be so.

Notes

1. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶ 304.
2. Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 409.



Reconciled
Hannah Garrity

I wanted to portray the moment Joseph reconciles with Benjamin as they both weep on each other. Forgiveness is an act of cleansing. Here, I imagine forgiveness as water flowing over the brothers as they embrace.

How to Pass the Peace

Gail Ramshaw

Here is my favorite story about the passing of the peace. By the thirteenth century, a literal kiss as a standard ritual in the Sunday eucharistic liturgy had been replaced by the use of a pax board. A pax board was an image, usually of the crucified Christ, constructed of some durable material, about seven inches square, with or without a pole handle, that was passed from one person to another and kissed by each along the way. By the early sixteenth century, there came to be disputes about who got to kiss the image first, since the tradition of hierarchical privilege left the poorer sorts miffed. On All Saints Day in 1522 in an Essex church, John Browne, having kissed the pax board, smashed it over the head of a fellow parishioner, having warned him the previous Sunday, “Clerke, if thou here after givest not me the pax first I shall breke it on thy hedd.” And he did.¹

More History of the Passing of the Peace²

I have been asked to think with you about the passing of the peace in Sunday worship, and I suggest we begin by reviewing some liturgical history more benign than that of the broken pax board. In the Mediterranean Greco-Roman world of the first century, kissing was understood as private behavior, usually confined to the privileged space of the home and between family members. When kissing involved other than family members, it was reserved for persons of equal rank. Thus, when early Christians speak of giving one another a holy kiss, it seems that the rituals associated with familial relationships within one’s home were being adopted as appropriate for use within the fictive family of the church and that a behavior meant for persons

of equal status was now surprisingly practiced by persons of quite different social positions. The kiss of peace was thus a countercultural gesture enacted within the family of faith, a startling sign of bonding in Christ.

Some liturgical sources indicate that a person’s first reception of the kiss occurred as part of the rite of baptism and administered by the bishop. Liturgical scholars argue about when and where the kiss of peace became standard in the eucharistic liturgy, but it seems that by the early medieval period, this rite called for a full kiss on the mouth, men to men, women to women, the sexes situated apart from each other, as they are still in some churches. Even so, rules came to be established that ensured that the kiss remained far distant from any erotic promiscuity. During early centuries, the greeting was socially extraordinary, a sign of baptismal bonding between unrelated persons of unequal social status, a ritual prefatory to eucharistic sharing designed to enact the oneness shared by everyone who were members of the fellowship. But of course in many places in medieval European Christianity, every single person you knew received this kiss; any cultural uniqueness the ritual had once was now long gone and quite forgotten.

By about the tenth century, only the clergy participated in the kiss; and, as we saw in the report about the Essex parish, by the thirteenth century a literal kiss had been replaced by the ritual of passing around a pax board. Among the wealthy these pax boards were adorned with valuable gems. In some places the pax board got attached to an interior wall of the church, and the peace received by kissing the image was understood as replacing the benefit of participating in communion, which required fasting.

Gail Ramshaw, a retired professor of religion, studies and crafts liturgical language from her home outside Washington, D. C.

One scholar suggests that congregations came to replace a kiss to another person with kisses to crosses, icons, bishops' rings, statues' feet, all sorts of liturgical objects, but not humans. In some places the kiss given to the newly baptized devolved into the bishop's slapping the face of the confirmand. (Isn't church history incredible?!)

One scholar suggests that congregations came to replace a kiss to another person with kisses to crosses, icons, bishops' rings, statues' feet, all sorts of liturgical objects, but not humans. In some places the kiss given to the newly baptized devolved into the bishop's slapping the face of the confirmand. (Isn't church history incredible?!) Throughout these centuries, the decline and fall of a congregational passing of the peace was only one of the many limits placed on the liturgical participation of lay people. The churches of the Reformation tried to end these substitute ritual kisses, although in some churches the Protestant liturgies retained a verbal proclamation of peace pronounced by the minister, to which the people responded with their amen.

It was left to the mid-twentieth century for churches around the world to begin to restore—at least in some sense—the Sunday kiss of peace. During the 1950s, the Church of South India included a revived passing of the peace in its liturgy. Note its openness to various ritual forms: “The manner of giving the Peace is according to the local custom.”³ Far from restoring a countercultural full kiss on the mouth, the increasingly common twentieth-century rite suggested the use of a socially commonplace handclasp of one kind or another as an appropriate sign of bonding within Christ. This kiss of peace was placed in various places within the liturgy: at the beginning or the end of the gathering rite, as a conclusion to the intercessions, or as a prelude to the eucharistic sharing. Each positioning had its adherents, with biblical proof texts to clinch the argument.

This ritual behavior is best understood as a contemporary enculturation of the early Christian rite, adapting an archaic behavior—a full kiss on the mouth—into a practice acceptable for current use. Even so, ecumenical ease with this ritual took some time, since, understandably, worshipers who had lifelong training to keep their hands to themselves and their eyes either on the altar or closed in prayer found it disconcerting to be expected to attend to their neighbors. Not unexpectedly, churches with

different liturgical styles came to include a ritual of peace in their own unique ways, from quite formal to easily casual.

Enacting John 20:19, 26⁴

When in the 1960s I first encountered the passing of the peace among Lutherans, the ritual began with the presider proclaiming to the assembly the peace of the Lord, with the people's verbal reply, followed by the presider shaking the hand of the vested assistants, who then passed the peace down the center aisle to the head of each pew, where the peace was passed from one worshiper to the next. This ecclesiastically ordered ritual meant to enact the presider's greeting of the peace of Lord, the theological idea being that what was being practiced was John 20:19 and 26. The handshake symbolized and effected the Easter greeting described in John 20 that expressed the presence of the risen Christ. Placed in the worship service before the eucharistic meal, the greeting was especially appropriate to Christians on Sunday, when, as in John 20, on the first day of the week, the assembly gathered to experience the risen Christ in their midst.

It is this biblical intention that seems clear in the texts provided in the PC(USA)'s 2018 *Book of Common Worship*.⁵ The six options for wording (pp. 117–118) that are listed in “Additional Texts” are all biblical quotes, each of which makes clear that this peace is a sign of Christ shared within the assembly. Looking for a hymn that articulates the narrative in John 20, we see that it is not so much those peace hymns that pray for interior well-being, nor those hymns that plead for the end of violence and injustice. Rather, it is the Easter hymns, in which we sing this “peace of the Lord,” that carry the idea that in the eucharistic assembly we become the risen Christ to one another. Nigel Weaver's 1993 hymn “The Risen Christ” says it well in stanza 2: “The risen Christ . . . breathes out his Spirit . . . new grace, new strength, new purpose they receive.”⁶

There are some assemblies and whole denominations that intend to maintain this

theological understanding of the passing of the peace. For church members with sincere religious intent to wish one another “the peace of the risen Christ” it is, although not a public full kiss on the mouth, still a countercultural sign of baptismal grace shared within the community of faith. Worshipers are invited to share this peace with several persons who are standing nearby. In some assemblies care is taken that all persons are greeted by someone, no matter where in the nave they are situated. The ritual need not be stilted, but can with full heart and mind be understood and experienced as sharing the Spirit of the resurrection with one another. One might think of this passing of the peace as religion before irony, as a genuine transfer of baptismal spirit within the community of faith, as a symbol of the reconciliation that Christ makes possible, as a significant gift of extraordinary communion given by God to the church.

Enacting Galatians 2:9

In some denominations and assemblies, the suggestion that each member be called upon to speak divine blessing on other worshipers remains a rather alien notion. What for many has taken hold over the decades is a reliance on a different biblical passage, one in which Paul describes that he and Barnabas received the “right hand of fellowship” from the Jerusalem community of disciples. By offering such fellowship, the Jewish Christians welcomed the Gentile Christians as baptismal equals, and in some denominations this ritual practice remains a valued congregational rite, for example when welcoming new persons into parish membership. It is a behavior wholly acceptable within Western societies, a hearty handclasp that bonds two persons together, symbolized by the intertwining of their hands.

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Because this practice so closely resembles a contemporary normal greeting, many assemblies have relocated this “passing of the peace” from its

historical place in the center of the eucharistic liturgy to the very opening of the worship service. We shake hands to greet one another, and then together we proceed with worship. Since the ritual is placed at the very beginning of worship, there is little formality to the rite. In some assemblies, the free expressions of exuberant greetings are highly prized, and this opening to the Sunday liturgy is a delightful chaos of people hailing others from across the room, dashing about, hugging others, reminding each other of first names, even checking to see whether the brownies got delivered for coffee hour.

I suppose we could smile and see this unstructured greeting as symbolic of the chaos of the outside world that the liturgy replaces with God’s peace. We might view this use of “the right hand of fellowship” as an inculturation of an inculturation, an adaptation of an adaptation of the original kiss. Without overlaying the handclasp with theological intent, the greeting achieves perhaps all that its participants want: a uniting of the disparate assembly into one body of believers. Whether it is appropriate to refer to this practice as “the passing of the peace” is a question worthy of careful consideration. However, it is likely that in many churches, John 20 and Galatians 2 are themselves bonded into one, and the parish practice is somewhere between the two that I have here sketched. In any case, it does need to be clear to the visitor what is going on and what behavior is welcomed, if not expected.

Especially in assemblies where this free-form greeting is practiced, there needs to be far more respect for the introverted among us than is often the case. Introversion is not a disease that is eradicated by baptism, but a God-given and valued psychological formation and personality trait that serves the community in its own quiet way. I have heard of introverted devout worshipers who try one way or another to avoid full participation in such a greeting, averting their eyes so as to avoid multiple embraces. We need to have compassion also for persons newly returned to worship and shy about their attendance, for visitors who are loath to identify themselves, for the member in great grief who can’t face other persons this morning. Not everyone who wishes to meet God wishes also to meet many enthusiastic individuals, and we must find ways to hold these people in our hearts, if not in our arms.

The biography of Francis often begins with the story of his embrace of the poor and especially of the leper as he extended to them the peace of the Lord.

The Model of St. Francis

Whether it is John 20 or Galatians 2 that is being envisioned, St. Francis of Assisi provides some depth to our practice.⁷ Too often our passing of the peace is received by only our family members or our best friends in the congregation. But Francis, who became renowned for his habit of saying to any and everyone “May the Lord give you peace,” shows us a more profound way. The biography of Francis often begins with the story of his embrace of the poor and especially of the leper as he extended to them the peace of the Lord. Indeed, some biographers think that his wounds, usually identified as miraculous stigmata of Christ’s wounds, were actually marks of the leprosy that he contracted from his repeated greetings and continued ministry to lepers.

Francis is perhaps most famous for speaking peace to animals. See the wonderful legend of Francis and the wolf of Gubbio in the children’s book illustrated by Tomie de Paola.⁸ Less well known was Francis’s fearless visit to the Sultan during the Fifth Crusade, when as a Christian he greeted with peace the Muslim ruler. And at his end, when Francis lay dying, he could embrace and welcome even Sister Death: be sure to sing his fifth stanza in the hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Francis looks at us over the centuries, as we are busy greeting our nearest and dearest, and he reminds us of the exceptional nature of the Christian ritual of peace: it is to be shared with lepers, wolves, national enemies, and death itself. I hope that to some degree our passing of the peace can have something in it of the transformative ministry of Francis.

One Virus after Another

Although the worst of the coronavirus pandemic may be over, we are foolish to imagine that Christian churches are done with contagion. There will be one virus after another. It may be that often or in many places a gesture that does not involve the touching of another’s hand is a policy worth considering. One technique to give the greeting more weight is to encourage people to say not a quick “Peace!” but rather “The peace of the risen Christ be with you.” This will give some religious tone to what is sometimes nothing other than a breezy “Hi!”

Alternatives to a handshake are a clasp of the forearm, given that long sleeves are worn. There is a simple nod of the head, or the bodily bow utilized by our fellow Christians in the Eastern world, or the Indian *namaste*, a gesture in which one’s palms are placed together and pointed upwards over one’s heart in a sign of respect. Perhaps the most significant improvement in our greetings with any of these patterns is deliberate and sustained eye contact, which is often wholly missing during our cursory handshakes of peace. At least I hope that gestures such as “thumbs up,” a V for victory, or elbow bumps do not become standard procedure in what is meant to be a somewhat holy moment.

A somewhat holy moment: perhaps not all Christians consider the passing of the peace to be a somewhat holy moment, but at least some Christians affirm that it is, and they value it for that reason. It’s a ritual that enacts peace that comes from God, a peace that surpasses all understanding and that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It’s a peace that is worth treasuring, worth sharing from one worshiper to another with intentionality and devotion. Let your assembly think on these things, and as you do, I wish you all the peace of the risen Christ.

Notes

1. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 126–27.
2. For more details, see Edward Phillips, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1996).
3. “The Church of South India,” *Baptism and Eucharist: Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration*, ed. Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 179.
4. For more details, see Colin Buchanan, *The Kiss of Peace* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1982).
5. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 22, 25, 117. Also *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 4, 7.
6. Nigel Weaver, “The Risen Christ,” *Glory to God*, #257.
7. For more about Francis and the peace, see Gail Ramshaw, “Passing the Peace with Francis of Assisi,” *Saints on Sunday: Voices from Our Past Enlivening Our Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006).
8. Tomie de Paola, *Brother Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020).

The Work of Our Hands: *Pietà: “Woman, behold your son; behold your mother”*

An artist statement/sermon about a pivotal day in American history.

T. D. Anderson

Ἰησοῦς οὖν ἰδὼν τὴν μητέρα καὶ τὸν μαθητὴν παρεστῶτα ὃν ἠγάπα, λέγει τῇ μητρί,
Γύναι, ἴδε ὁ υἱός σου. εἶτα λέγει τῷ μαθητῇ, **Ἴδε ἡ μήτηρ σου.** καὶ ἀπ’ ἐκείνης τῆς
ᾠρας ἔλαβεν ὁ μαθητὴς αὐτὴν εἰς τὰ ἴδια.

*“Jesus upon seeing his mother and the disciple nearby whom he loved said to his mother, ‘**Woman, behold your son.**’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘**Behold your mother.**’ And from then on, the disciple received her as his own.”*

—Matthew 19:26–27 (my own translation from *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle-Aland 26th ed. (Stuttgart, Ger.: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979).



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Introduction

In John's account of Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus says to his mother, "Woman, behold your son." We read this and often assume that Jesus is referring to "the disciple whom he loved" as her "son" because of the disciple's physical proximity to Mary and the fact that he then says to the disciple, "Behold your mother." It's probably not a flawed assumption, but it's an assumption, nonetheless. The text gives no indication that Jesus is speaking of the disciple here. He very well may have been speaking of himself. If my child simply said to me, "Look at your daughter," I can't imagine I'd be looking around at anyone nearby. I'd fix my eyes on *my* child, the one I birthed and raised, especially if she were in distress.

What does it take to fix one's eyes on a dead or dying child, particularly when their life has been taken by a form of violence designed to repress and terrorize your community? What could Jesus have been asking of his mother at that moment? What strength would she have to tap into to honor this instruction?

One mother who may have had an idea of what Mary experienced was Mamie Till-Mobley. On Saturday, August 20, 1955, she took her son, Emmett Till, to the Central Station at Twelfth Street in Chicago. There he boarded the City of New Orleans to visit family in Mississippi. She was apprehensive about this visit because Mississippi was a dangerous place for a young Black boy, especially one who didn't know its social codes. She tried to convince him not to go and instead join her and Gene Mobley, her companion and Emmett's father-figure, on a family vacation. After assurances from her uncle that Emmett would be looked after, she agreed to let him go. As Emmett ran to catch the train, his mother called after him to kiss her goodbye, ominously asking, "How do I know I'll ever see you again?"

Eight days later, her worst fears were realized when she received word that Emmett had been kidnapped. After a three-day roller coaster of phone calls, telegrams, and appeals to politicians and the media, he was confirmed dead on Wednesday, August 31, 1955. The 14-year-old had been found in the Tallahatchie River, mutilated with a gunshot to the head and a cotton gin fan tied to his neck with barbed wire.

My Approach to This Work

The *pietà* is one of the most recognizable Christian art themes and depicts Mary, Mother of Jesus, grieving over her murdered son's body. I created my piece with that tradition in mind. It's a diptych—two paintings designed to be viewed as a single work of art—and recalls the events of another fateful Friday.



Figure 1: Michelangelo's *Pietà* 5450.jpg, CC BY 2.5, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3667082>

A word about the use of names in this statement: Historically, proper titles and honorifics were/are withheld from Black people to debase us. As I recall this important story, I am committed to using honorifics when referring to its subject. Mamie Till-Mobley used different last names throughout her life. Whenever I place her in the time of her son's murder, I will refer to her by the name she used then, Mrs. Bradley. When I recall something she said or did later, I will use Mrs. Till-Mobley. I understand this interchange may be confusing to my reader, but I find it an important exercise in respect. Know that I am speaking of the same incredible woman.

Friday, September 2, 1955, Mrs. Bradley returned to Central Station in Chicago to retrieve her son's body. It arrived on the City of New Orleans, the same train that carried him to Mississippi just two weeks earlier. I draw from Jesus' words to his own mother and beloved disciple in John 19:26–27 to tell

the story of a woman who, like Mary, lived a very public nightmare that changed the world.

Mrs. Bradley is the only figure I've rendered in color in both panels. Along with manipulating the reference photos' composition, I treat her this way to focus the viewer's attention squarely on her. I center her both literally and figuratively. Painting her in color distinguishes her from her surroundings (for those who can see colors) and reinforces her Blackness. What happened to her son was meant to reach far beyond him. Like every other before and after it, this act was an act of racialized terror against Black people. Her Blackness is of import, so I chose to depict it as fully as possible.



Panel 1: "Woman, Behold Your Son"

The reference photo for the first panel was taken by the late David Jackson and published in the September 5, 1955, issue of *Jet* magazine. In the photo, Emmett's body lay in the foreground while his mother and Mr. Mobley look on from behind.



Figure 2: Mamie Bradley and Gene Mobley view the body of Emmett Till. Photo by David Jackson for *Jet* magazine. <http://100photos.time.com/photos/emmett-till-david-jackson>

We should note that Jackson's photo was taken later in the day on September 2nd, after Emmett's body had been prepared and dressed by funeral director A.A. Rayner. This is actually the second time that day Mrs. Bradley had seen her son's body, and by then she'd already determined his funeral would be open-casket. She wanted the world to see what she saw, though we still did not see the worst of it. Mr. Rayner worked on Emmett's appearance against his mother's wishes, but she ultimately appreciated the work he did. That work included putting Emmett's tongue back in his mouth, removing an eye that had been pulled out of its socket, and sewing his head back together. What they initially saw was far more grotesque than the now-famous photos that catalyzed a movement.

In *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*, the memoir Mrs. Till-Mobley wrote with Christopher Benson, she described viewing Emmett's body for the first time and what she had to do to mentally prepare herself for what no one wanted her to see.

Suddenly, as I stood there gazing down at the body, something came over me. It was like an electric shock. In fact, it was terror. I felt it through every bone in my body. I stiffened. The horror of this moment was as overwhelming as the smell had been before all this, and the sight of the box before that. And it was not because this body looked like something out of a horror movie. It was because I was getting closer to discovering, to confirming, that this body had once been my son. And I couldn't let anyone in the room know what I was feeling right then. I didn't want them to think even for a moment that I was not up to this. They might try to take this moment away from me. I couldn't let them stop me from going through with it. . . . I had a job to do.

—*Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*, p. 134

With such a generous glimpse into the mind of a mother who had to do the unimaginable, we are better able to understand the complexity behind her gaze, which *Time* magazine described as "stoic."

I decided to tighten in on Jackson's shot so that all that's visible on the canvas is Mrs. Bradley's full face and upper body, the right side of Mr. Mobley,

and just a portion of where Emmett's head would have appeared in the photo. I gave particular attention to her eyes and the direction of her gaze, to convey the steeled resolve and crushing anguish of a grieving Black mother. She appears strong here, but she shouldn't have to be strong. No one should be expected to exercise strength or composure in the face of this horror. But she understands that showing the kind of emotion this moment warrants will compromise others' respect for her agency. She has to subvert their expectations to be there for her son.



Figure 3: Side-by-side comparison between the reference photo and painting.

This is a burden familiar to Black women who often navigate a world incapable of understanding our emotional composition. We are “strong,” therefore we must be unfeeling. If we do feel, our feelings are somehow out of place; we’re too “angry” or “unapproachable.” It’s a catch-22 for Black women; an emotional prison imposed upon us that at once denies and ridicules our humanity.

I wanted to give some attention to the dress she was wearing because she thought enough of it to describe it in her memoir. It was one of the few pieces in her wardrobe that she’d picked out and bought for herself at the time. Back then, her mother was still making most of her decisions for her. Additionally, she had come out of two abusive marriages that were imposed upon her by the norms and expectations of her community. She

likely would have been married to Mr. Mobley by then. Yet, because Emmett witnessed abuses by his mother’s last husband, he was apprehensive about her remarrying even though he deeply loved Mr. Mobley. A woman with a newfound and fraught sense of independence and self-determination, she suddenly had to take charge of everything, and this dress was emblematic of who she’d become. So it was important to me to colorize the dress as much as I colorized her. Despite only having black-and-white photos for reference, I relied on her description to recreate it.

Concerning Mr. Mobley, while I’m adamant about centering Mamie Till-Mobley’s narrative, I wanted to treat his grief with care and justice. In Jackson’s photo, we see that Mrs. Bradley’s focus is on her son’s body while Mr. Mobley is looking into the camera, and, by extension, at us. His expression is haunting and his emotion palpable, as he was perhaps the closest thing Emmett had to a loving father. I wanted to retain that penetrating gaze in this piece because I believe it calls us into the scene. We are challenged not to look away but to respond. He beckons us to move beyond voyeurism because there are no innocent bystanders here. As Mrs. Bradley beholds her son, Mr. Mobley beholds us.

And then there is Emmett. While I realize artists have attempted depictions of him in this state, and I’m sure they approached that work thoughtfully and with a desire to do justice to the subject, I believe that some things can’t and probably shouldn’t be depicted. The photos of his body are widely accessible and speak for themselves. They are already in their own words, are the results of his mother’s agency, and, in my opinion, do not need further interpretation. So in the lower right-hand corner of the canvas where his body appears in Jackson’s photo, I treated the area with a thick application of

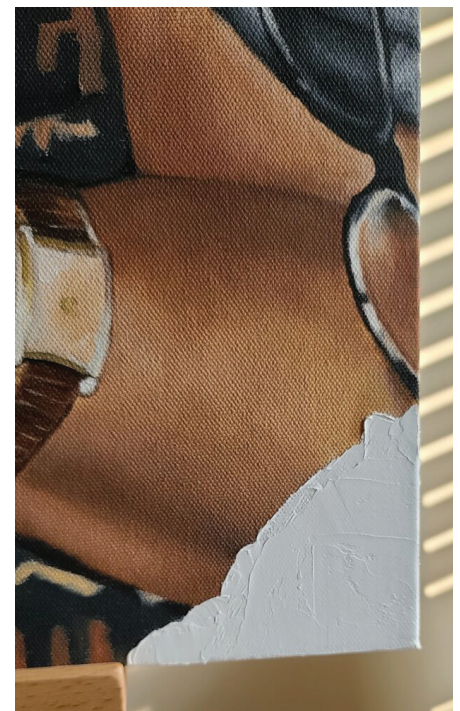


Figure 4: Detailed view of the lower right-hand corner of the canvas.

titanium white paint. I approached this part of the painting rather ritualistically, thoroughly cleansing all remaining pigment and oil on the palette before dispensing fresh paint, taking a palette knife, and smearing it over the area where Emmett's body would have appeared. I was fastidious about it, almost as if administering a sacrament. I needed that area to look blank. No dimension, no nuance, and no traces of any other pigment. Just a pure, opaque, suffocating layer of whiteness, because whiteness is ultimately what killed Emmett Till.

Whiteness—the construction that hoards social and other forms of capital among those who are racialized as white—established the arbitrary rules Emmett's mother was so worried he'd break, precisely because they were capricious. Whiteness decided that Emmett's whistling, a canceling strategy his mother taught him to manage his stuttering, was an affront to Carolyn Bryant's [white] womanhood. Whiteness gave Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam license to enter Mose Wright's home in the middle of the night and abduct his nephew. Whiteness determined the boy should be buried without his mother ever laying eyes on him. Whiteness ensured that neither Bryant nor Milam would ever be held accountable in a court of law for their crimes. Whiteness enabled them to later openly admit to killing Emmett Till and sell their story for thousands of dollars. And whiteness permitted Carolyn Bryant to live more than sixty years in obscurity before admitting to a journalist that her testimony under oath was fabricated. Whether or not they escaped divine justice, whiteness shielded them from any form of earthly justice. Whiteness, as Ephesians 6:12 says, is a spiritual force. Bryant and Milam effectively had help carrying out their brutality. They didn't own it by themselves.

Finally, the viewer will notice ethereal, human-like figures in the canvas's upper left-hand corner. In an interview with PBS, Mrs. Till-Mobley spoke of a "visitation" she had the night she was told Emmett had been found. She was trying unsuccessfully to sleep that night when a cloud-like presence filled the bedroom, and she was raised to a sitting position. She understood this as an encounter with God, who spoke to her in a voice like thunder. Emmett was never hers, she was told. He belonged to God, and his job on earth was complete. She was also told she would be given "thousands" of children for the one who was taken from her.



Figure 5: Detailed view of the "thousands" of whom Mrs. Till-Mobley spoke.

Hearing her recall this encounter is chilling. And I wonder, who were the thousands? You could certainly say the thousands were those who participated in a movement animated by her refusal to let Emmett die in obscurity. You could say the thousands were the children she taught as an educator. You could also say the thousands are the children who continue to die from racial terror and extrajudicial murders. The thousands may include the mothers who, like her, refused to let the world off the hook when their children were taken—Lucy McBath, Geneva Reed-Veal, Tamika Palmer, Leslie McSpadden, Sybrina Fulton, and so many others. So much changed because of what she did, but too much remains the same. Who are the thousands? I don't know, but I want to acknowledge them.

Panel 2: "Behold Your Mother"

The events depicted in the two panels happen in reverse chronological order. The second panel takes place as Emmett's body first arrives at Central Station. The reference



"Behold Your Mother"

photo from the *Chicago Sun-Times* was one of many snapped as Mrs. Bradley collapsed at the site of the box[es] containing her son's body. In her words:

"I looked up, saw that box, and I just screamed, "Oh, God. Oh, God. My only boy." And I kept screaming, as the cameras kept flashing, in one long explosive moment that would be captured for the morning editions. It was as if everything was pouring out all at once. All the tension that had built up since Emmett left for Mississippi, all the fear that had grown in me since we had gotten word of his abduction, all the sorrow of a thousand people in that train yard, began bursting out of me. The box was huge. It seemed to me to be nearly half the size of the train car itself. Such a big box for such an itty-bitty boy. I couldn't imagine how they ever thought they could have buried that huge box intact. It would have taken up nearly three grave sites. That's the way it looked to me. At that moment, there was nothing in the world but that giant crate. Death to me was so much larger than life. It was overpowering. It was terrifying. It seemed that, if I could scream loudly enough, I could get that feeling out of me."

—Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America, p. 132



Figure 6: Mrs. Bradley collapses as her son's body arrives at Chicago's Central Station. Photo credit: *Chicago Sun-Times*.

I have to say I remain awed by how generous she was in sharing this, not only in her memoir but in countless public speaking engagements and conversations with strangers. It seems that doing this would take an immense toll on anyone, and I have no doubt it took its toll on her many days. Yet, she refused to let us look away. She wanted us to see him. She wanted us to see her. It's that realization that brought me to the treatment for this panel.

Again, Mrs. Bradley is situated at the center of the composition and depicted in color, but this time the people around her are rendered only in outlines. This is for a number of reasons.

1. Losing someone as close as a child is a particularly lonely kind of grief. In that moment, Mrs. Bradley had a multitude surrounding, supporting, and holding her. But no matter how many people are there for you in your grief, none of them can ever take it away from you.

To be sure, this was everyone's loss. The men seen in the composition included Bishops Roberts and Ford of the Church of God in Christ, Mrs. Bradley's step-cousin Rayfield Moody, and Mr. Mobley, though there were many others in the space. All of them were grieving along with her. Yet, none of them were grieving quite like her. Emmett had but one mother, and she had but one child. There would be no more first-born son relationships for Mrs. Bradley. She was the one who labored through a breech birth that threatened the boy's life and mobility. She was the one who nursed him through polio and coached him through the stutter it gave him. She was the one who protected him against so much that threatened him, and he, in turn, had become her protector. A profound loss despite the whole world sharing in her pain, she would still have to carry it uniquely.

Rendering the people around her in outlines communicates that loneliness. Everyone was there for her, but I can't imagine it felt substantial enough. How could it have? There's just no consolation for this kind of loss, at least not when it's that fresh.

2. In our greatest need, Black women too often find that the support around us is tenuous. When Mrs. Bradley shared the news with her family that Emmett's body had been found, she described feeling a transfer of energy from her mother, who was the family rock, to her. She talked about the entire family collapsing into tears and horrific screaming. Their reaction is understandable, but she knew at that moment she couldn't rely on

any of them in the ways she'd come to expect. She would have to soldier through this mostly alone.

At every turn, someone sought to undermine Mrs. Bradley's agency. The reporter who broke the news to her had to be coaxed out of the information, unsure of her ability to handle it. The state of Mississippi had every intention of burying Emmett the day he was found, as if no family would claim and mourn him. She had to fight them to bring his body home. She had to fight to open the nesting boxes sealed by the state of Mississippi. They sent him to Illinois under the condition that the boxes containing his body not be opened. Mrs. Bradley had no time for that. She hadn't signed any agreements and was determined to see and identify her son. When she did, she found they'd packed his body in lime so that it would decay faster. The evils perpetrated against this woman and her child were endless!

No one thought she should view his body. Everyone was aghast when she insisted on an open-casket. Every decision she made was questioned, but she would not relent. And those decisions sparked a revolution that had worldwide reverberations.

My message is simple: Trust Black women. Listen to Black women. Vote like Black women. Support Black women. Amplify Black women. Or, at the very least, get out of our way!

Mrs. Bradley thankfully had "footsoldiers" in her corner. Mr. Moody leveraged his relationships with influential people to set things in motion and accompanied her to Bryant and Milam's trial in Mississippi. Mr. Mobley loved her and her son and supported her lifelong mission to tell her story. Dr. T.R.M. Howard, Ruby Hurley, Medgar Evers—the list of co-conspirators championing her cause and the coalition that had formed around her were impressive. When we follow the lead and adequately support the leadership of the most ignored among us, we can turn the world in the right direction.

3. I want to invite the viewer to fill the void inside the lines. I am intentionally trying to convey emptiness around Mrs. Bradley in this panel. There's the emptiness of profound grief and lack of support, but also the emptiness of opportunity.

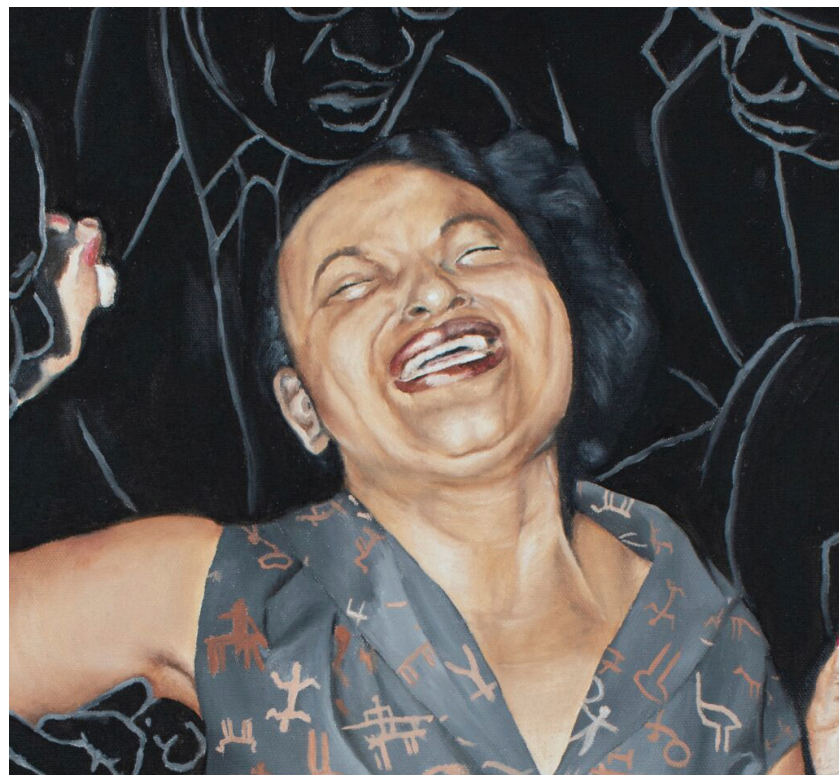
In Matthew 12:46–50, Jesus' mother and brothers send word that they want to speak to him. Jesus asks, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" He points to his disciples and says that those who do the will of his Father in heaven are his mother and siblings. In the parable known as

the "good Samaritan," Jesus taught that being a neighbor is more about what you do for others and less about your proximity to them. John's Gospel proclaims that those who received Jesus were given the power to become children of God. And as he struggles with his last few breaths, Jesus establishes a familial relationship between his mother and disciple. Jesus was always turning the idea of family and relationship on its head. He came from a religious tradition that teaches that righteousness is determined by how one treats one's neighbors, the vulnerable, and strangers. For him, family extends beyond blood relation, and community is something to be pursued and maintained. You are family by what you do, and your job is to expand your family and community as much as possible.

Behold your mother. Look at her. Take her in. See her anguish. How will you fill the void around her?

Are her cries for nothing? Were her loss and subsequent fight in vain? And if not, then why have so many joined her sisterhood? Why wasn't Emmett enough? For that matter, why wasn't Jesus enough? How much more blood is necessary?

We are still called to fill the gaps and repair the breaches that concentrate suffering and fragment the human family. Mrs. Till-Mobley has completed her baptism and received her reward. She has done her job, and now we must do ours. Are there mothers or siblings from whom you have hidden? Who are the



mothers who have been crushed by grief because systemic evil was visited upon them and their children? Where and why is it still happening? Think on these things, and then act.

Conclusion

As I read Mrs. Till-Mobley's memoir, it occurred to me that Emmett was well on his way to being a fine, upstanding man. He had overcome so many obstacles in his short life. He was industrious, reliable, and courageous in many ways. I can believe he was sent here to do a job, but I can't help but wonder if God had other desires for Emmett. Given the trajectory of his life, he would have definitely changed the world, were he allowed to live. Had God not accounted for white supremacy? Did God not fully appreciate its tenacity, expecting more from humanity? Was God forced to work around the evil and obstinance of racial hatred? And if so, how much longer will God's hopes and dreams be frustrated by a people who have the ability to end this nightmare but won't?

Pietà is an Italian word translated as "piety" or "compassion." The theme is poignant for me because American Christianity's notions of piety are usually about orthodoxy. The vestigial influence of Puritanism leads us to understand piety as right doctrine, right behavior, and "decency and order." Piety's connotation with compassion is less apparent, however. I say this as a Black clergywoman laboring in a predominantly white denomination who too often has to explain to its members why/that Black lives matter. I see politicians appeal to the



Chicago, September 6, 1955. Photograph by Ralph Walters, *Chicago Sun-Times* Collection, CHM, ST-17500641. © Sun-Times Media, LLC. All rights reserved.

electorate's religious values while calling those who protest extrajudicial murders of Black people "violent mobs." Statues are more important to them than humans. Churchgoing Christians are as faithful in their support of these lawmakers as they are in attending service. American Christianity is dangerously apathetic or outright antagonistic toward we who are marginalized. How long will God be mocked like this?

Any notions of religious piety must have compassion at their core. Through this piece, I hope to inspire and generate the kind of compassion that creates equity and alleviates suffering. This piece is for Mary and Mamie Till-Mobley. It's for every mother after them who sought justice for their murdered children. It's for every mother in a detention center whose children were taken from them. It's for the Black women who disproportionately die or experience severe maternal morbidity events while giving birth. It's for Indigenous women whose communities mourn their disappearance without a consoling word from the rest of the world. It's for incarcerated mothers and mothers who work to extract their children from the jaws of the judicial system. It's for Black womxn on the frontlines of the fight for justice for all. It's in gratitude to trans women, femmes, genderqueer and nonbinary siblings, and everyone whose social currency account may be in the "red," but whose voice and power will not be silenced. When the tides of all these rise, everyone's vessel will be lifted.

May it be so.

Acknowledgments

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Deep gratitude to the Reverend Lisle Gwynn Garritty and the collective at A Sanctified Art for walking alongside this project and dreaming pathways for its use.

For Tamika Palmer, fellow Louisvillian and mother of Breonna Taylor. I pray for you without ceasing.

And for Mamie Till-Mobley, venerated ancestor and mother, whose power and loving spirit continue to shape us in the best ways.

Belhar Fencing the Lord's Table?

Martin Laubscher

Introduction: Just Imagine Praying with Belhar

This essay is an attempt to ponder the theological-liturgical significance on how the Confession of Belhar might guide us to serve the Word of God more truthfully. Much of what is explored in this practical theological reflection on Belhar's potential for the church's witness in the world centres upon a recent incident that occurred within our congregation when we dared to image that Belhar can show us the way to the Lord's Table. Once we open up to pray with Belhar in the liturgy, the challenges of coming to terms with some of the unjust legacies of the past and the promises of the reimagined future is perhaps much easier to see. However, before I share and reflect upon what exactly happened that particular morning in our congregation at the Lord's Table, it is perhaps important to say something more on why the idea of *praying* with Belhar is just the right note to get this particular essay going.

Over the years I have come to dearly appreciate those colleagues in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) who have taught many of us, especially members like me within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), that the issue with Belhar is about *living* Belhar. Or, and perhaps more to the point, it is not a matter of whether we accept the confession, but whether we will be *doing* and *embodying* Belhar. Obviously, I fully agree with this, but I do wonder whether we should not be even more explicit and liturgically rooted in doing so. Stated differently, living Belhar starts in my mind with worshipping God. All the talks, meetings, discussions, and even intense debates are important in the reception process, but just imagine if we could have more opportunities of actually praying with Belhar.

It reframes not only the confession significantly, but perhaps also our perception of what true worship is all about. Moreover, it might also help us to see what is really wrong and false about many of the things we seem to love and protect in our churches. Just as Belhar wants to enrich and empower us to worship God, so too we should not underestimate the struggle to break with our heretical convictions of the past. Belhar might be a wonderful gift to help the church to hear the "yes!" of the gospel, but so too we should not underestimate the challenges of dealing with the "no!" that comes with it. Both our worship services and the Belhar Confession can enable us to see the world differently; first, however, we must expose our current views.

The first and best place to start living Belhar is to explore it as a significant and potent liturgical resource for the church's worship and witness in the world. Not only is it a potent gift for the church to renew its liturgical imagination and witness in the world by revealing what is real and therefore possible in terms of what God did in Christ for us, but in doing so it also unmask what might actually be our affinity for other (false) "truths" we continue to accommodate (and often even cherish) in the name of the triune God. To my mind Belhar helps the church to discern the gospel more fully, especially when it is spoken and heard by the church at worship. Or, to put it another way, worship services are perhaps the best place to discern what is truly believed (worshiped and witnessed) in a community, and having Belhar in this space, and especially at the Lord's Table, provides an excellent lens for the church to see and confess where we actually stand—and who we side with. Once we pray with Belhar, it is so much easier to see the

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living-concrete-and-very-contextual nature of the gospel (and some other elephants in the room)—as the following story indeed reveals.

Some (Redemptive) Disruption at the Table: Belhar Fencing the Lord's Table?

After months of various hard lockdowns and with some strict COVID-19 protocols in place, we had at last an opportunity to be together in person at the Lord's Table. My anticipation grew even more so when I saw the creative way in which our minister crafted the liturgy in preparation for the feast at the table. Instead of following the usual script in preparation for the table, he opted this time to freely use various creeds and confessions that are dear to the Reformed faith in our tradition and context.¹ Phrases from the Belhar Confession were voiced together with well-known phrases from the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, all guiding us towards the Lord's Table. For the Dutch Reformed Church, which still struggles to accept the value of the Belhar Confession, I was truly excited about it being a part of the service. Although the Eucharist continued to taste bitter in a church still divided by our history with apartheid, I was over the moon, for here we had a true and significant attempt to address the conflict. Here we had, at last, a taste of what might make us hungrier and thirstier for more. In short, the table was set for a very special feast that morning.

At that exact moment within the liturgy when the words of Belhar were spoken, one of our brothers stood up, walked to the other minister in the congregation, raised his objections, and then, for all to see, excused himself from the feast. For our brother, Belhar was not an official confession of the DRC, therefore it could not have any constructive part to play in creating a scene of festivity and table fellowship within the congregation.

Thinking afterward about what occurred in that service when we dared to speak the name of Belhar on our way to the Lord's Table, I am reminded of the parable of the prodigal son, where one of the sons seemingly had a very hard time acknowledging and freely partaking of the feast of the father to which he was also invited. It was such a beautiful winter's morning in a cold part of the country, after many weeks of not being able to gather for a service like this, only to be disturbed by someone in the congregation who found the presence of Belhar too bitter a pill to swallow. Everything went smoothly

and well that morning, until we came to that part in the liturgy where we could get up close and personal with Belhar on our way to the Lord's Table.

Although there was this tragic disruption, the liturgy continued undisturbed and moved forward graciously without any further incidents. In fact, afterwards there was widespread appreciation for the meaningful liturgy in which the broken fullness of the body of Christ could be distinguished with particular compassion and wisdom.

The dust our brother kicked up, however, was still hanging in the air for weeks thereafter. I came to wonder whether the tragedy that occurred in worship might not be some strange and ironic redemptive disruption. Does Belhar not unmask us here to show our true colours in terms of where we stand with the gospel's living unity, real reconciliation, and caring justice? What happened here was tragic, and yet the embarrassment and shame may also have the potential to reopen an almost-closed conversation. The window of opportunity here is not so much for yet another debate with a yes-or-no vote on Belhar, but rather to see whether we have the necessary spiritual maturity to truly discern Christ's body at the Table.

The essential question is how to deal with our brother who excused himself so noticeably that day from the feast. For him, however, the question is rather how we are going to deal with the minister (and fellow members) who dared to imagine praying with Belhar at the Lord's Table. After he disrupted the feast at the Table, and later took the matter to the church council, I could not help but wonder if he might not, strange as it may sound, have done the right thing that day. No matter how saddened we were in experiencing this disruption, there began to appear some redemptive glow in all of this.

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communion and then secretly say
“no” to the Belhar Confession. Or,
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is also a “yes” for Holy Communion.

The longer I thought about it, the more I realized that one cannot really celebrate communion and then secretly say “no” to the Belhar Confession. Or, to phrase it positively: a “yes” for Belhar is also a

“yes” for Holy Communion. In a sense we were back in time and had an excellent opportunity to address some of the wrongs from the infamous 1857 decision of the DRC that “because of the weakness of some” there can indeed be separate communion services from thereon. This resulted quite soon into racially separate churches within the DRC, and eventually provided the necessary impetus for the doctrine of apartheid. Of course, the incident surrounding Belhar was not an exact repetition of history, but it did present an opportunity to deal with, and learn from, our history. Here was indeed a chance to, in some small way, overturn and correct something of the infamous decisions in our past, and confess loud and clear that Belhar guides us toward finding a place in Christ’s body broken for all of us.

Furthermore, as our sisters and brothers in URCSA often tell the DRC, the people within the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa—a denomination formed by the union of the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in 1994—are indeed Belhar. To accept Belhar, they say, means to accept us. You cannot embrace the one without the other. Belhar is not an abstract and theoretical theological treatise, but the guts and blood of believers who were touched upon the mouth to confess from the heart in a moment of truth the gospel that was at stake within a very particular historical context. Our brother who walked away from the Lord’s Table does not realize that Belhar is not a theoretical text or an ahistorical writing with which we practice mere armchair theology (or politics) in our living rooms, but rather the very symbol of so many names and faces of fellow Christians in the same faith and tradition in our immediate context. Belhar is not a mere symbol of party politics and political ideologies, but rather a symbol of all with whom we share the same blood and body within the body of Christ.

Does the celebration of the Lord’s Supper not always require an urgent search and longing for greater unity, true reconciliation, and compassionate justice in the church of Christ? Does the Lord’s Supper not force us time and time again, in fact week after week, to continue to discern the body of Christ anew in order to recognize Belhar (and all the sisters and brothers who represent it) as a rightful part of the body? I could not help but wonder that if the essential fullness of Christ’s broken body for all of us really hits one so hard

on the chest, then I should perhaps indeed excuse myself from the festive community, before I eat and drink a judgment upon myself (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27–29).

This is exactly what George Hunsinger points out in his important book *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast*,² when he provides the following commentary on that well-known text: “The ‘unworthy partaking’ was not a matter of inward disposition or general moral behavior, but precisely a matter of communal behavior in the Eucharistic assembly.” It is essentially not about some moral individual misstep that keeps and excludes us from the Table, but rather whether we can truly recognize the names and faces of the flesh-and-blood people in the body of Christ as our own blood relatives, taking our place next to them with the Body/bodies at the Lord’s Table. Discerning the body of Christ does not, after all, lead us to cultivate further separation, alienation, or injustices, but rather to witness and embody the opposite. We are called to discern the body, recognizing and embracing the breadth and depth of all included by Christ in his body. In other words, we are called, not to adhere to incompatibility and alienation as doctrine and gospel, but rather to the reality that God in Christ broke down all barriers and walls of separation for us—and thereby recreated a new humanity and community for us and the world to see. As David Ford in *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* rightly states: “There is a sharp note of exclusion, but it is one that follows from the inclusiveness. The excluded are those who cannot bear God’s generosity and will not imitate it.”³

Whether we realize it or not, Belhar is putting a safety net around our tables. Belhar will always fence the tables of the Dutch Reformed Church, whether we want to acknowledge it or not. The mere fact that we do not always say it explicitly does not mean that it is not present. It may not be “yet” a confession we have officially accepted, but who can deny that the Lord’s Supper compels us to say a loud and unequivocal “yes” to Belhar in this context? Or, who celebrates the Lord’s Supper and does not long for greater visible unity, embodied reconciliation, and restorative justice in our world today?

Who celebrates the Lord’s Supper and
does not long for greater visible unity,
embodied reconciliation, and restorative
justice in our world today?

The tragedy and the gift of this particular incident is not to see it as an isolated scene that occurred at the table in our congregation, but rather to discover that this profound and abiding exclusionary theology is still being exposed for all to see. Belhar allows redemption in the midst of this kind of disruption by not only exposing the tactics as theatrical in nature, but also by revealing the subtle poison in being silent if we do not let Belhar help us to discern the body of Christ at the Table. Even though the dust may still hang in the air, there is indeed some solid ground under our feet as we approach the way paved in truth and life towards the Lord's Table.

In the end I cannot but wonder and grapple with the following kinds of questions: If you do want to excuse yourself in protest of Belhar, then is it perhaps time to realise that you are actually excusing and excluding yourself from more than this particular service and sacrament? Surely, then, isn't the only way back to the Table (and this meal of reconciliation) through a change of heart? Is it not just Belhar that is the obstacle in this regard, but with all due respect, the Word itself? Again, can one really continue to say "no" to one (Belhar), and "yes" to the other (Holy Communion)? If you want to detach yourself from the feast because of Belhar being present, then surely you will struggle to discern the body of Christ being present here and now; and, may I add, then surely also there and then as well? In the end it is not about Belhar *per se*, but whether we hear Belhar's prayer for visible unity, real reconciliation, and healing justice—and start to do that first and foremost in the church at worship.

In reflecting upon what happened here, it is important that the leadership and members of the congregation also look in the mirror and self-critically reflect upon the ways we are responsible for this tragedy. Perhaps we ourselves are to blame for our brother's self-constructed exclusion, in the sense that we sometimes present the unity of the church as something other than the unity of the body of Christ. Can we really present unity of the one without any connection to unity that also manifests itself elsewhere? Moreover, do we truly believe in unity without justice and reconciliation? Don't we get it that Belhar speaks of unity-in-distinction and distinction-in-unity with regard to the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice? There might be three clear themes of the gospel in Belhar, but together they constitute three forms of the *one* Word

of God. It does not matter how much one focuses on one of the themes in Belhar; we must understand and honour the connection between all three themes and their content or else we contradict what is witnessed in the entire confession. As theologian Dirkie Smit has taught us, the embodiment of the one calls for, and implies, the embodiment of the other, and vice versa. There can be no question of two (or more) kinds of unity. That is, we must resist the argument that we cannot seek unity within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches, because it will disrupt the "unity" within the congregation. We cannot seek deeper, real, and visible unity within the broader church, some say, because that will only unmask the false and superficial "unity" within our current group/congregation or church. Such a take on unity is often what happens when the bonds with reconciliation and justice are lost in the process—and the so-called peace is nothing other than a false and superficial peace projected to the outside. In short, we cannot seek a bigger and wider unity (we have in Christ), because that will only disturb *our* "unity."

We cannot seek deeper, real, and visible unity within the broader church, some say, because that will only unmask the false and superficial "unity" within our current group/congregation or church.

So too, true unity cannot be something independent and detached from justice and reconciliation. The ways in which unity is embodied are meant to be inextricably linked to each other—and that is precisely why there can be no question of unity without reconciliation and justice. That is exactly why we cannot default again into siding with "the weakness of some" to try to maintain such an apparent unity in the congregation, and thereby actually give up, and flatten and falsely present the greater unity within the body of Christ.

Maybe we should hear about Belhar more often when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Perhaps we should be less content with the crumbs of Belhar that sometimes fall from the table and focus on learning to pray with Belhar on a regular basis when we respond to God's call to worship. Belhar's content is about the ministry of the Word—and as in this case,

especially the visible Word. Confessions are, after all, not primarily earmarked for debate and controversy, but meant to school and form us in prayer, nourishing us in the Christian life that continues to seek to embody God's living unity, real reconciliation, and compassionate justice in this world.

Many years ago the South African Roman Catholic philosopher Martinus Versfeld said in his *Food for Thought*, "Nothing is more indicative of what you are than your food and table customs."⁴ There are many scholars today who will tell us that food and tables remain some of the most powerful markers of identity in our lives. Somehow what happens at the table is seldom innocent or without powerful effect. It is at the table, especially the Lord's Table, that thick descriptions of who we truly are become visible (or not). Belhar helps us to get through many of the false facades with which we often approach the liturgy, as it concretely reveals the guest lists and table manners we are called to embody at this table. This particular word, food, and table embody who we are. Subsequently, the Lord's Supper strips and exposes the Christian faith community, points to all sorts of skeletons, elephants, and material underskirts protruding, but at the same time proclaims that this kind of death has been dealt with already, we are clothed anew with Christ's body, and thus welcome to partake at this feast and many other tables throughout the week. Belhar as *fence* around the Lord's Supper liberates us from cold, self-imposed isolation and bitter captivity, and brings us into deeper and more intimate spaces of belonging.

In Conclusion: Belhar Being Perhaps Ahead of Its Time?

More than a decade ago, the late Russel Botman said that we should not make the mistake to think that Belhar primarily speaks to the past (as being a thing of the past). In fact, Belhar continues to speak into the future (and then not as *futurum*, but as *adventus*) that continues to call and shape us in the present. To my mind, Belhar truly guides us to embody what is to come within our present contexts. Belhar surely deals with significant aspects of our past, but surely, too, with things well

ahead of its time. In a sense I think this is what I discovered in this practical theological reflection of mine: Belhar continues to help us to confess the "yes" and "no" of the gospel with more concrete focus. Just as our actual identity with Belhar's words again revealed in this meal on that particular Sunday in our congregation, so too it helped us to see the (white!) elephant in the room that is still with us. We need to focus upon taking our witness in the world even more seriously, and therefore also the many forms of whiteness that were manifested within this "little" process of ours. Belhar is not the elephant in the room, but a gift for the church to empower its witness and come free from its whiteness. In the words of the South African poet, "White is not a colour, it is a religion,"⁵ and that surely helps our congregation to pay closer attention to the ways in which Belhar might help to restore, heal, and fence the Lord's Supper for us, and set us free for more bold witness in the liturgy after the liturgy.

Belhar is . . . a gift for the church to
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Notes

1. In fact, as I witnessed this, I thought to myself, It is a pity that there are not more theological students present to see and experience that this is how one can play and create with the liturgy. Or, more correctly, this is liturgical renewal that clearly plays and continues to stress the spacious nature of grace. The gifts and resources of the church are received and used in this liturgy in such a manner that it testifies to a living tradition that wants to continue to work and grow within us.
2. George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 256.
3. David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 269.
4. Martinus Versfeld, *Food for Thought: A Philosopher's Cookbook* (Capetown: Juta and Company, 2004), 34.
5. Nathan Trantraal, *Wit issie 'n colour nie—Angedrade stories* (Kaapstad: Kwela Boeke, 2018), 66.

Ministry in the “Purple Zone”: What Happens When Churches Engage Social Issues through Sermons and Dialogue?

Leah D. Schade

Red state/blue state politics, racial and ethnic tensions, the rise of disinformation, and the COVID-19 pandemic threaten the foundations of our democracy and tear the fabric of our churches. Congregations and church leaders are wrestling with fundamental questions during this difficult time. For example, is there a way for clergy to preach prophetically without endangering their positions of trust and rupturing their pastoral relationships with parishioners? Is there a way for preachers to avoid the extremes of quietism on the one hand and the risk of losing their positions on the other? In other words, can we “thread the needle” in a prophetic yet pastoral way when engaging issues of public concern? How can we talk with people who differ from us politically? Are there ways we can engage justice issues in our congregations so that we can listen, respect, and learn from each other?

Since 2016, my scholarship, teaching, preaching, and public theology has been shaped and energized by these questions. Based on my research with thousands of clergy and laity, I am convinced that pastors and congregations can navigate the perils of prophetic ministry using tested strategies and prudent tactics grounded in biblical and theological foundations. The book I wrote titled *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*¹ introduces a method of preaching called the *sermon-dialogue-sermon* process. This method expands the pastor’s level of engagement on justice issues beyond the single sermon. Key to this endeavor is using a method of civil discourse called “deliberative dialogue,” developed by the Kettering Foundation, for finding common values among diverse participants. Preaching in the Purple Zone equips clergy and lay leaders to help their

congregations respectfully engage in deliberation about social issues that affect their lives and communities, identify the values that bind them together, and respond faithfully to God’s Word.

Through my work with Kettering and in teaching courses at Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) and other institutions on the sermon-dialogue-sermon (SDS) process, I have found the deliberative dialogue approach to be a viable method for helping congregations engage difficult social issues. There are, of course, other organizations that specialize in civil discourse and dialogue,² but I believe the deliberative dialogue approach using nonpartisan issue guides developed by the National Issues Forum Institute (<https://www.nifi.org/>) are easily adapted to a congregational setting. In addition, there is potential for deliberative dialogue to help congregations discern how they can best respond to the needs and concerns of their communities, thereby answering Jesus’ call to care for “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40). In this way, clergy can help their parishioners to find the purple zone within the red-blue divide of their churches and communities.

The Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process as an Impetus for Civic Engagement and Social Action

In 2019 I was awarded a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to study the effects of deliberative practices in theological education. The grant program was designed to support projects that would test ways to increase the capacity for civic engagement and social action through pedagogy in seminaries, divinity schools, and religion programs in higher education. I worked with a team of six consultants

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who assisted with the training, survey instruments, and mentoring of the clergy throughout the process.³

The supporting scholarship for my project drew from and synthesized complementing strands of thought within the field of homiletics. I wanted to build on the work of Ron Allen, O. Wesley Allen, John McClure, Lucy Atkinson Rose, and others who have contributed toward the concept of *conversational/collaborative preaching and prophetic/ethical homiletics*.⁴ This branch of homiletic theory posits that clergy can utilize the practices of dialogue with their parishioners in order to create sermons that are communal, nonhierarchical, personal, inclusive, and scriptural. This conversational approach is especially helpful when addressing complex and controversial issues of public concern in a pastorally prophetic way. It enables clergy to stay in relationship with congregants even when engaging with politically fraught topics.

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The purpose of my project was to explore the use of *deliberative dialogue* as a tool for facilitating difficult conversations and encouraging civic engagement in congregational settings. The motivation for this work came from the expressed desire of our students, alumni, and their congregations to learn how to dialogue with each other about the important issues of our time in the midst of increasing divisiveness in church and society. Our intent was to determine if the sermon-dialogue-sermon process is a viable method for bridging the divide between seminary study and public ministry that can also build capacity for civic engagement and social justice action in the church.

What Is Deliberative Dialogue?

Utilized by the Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI), deliberative dialogue is a method that enables citizens from diverse backgrounds and political orientations to constructively engage each other, support community building, and strengthen the democratic process.

In a deliberative dialogue, participants engage in respectful discourse to weigh pros and cons of three different approaches to an issue, discern together the common values they share in the midst of their different standpoints, and determine next steps for social action as a community.

This project focused on using dialogue to create a “purple zone” within the political red-blue divide and was designed to test the effectiveness of deliberative dialogue as a methodology that can serve both the church and the academy by preparing students to engage in productive civil discourse in the classroom and within their congregations. The impetus for this project arose from our ongoing conversations at LTS about how we might deepen and expand our teaching techniques in concert with the pedagogical commitments of our institution to “prepare men and women for ministry in congregations through innovative instruction, flexible curriculum, congregational experience, and compassionate engagement with the needs of society” (LTS Mission Statement). Our hopes for the outcome of this project were to cultivate and nurture democratic dispositions and discussions about issues of public concern with our students and their congregants, and to think about how we might integrate dialogical pedagogy into the ethos of our institution and the larger church going forward.

Testing the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process in Congregations

As part of the grant project, we brought together a group of ten pastors who were LTS graduates and one lay leader from their congregation (a total of twenty people) for a two-day training in the sermon-dialogue-sermon (SDS) method for their churches. In the sequence for the SDS, deliberative dialogue is bookended by two sermons—one to introduce the topic and invite people to the dialogue (the “prophetic invitation to dialogue” sermon), and a sermon after the dialogue that integrates the insights that emerged from the discussion (the “communal prophetic proclamation” sermon). Our goal was to measure the effectiveness of the SDS process for increasing the congregation’s willingness to talk about difficult social issues and to consider putting their faith into action in response to the dialogue.

Key to this training was asking the pastors to select a lay leader whose *political orientation was different from their own*. This decision worked on two levels. First, it ensured that we had a politically

diverse training group that ranged from conservative to moderate to progressive. Second, because we encouraged the lay leaders to serve as ambassadors for this project in their congregations, they were able to make inroads with their peers in the church to ensure that the dialogue groups in the churches were politically diverse as well.

Because we encouraged the lay leaders to serve as ambassadors for this project in their congregations, they were able to make inroads with their peers in the church to ensure that the dialogue groups in the churches were politically diverse as well.

Of the nine congregations that completed the project (one pastor left their call midway through the project), one was located in a rural area, five were in small or midsize towns/cities, and three were in suburban areas. Three mid-central states were represented—Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. All churches were in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination. While the congregations were politically and economically diverse, racially and ethnically they were 97 percent white.⁵

As it happened, in every deliberative dialogue the lay leader was the moderator, and the clergy person was the recorder (except for one church where more people showed up than expected and they had to split into two groups, with the pastor doing both moderation and recording). Clergy expressed very positive responses to this arrangement, noting that they appreciated not having the pressure to moderate but instead being able to stay neutral, listen carefully, and accurately record the group's responses. Lay leaders said they felt that their gifts for moderating and their role as a true partner in this arrangement was affirmed.

Following the two-day training, two members of my team and I mentored the clergy-laity pairs over the course of the next twelve months as they implemented the SDS process twice in their congregations. The emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent declaration of a medical emergency and global pandemic, however, disrupted our plan. Some of the pastor/lay leader teams were not able to complete the second round of the sermon-dialogue-sermon process. Nevertheless, we still had

a tremendous amount of data from the first round of the SDS process carried out in all ten churches. And our follow-up symposium in the fall of 2020 gave us a unique opportunity to see how COVID-19 had impacted their churches' engagement with civil discourse and social action. At this symposium, we discussed what they learned and the results from the SDS process and how COVID-19 had impacted their church's civic engagement and social justice involvement.

Evaluating the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process

We used three different assessment instruments to evaluate the success of the program: one-on-one interviews, online surveys, and group processing through the symposium. We designed questionnaires to collect initial data before the training and then a year afterwards. Also, one of the grant consultants conducted one-on-one interviews with each pastor and each lay leader. Both the questionnaire and the interviews helped us to establish a baseline and then track changes in their attitudes about things such as the role of the church in the public square, addressing social issues in congregations, how they define social justice, and how they assess the level of divisiveness in their congregation.

Two key insights emerged from these initial interviews and questionnaires. First, when asked if they felt prepared by their seminary training to engage in hard conversations with their congregation about social justice and public policy issues, every one of the pastors in the cohort said that they did not feel equipped. In fact, this was one of the reasons they agreed to take part in the training—they knew they needed support and resources for social justice engagement, so this opportunity came at just the right time for them.

The second insight came from the surveys and interviews with the lay leaders. Those who were more conservative in their political orientation expressed suspicion of the process because the survey asked them their opinion about "social justice." To them, the fact that we used the term "social justice" was a sign that the survey—and the project itself—had a liberal bias. So, we made a strategic decision to change the term to simply "social issues" when we designed the survey to be sent out to the whole congregation. We believe this helped us to avoid having the survey inadvertently generate unnecessary hostility towards the project

and allowed for more willingness of congregants to complete the survey.

The other way we used this insight about terminology was in the congregational survey we designed to test the effects of the use of the SDS process in their churches. For instance, we included a question that tested politically volatile words. In the initial survey we sent to the ten congregations, we provided a list of nineteen terms (such as “climate change,” “guns,” and “capitalism”) and asked them to indicate whether the word was “too political” to be mentioned in a sermon. We presented this question again in the 2020 follow-up survey to track any changes in the volatility of these terms. While the data set contains much fascinating information, I want to highlight just one word that we tracked: *dialogue*. This word registered “cooler” in 2020 than it did in 2019. This may indicate that exposing congregations to the SDS method and participation in deliberative dialogue may have helped parishioners be more open to civil discourse. We may posit, then, that continued exposure to deliberative dialogue or other forms of intentional civil discourse could help congregations be more willing to address controversial social issues in the future.

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the 2020 Election Season, Racial Justice Movements, and Disinformation

The obvious factor affecting this project was, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic. Because congregations were not able to meet in person for the second half of the project period, this significantly impacted the percentage of people who said they were actively volunteering—a key variable we were measuring to determine the effect of dialogue on civic engagement. Nevertheless, indicators about attitudes toward civil discourse showed improvement. For instance, we saw an overall net decrease of 22 percent in reported feelings of disappointment, frustration, and hurt regarding discussion of social issues in church.

We also noted that even in the midst of COVID-19, the upcoming election season, and social unrest around justice issues throughout the nation, congregants reported that engaging social issues was important for them. For example, in both years, 83 percent strongly or moderately agreed that “working for social justice is an extension of my

faith.” Further encouraging data from the survey was the response to a question about whether or not the church should “help members discuss social issues and host community dialogues.” The number who agreed or strongly agreed in both years remained strong at 86 to 87 percent. Even more heartening was the increase in the percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed that their church should “work to make changes in community and society.” In 2019 that number was 87 percent. In 2020 the number rose to 92 percent. While correlation cannot be confused with causation, it may be the case that the SDS process conducted in these congregations helped to contribute to this increase.

“When Can We Do This Again? We Need More of This!”

The other way we assessed the effectiveness of the SDS process in the congregations was through follow-up interviews with the clergy after they conducted their first deliberative dialogues and prepared for their second sermon, as well as through the symposium in the fall of 2020. Through these conversations we gathered the following observations:

- Several of the churches served food before the deliberative dialogue. This helped to draw in more people and provided a convivial atmosphere before starting the dialogue.
- Several expressed appreciation for the issue guides used in the dialogue that were developed by the National Issues Forum Institute, which they felt were very helpful for framing the topic and giving information for the dialogue. Topics addressed in the issue guides used included food and hunger, the church’s role in a divided society, the opioid crisis, and Social Security. “The issue guide was fair and balanced” was a recurring quote.
- Generally, the dialogues were relatively calm, though people were often passionate about the topic. Even in the moments of tension about the different options, however, people remained respectful.
- Pastors were appreciative of their lay leaders and affirmed their skills in moderating the dialogue, including reframing, restating, asking clarifying questions, drawing out quieter participants, redirecting participants who went off on tangents, and keeping the conversation moving.

- With the issue guides focusing on hunger and the opioid crisis, there was a recurring concern about how these issues affect children. Participants consistently expressed a desire to do something to help children who are suffering.
- There were many emotions expressed throughout the dialogue, depending on the topic:
 - o Some felt frustrated and overwhelmed—not by the dialogue, but by the complicating factors involved with the topic itself.
 - o Some expressed appreciation for what they learned from each other. Many discovered things about people with whom they had long-term friendships but never knew about their experiences or thoughts regarding a topic. As one said, “Each of us had a little piece of the picture that we all contributed. Some of us had information we weren’t aware of before.”
 - o Some topics elicited tearful responses from people sharing how the issue had affected them personally. Across the board, there was profound trust among the groups and a willingness to be vulnerable.
 - o All clergy-lay leader pairs reported that participants were eager to participate in another deliberative dialogue. “When can we do this again?” “What topic is next?” “Let’s do this again soon!” “We need to do more of this.”

We also gained important learnings about how the SDS process affected a congregation’s willingness to engage in civil discourse and social justice. First, regarding “next steps” for how a church might move forward on an issue, many realized that churches don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Many participants were able to name or identify existing connections to community organizations with which the church could partner to address justice issues on a local level. Two congregations in particular initiated food ministry programs to work with community food-justice efforts as a direct result of the SDS process.

Second, one congregation had several of their youth attend the forum on food and hunger issues. The young people were especially engaged in the discussion and liked the distinctiveness of the options. The adults were quite interested in what the young people were learning in school about the importance of reading food labels and choosing

healthy options. Yet the students worried that society is not addressing the root causes of the problem. One of the possible next steps that came out of the discussion was being more proactive about choosing more nutritious food to donate to food pantries. These observations highlighted the importance of involving young people in deliberative dialogues whenever possible. The energy and perspective that they bring to the conversation can make all the difference in the tone and generativity of a dialogue.

The Benefits and Challenges of Deliberative Dialogue in Preaching and Ministry

As we listened to the clergy and laity and sifted through the survey data, we discovered these benefits we believe can result from using deliberative dialogue in preaching and ministry:

- Using reflective listening
- Respecting other’s opinions
- Thinking more about other perspectives and valid critiques
- Self-reflecting on one’s own opinions
- Understanding how and why people believe what they do (especially in the “what’s at stake for you” part of the dialogue)
- Being sensitive to each person’s context and lived experiences
- Becoming aware of nuance
- Incorporating the stances and perspectives of others into one’s thinking on an issue
- Expanding beyond one’s own point of view
- Enabling people to see social issues from a faith perspective, rather than as just a political issue
- Recognizing the need for pastoral care to accompany prophetic preaching
- Providing theological perspective for issues in the public square
- Being more convinced that church is not only permitted but called to address social issues

At the same time, I can’t overemphasize how different the world is from when this project started in the spring of 2019. Both the surveys and the symposium revealed just how much the COVID-19 pandemic, growing social unrest around racial issues, and the 2020 election diminished the capacity of both pastors and congregants to engage social issues after March 2020. Whereas there was high enthusiasm for the project when they began

carrying out the process in their congregations and after they completed the first round at the end of 2019, the level of exhaustion and frustration was palpable by September 2020, especially for clergy.

We also noticed something that alerted us to the fact that sustained dialogue and intentionality is necessary for helping the congregation transform its culture of civil discourse and social engagement *over an extended period of time*. For example, in the congregations where they were able to do the second SDS process before COVID hit, and in congregations where pastors made it a point to continually reference what the congregation learned about listening, being respectful, and engaging with each other in a meaningful way around social issues, parishioners were able to metabolize and apply what they learned with greater frequency and depth than those congregations where the process was cut short. This tells us that there are no “quick fixes” for this work. It is, in a sense, “slow cooking” ministry that requires patience, willingness to take risks, dedication to the involvement of lay leaders, listening to the congregation, and modeling the deliberative practices in ministry on a consistent basis.

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How Can We Dialogue in the Midst of Disinformation?

The congregational surveys conducted for this project indicated that in both years, 60 to 65 percent of respondents agreed that they look to their congregation to “think biblically and/or theologically about social issues.” Nearly half (47 to 49 percent) indicated that they see their congregation as a place to “talk about social issues in a healthy and constructive way.” In other words, the majority of parishioners see their church as a resource for dialogue and biblical/theological reflection about the contemporary issues that affect

their lives and the lives of their friends, families, and communities. But what we found in working with pastors and lay leaders over those two years was that the task of civil discourse and dialogue has been complicated by the rise of conspiracy theories, cultish movements, “alternative facts,” and intentional gaslighting and lies from leaders who mislead the public, which includes members of congregations. The exigent question that emerged from participants in this project was: “How can we engage in dialogue when facts and truth have been so eroded that people cannot agree on reality itself, much less discuss how to move forward with the multiple crises we face?”

The exigent question that emerged from participants in this project was: “How can we engage in dialogue when facts and truth have been so eroded that people cannot agree on reality itself, much less discuss how to move forward with the multiple crises we face?”

The phenomenon of a society fractured by radically different worldviews, some based on “alternative facts,” raises fundamental questions. How do we talk about talking? How can we communicate with our congregations and communities that *conversations matter*? How do we help our congregations embody and better represent the ideal of constructive dialogue that respects difference while protecting those most vulnerable? How do we ensure that our clergy and congregations have the tools and resources to engage these difficult but necessary conversations around civic engagement and social justice in a world that is so fragmented and shot through with woundedness? In a larger sense, how can the church contribute to the healing of a fractured public square to engender dialogue not only in congregations, but in society at large? These are the questions that are informing my work going forward.

With these questions in mind, I am now engaged in a project with the United Methodist Church’s Great Plains Conference (Kansas-Nebraska) in which I have trained a cohort of ten clergy in the SDS process. They have not only used the process in their own

congregations, they have also been trained by me to be “Purple Zone Trainers” so that they can teach this method to their colleagues in the Conference. At the Conference’s Orders and Fellowship event in early 2021, more than five hundred clergy participated in the deliberative dialogue process and learned about my work with congregations and clergy through the Wabash grant. I am also conducting congregational surveys of the congregations whose pastors are in the training cohort, just as I did with the Wabash cohort in 2019–2020. This will give us important data to compare and contrast the use of the SDS method between groups of churches in two denominations, the United Methodist Church and the Disciples of Christ.

Despite the challenges, I do believe that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process is a viable method for bridging divides in ministry settings. My team and I remain convinced that theological education, as well as the larger church, can incorporate dialogical practices into pedagogies of faith formation, civic engagement, and social justice. After testing the deliberative dialogue methodology, I believe we can confidently say that it can serve both the church and the academy by preparing clergy and congregations to engage in productive civil discourse in their congregations and communities. This, in turn, fulfills the church’s mission to be “light unto the nations” (Isa. 42:6) and to be Christ’s witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Notes

1. Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). The research discussed in this article was made possible by a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion.
2. Other organizations include Better Angels (<https://www.better-angels.org/>), Sustained Dialogue Institute (<https://sustaineddialogue.org/>), National Institute for Civil Discourse (<https://nicd.arizona.edu/>), and Learning for Justice (learningforjustice.org) to name a few.
3. The consultant team members were the Rev. Dr. Ronald J. Allen, professor of preaching and New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary (retired); the Rev. Dr. Katie Day, Charles A. Schieren Professor of Church and Society at United Lutheran Seminary (now retired); the Rev. Dr. Gregg Kaufman, ELCA ordained pastor (retired) and Kettering Foundation researcher; Dr. Wayne Thompson, associate professor of sociology at Carthage College; and the Rev. Dr. Amanda Wilson Harper, assistant professor of social work at Tarleton State University.
4. See John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995); Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Ronald J. Allen, John S. McClure, and O. Wesley Allen, *Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013); Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015.)
5. We had invited LTS alumni who were clergy of color to participate in the program, but, unfortunately, the training dates did not work with their schedules or they had prior ministry commitments.

Bending the Eucharist: Occupation-Eucharist and the Possibility of Eucharistic Reconciliation

Andrew Wymer

In an interview marking the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in September 2016, former Attorney General Eric Holder was asked, "How far have we come on the arc of justice?"¹ Holder answered this history-laden question saying, "The arc bends toward justice, but it only bends toward justice because people pull it toward justice. It doesn't happen on its own."² Holder's words, echoing those of King and Obama, express profoundly the injustice and violence embedded within the social order of the settler colonial state of the United States of America—and of the past and present struggle for survival and self-determination of racially minoritized persons amidst the continuing heteropatriarchal white supremacy in the nation. In our context, reconciliation is an alternative vision, one that will only come to pass as individuals and communities struggle to bend our society in a different direction.³

It is within this broader context of minoritized struggle for survival and freedom that this essay engages the intersection of the eucharist and reconciliation.⁴ My argument is twofold. First, eucharistic practice in the United States is deeply formed in the specter of occupation-eucharist—that is, a past and present ritual tool of settler colonialism that utilized the tactics of imposition, exclusion, and segregation, one that privileges heteropatriarchal white supremacy. Second, these past and present realities of occupation-eucharist require that we turn toward the "bent theologies" of minoritized scholars whose nondominant approaches to the eucharist provide us with glimpses of how we might bend the eucharist toward serving as a site of and resource for

reconciliation. In order to support these arguments, I will first draw upon sources outside of liturgical and sacramental studies, including primary sources and critical histories of the Americas. Second, I will briefly survey key concepts of M. Shawn Copeland and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, and then take a brief, constructive and practical turn in conceptualizing what it means to bend the eucharist toward serving as a site of and resource for reconciliation today.

Occupation-Eucharist

The genocidal history of settler colonialism in the Americas is, among other things, a eucharistic history. The eucharist—or occupation-eucharist—was deployed by Europeans and Euro-Americans through the fluidly shifting tactics of imposition, exclusion, and segregation to enforce the power of the settler colonial state and to consolidate a white-dominant social order; however, that is only half of the story. The eucharistic history of settler colonialism in the Americas has also been one of struggle for survival and liberation on the part of colonized and minoritized persons and communities.⁵ In this section, we will attempt to bear witness to, and to call to our memory, this violence and resistance, briefly surveying three tactics of occupation-eucharist: eucharistic imposition, eucharistic exclusion, and eucharistic segregation. We will do this through localized vignettes while carefully interpreting these vignettes within broader structures to avoid any interpretation as one-offs, aberrations, or regretful collateral on the path to progress.

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Eucharistic Imposition

The history of occupation-eucharist's role in genocide, cultural erasure, stealing of land, and all manner of brutal exploitation lies against a broader sacramental backdrop. From the mid-fifteenth century, a series of popes negotiated with the powerful European states in their lust for colonial conquest by eventually deploying the Christianization of "undiscovered" lands as the rationale for conquest and genocide.⁶ Thus, what Willie Jennings calls "conquest-baptism" and occupation-eucharist became essential rituals of settler colonial dominance, for their celebration both initially determined an indigenous or enslaved person's status in view of Christendom (conquest-baptism) and continually enforced and consolidated the occupying settler colonial state's power (occupation-eucharist).⁷ The initial sacramental tactic of colonial conquest was to force as many indigenous persons as possible to "convert," which entailed initial "baptismal imposition" and then ongoing eucharistic imposition.

In *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, David Stannard recounts the brutal conditions of the early Spanish missions in the Americas. Having passed through the violent battles of conquest and the gauntlet of imposed baptism through coercion or sheer desperation, indigenous persons were often sold into slave labor or brutally exploited by the missions under the pious guise of assisting in their conversion and discipleship. These actions strategically erased personal and cultural identity and practices and strategically disrupted tribal and familial groups. Stannard writes, "In short, the Franciscans simultaneously starved and worked their would-be converts to death."⁸ Lest this be understood as a local manifestation that was an aberration rather than normative, Stannard argues that these missions "were directly modeled on the genocidal encomienda system that had driven many millions of native peoples in Central and South America to early and agonizing deaths."⁹ Other historical accounts, such as Henrietta Stockel's *Salvation through Slavery: Chiricahua Apaches and Priests on the Spanish Colonial Frontier*, document the horrific personal, familial, and communal traumas of erasure, rupture, and eradication that accompanied these missionary efforts.¹⁰

In these brutal situations of horrific exploitation, degradation, and looming death, indigenous converts—whether by choice, coercion, or

desperation—were regularly and brutally forced to participate in occupation-eucharist. Stannard utilizes a contemporary primary source to describe one such "celebration" of occupation-eucharist:

To be certain that the Indians were spiritually prepared to die when their appointed and rapidly approaching time came, they were required to attend mass in chapels where, according to one mission visitor, they were guarded by men "with whips and goads to enforce order and silence" and were surrounded by "soldiers with fixed bayonets" who were on hand in case any unruliness broke out. These were the same soldiers, complained the officially celibate priests, who routinely raped young Indian women. If any neophytes were late for mass, they would have "a large leathern thong, at the end of a heavy whip-staff, applied to their naked backs." More serious infractions brought more serious torture.¹¹

The horrible predicaments that the imposition of the eucharist in this context forced upon indigenous persons should not be understated. While brutally enslaving them, starving their bodies even while forcing them to work excessively long hours, the friars then in the cruelest of hypocrisies forced a ritual of eating and drinking on them, all while they were surrounded by their rapists and torturers.

In these contexts, participation in the torture of occupation-eucharist was necessary in order for indigenous persons to survive one more brutal day of European occupation; however, this is not just a centuries-old legacy. Survivors of the residential schools in Canada reported similar experiences. One survivor of the residential schools who, after extensively listing all of the strictly regimented times that they were forced to pray every day, said, "The reason I remember all that praying was because I didn't accept or acknowledge their God or their religion. . . . I didn't want to partake of [communion, but] we were forced to, and physically beaten if we didn't. . . . It was a kind of spiritual brutality that I experienced there."¹² Here, occupation-eucharist functioned in a similar manner to what Stockel labels—in reference to baptism—"identity theft" through sacramental imposition.¹³

Eucharistic Exclusion

As the needs of colonial conquest shifted toward long-term occupation, eucharistic exclusion also emerged as a common tactic of colonial elites. In *Christian Ritual and the Creation of British Slave Societies, 1650–1780*, Nicholas Beasley observes that “the Lord’s Supper was a powerful location for the ritual exclusion of most Africans and their descendants from the human community,” through which the colonial elite established and consolidated power while extracting vast wealth.¹⁴ He examines how the eucharist represented a moment of vulnerability for the plantation elites, because it temporarily placed them in shared postures of submission and repentance:

In a slave society, self-abasement was the very characteristic that whites wanted to see in people of color and not in themselves. To perform in this manner in the company of even a small number of enslaved people or subjugated free people of color must have caused enormous anxiety for white Christians in the plantation colonies. As white uneasiness increased in the black majority colonies, kneeling to share a cup and a humble bit of bread with black Christians seemed a dangerous condescension indeed.¹⁵

There was much at stake for all parties in eucharistic practices amidst these brutally repressive colonial settings in which the humanity of enslaved persons was contested, yet in which enslaved persons greatly outnumbered the Euro-American elite. Restricting access to the eucharist as well as to baptism held enslaved persons and free persons outside of these fleeting ritual moments of vulnerability, and this had direct implications on the social, economic, and political status of these persons as full—or less than full, in the eyes of the planter elite—human beings.

Further evidence of widespread eucharistic exclusion is provided in discourse throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in which Europeans and Euro-Americans contested the admission of enslaved or free Africans or their descendants to the eucharist.¹⁶ One such example are the writings of Alonso de Sandoval, a Spanish Jesuit priest in Colombia, who wrote a treatise on slavery, first published in 1627, in which he argued that enslaved persons should be allowed similar

access to the eucharist as Euro-Americans. He particularly highlights the double standards applied to enslaved persons in the area of eucharistic reception.¹⁷ Even after the eucharist in some traditions and in some locations was required to be offered to enslaved and indigenous persons, it was still not consistently practiced based on supremacist assumptions and power.¹⁸ However, even the proponents of admission to the eucharist such as Sandoval were still overwhelmingly committed to the settler colonial order. Proponents of allowing enslaved persons to participate in the eucharist suggested that the eucharist made enslaved persons more compliant.¹⁹ Even the celebration of the eucharist itself, which often featured ornate silver communion ware, symbolized what Beasley calls a “ritual celebration of [colonists’] power over the Afro-American majorities of the plantation world.”²⁰

Eucharistic Segregation

The imposition of or exclusion from occupation-eucharist was met with resistance on the part of indigenous, enslaved, and free persons who were always struggling to bend their situations and settings—including eucharistic practices—toward survival and freedom. Beasley observes that the tactic of eucharistic exclusion was eventually broken by “black initiative, the creolization and intermingling of the colonial populations, and the persistent demands of metropolitan public opinion.”²¹ As some enslaved persons embraced the Christian faith in culturally relevant and subversive manners, others, at the very least, found in the eucharist a ritual resource for contesting the *status quo*. What emerged from the breakdown of the tactic of exclusion was an integration of sorts, in which minoritized persons were consistently “separate and unequal,” that eventually led in many locales to even more distinct segregation and the formation of minoritized churches and denominations.²²

In *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790*, Robert Olwell notes the dramatic outnumbering of Black recipients over white recipients in some contexts. He observes that in one sense, enslaved persons who received the eucharist were publicly signifying acceptance of their place in the social order and doing so in front of their enslavers.²³ However, this also had a subversive dimension, as Olwell describes:

Slave communicants posed a silent challenge to the Anglican social order. When slaves knelt at the holy table while their masters looked on, the back of the church momentarily became the front. By quietly asserting that they possessed a larger share of God's grace than those who occupied the largest pews, black Anglicans inverted the social pyramid and reminded the minister, their masters, and the rest of the congregation that in heaven, if not on earth, the last shall be first.²⁴

Although this access to the eucharist was increasingly "integrated" in some locales, the nature of most eucharistic settings was intensely segregated. One vivid example from colonial and antebellum church architecture is the utilization of separate seating areas for white persons and Black persons. Further indications of the "separate and unequal" eucharistic status of racially-minoritized persons were the dominance of European symbols and aesthetics.²⁵

Eventually the eucharistic tactic of segregation resulted in enslaved persons and free persons rejecting their "separate and unequal status" in white churches through the formation of autonomous Black churches and denominations. Beasley writes:

While a colored elite persisted in Anglican churches around the plantation world, most people of color began to constitute Eucharistic communities of their own authority. Fusing Christian belief and Afro-American traditions, those black churches incarnated the prophetic promise that centuries of manipulation of the Eucharist and other Christian practices had erased in churches dominated by whites, exposing the hollowness of the spiritual comfort that whites had provided for themselves.²⁶

While this did not immediately undermine their status as "separate and unequal" in the broader context of segregating social configurations, the minoritized churches and denominations that emerged would play a significant role in the contestation of segregation in society.

The Specters of Occupation-Eucharist

Ian Baucom's theory of history examining the horrific history of the transatlantic slave trade argues that the past is never truly past; rather, the present is shaped by the continual accrual of this horrific history that lives on in our social systems. Baucom writes:

To lay the past to rest thus means not that we should forget it but that we have no choice but to relate to it, no choice but to live on within the full knowledge and unending of it. Time does not pass but accumulates. Why? Because what has been begun does not end but endures. Because this fatal Atlantic "beginning" of the modern is more properly understood as an ending without end. Because history comes to us not only as flash or revelation but piling up. Because this is, not was. Because this is the Atlantic, now. Because all of it is now, it is always now, even for you who never was there.²⁷

Baucom's theory of history is useful in this study because it vividly helps us begin to attend to the reality that the horror of occupation-eucharist is not fully past. Its ghosts still haunt us today in their continual unfolding, and we must grapple with them if we are to lay ahold of reconciliatory possibility in eucharistic theory or practice.

Today we celebrate the eucharist amidst the specters of occupation-eucharist. While eucharistic imposition may only be infrequently expressed in a violently imposed eucharist, eucharistic practices within the settler colonial systems of capital, race, and extraction still have the potential to impose dominating formations, identities, cultures, and ideologies on participants in ways that internalize domination while also further energizing its external manifestations. In a similar manner, eucharistic exclusion along lines of race and ethnicity may not manifest exactly the same today, but the eucharist is still celebrated in dominant, homogenous spaces, neighborhoods, and regions violently curated by the settler colonial state and the dominant, homogenous traditions and social groups that thrive in these spaces. The criteria for determining eligibility for eucharistic presidency through ordination is also prone to overlaying broader patterns of racial, sexual, gender, and class discrimination. Even after the "illegalization of explicit segregation," eucharistic segregation takes expression in the

eucharistic practices of segregated communities and in any eucharistic practices that reflect and recreate inequality along lines of race, gender, ethnicity, class, or sexuality. Indeed, the specters of occupation-eucharist haunt us today.²⁸

At the same time, increasing scholarly and popular attention is being turned toward nondominant knowledge and experience. Cláudio Carvalhaes calls this the “liturgical turn,” that is, a postcolonial effort to decenter dominant approaches to liturgy—including the eucharist—through emphasizing alternative approaches to the theory and practice of liturgy. As part of this liturgical turning, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives on eucharistic practice grapple with the ways in which the eucharist remains a site of contestation of power.²⁹

“Eucharistic Solidarity”

In *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, M. Shawn Copeland grapples with the ways in which race—a construct emerging in American settler colonialism—shapes Christian theology and practice, and she constructs a theology that both attends to the embodiment of Black woman and invites all Christians into more just and life-giving ways of being human and the body of Christ. Her work on “eucharistic solidarity” is of particular interest. Copeland asks, “If the Eucharistic meal is that ritual which celebrates the redemption of the body, then how do the sign and reality (*res et sacramentum*) of Eucharist contest the marginal position and condition of black bodies?”³⁰

To answer that question, she examines the connections between the eucharist and the lynching tree. She writes that “the Eucharist memorializes the death of Jesus in a ‘first-century lynching.’”³¹ This is, for her, a “dangerous memory” that forms us “into a body which transfigures the world’s violence through self-sacrifice and reconciliation.”³² But, since our formation takes place in “a situation in which authenticity cannot be taken for granted,” notions and speech about self-sacrifice and reconciliation are suspect.³³ For Copeland, language of “reconciliation” is suspect because of domination and bad faith. Copeland bears witness to the role of white Christians in the terror of lynchings as well as the “collusion of Christianity and Christian theology” and “the reality of significant Christian participation in, if not instigation of, a crime as odious as lynching.”³⁴ She examines the bad faith of this, writing:

Lynching was the instrument by which black bodies were to be purged from the (white) body politic. Then, in a mental leap of “profound theological inconsistency,” whites deliberately associated the scapegoat sacrifice of blacks with the mocked, tortured, crucified Christ. “The cross—Christianity’s central symbol of Christ’s sacrificial death—became identified with the crucifixion of the Negro, the dominant symbol of the Southern Euro-American supremacist’s civil religion.”³⁵

This connection between the execution of Jesus on the cross and lynching is, for Copeland, “the condition for a theological anthropology that reinforces the sacramentality of the body, contests objectification of the body, and honors the body as the self-manifestation and self-expression of the free human subject.”³⁶

Interpreting the eucharist from this theological anthropology, Copeland constructs a theology of eucharistic solidarity that “begins in an *anamnesis*.”³⁷ For Copeland this remembrance of violence—first century through today—is the source from which solidarity emerges. She writes, “A praxis of solidarity arises from apprehension and heartfelt response to accounts of historic and contemporary abuse and violence directed against black bodies.”³⁸ The eucharist is at once an *anamnesis* of past lynchings as well as the ongoing violence against Black bodies today.

Copeland is clear that eucharistic solidarity is not just an emotional or cognitive response to this violence. Her vision of eucharistic solidarity is deeply relational and entails addressing internalized formations into systems of white dominance as well as taking action to disrupt its external manifestations in society. In eucharistic solidarity, Copeland writes:

We shoulder suffering and oppression; we take up a position beside exploited and despised black bodies. Further, solidarity involves critique of self, of society, of church. This critique takes on and includes existential reflection, historical scrutiny, presence to memory, social analysis, acknowledgement and confession of sin, authentic repentance—change of heart, change of life, change of living.³⁹

For Copeland the reception of the eucharist is a remembrance of the first-century lynching of Jesus that increases our awareness to and resistance toward the ways in which “dark” bodies are still targeted for violence. It is a communal action that results in altered behavior, the rejection of divisions along lines of race, class, gender, or sexuality, and a much broader sense of ourselves as connected across racial boundaries in tangible and mutual struggles for justice.

“Eucharistic Resilience”

HyeRan Kim-Cragg’s essay “Postcolonial Practices on Eucharist” is another insightful vision of postcolonial eucharistic practices that provides crucial insight for this essay. Kim-Cragg critiques three colonial dimensions of present eucharistic practices while identifying “eucharistic resilience,” those aspects of the eucharist that enable and foster the possibilities of resistance to heteropatriarchy, whiteness, and any dominating system.

Kim-Cragg critiques three aspects of the eucharist that reflect the ongoing colonizing role of the eucharist, “the content of the Eucharist as written text, the leadership of the Eucharist performed by clergy, and the elements used in Eucharist.”⁴⁰ The first aspect of “text-based hegemony” speaks to the dominance of “propositional/textual knowledge over performative knowledge, and grants authority to clergy over the laity.” Kim-Cragg further explores the colonial legacy of such approaches to knowledge and its relation to the eucharist:

Colonial knowledge is used as a tool of the privileged, the literate, and the powerful for the sake of normalizing their experiences. It also benefitted their economic, cultural, and political interests. How does this written text-based colonial attitude toward knowledge relate to the practice of the Eucharist? The normative Eucharistic liturgies, the written texts produced in Europe (mostly in the Vatican in the case of the Roman Catholic Church) travel to various regions across the globe. These texts are inserted or imposed upon the worshipping communities there as authoritative, often failing to reflect or respect the local culture.⁴¹

Kim-Cragg names here the ways in which the eucharist was an expression of domination and

exclusion, and she troubles the way that eucharistic knowledge—including at the very least eucharistic and sacramental theology—has been a source of white, cis-het male control.

This led to the violent erasure of indigenous knowledge, which Kim-Cragg links to the dominant attempts to “preserve” it in appropriative and exploitative ways. She names how this both led to a distortion of indigenous knowledge on the part of those who write about it from the exterior and led to a hybridization of indigenous and colonial thought. In the context of liturgy, even if in subtle and miniscule cases, the hybridized liturgies that emerged were changed. Of this she writes, “The colonial power was disrupted by this effect. That is a paradoxical irony. However, fragmentary and limited, indigenous performative mimicry of colonial religious ritual as a hybrid and subversive practice served to put a crack in the wall of Empire.”⁴²

For Kim-Cragg this speaks to a “hybrid identity” of the eucharist that should shake our adherence to textual dominance. She writes, “The Eucharist carries a hybrid identity whose elements and traditions are mixed and whose practices intermingle with the current traditions and subvert old traditions while at the same time adopting and creating new ones, refusing to settle into one unified text or practice.”⁴³ She argues that the hybrid nature of the eucharist results in a “doubleness” in which lies “resistant power,” and it “poses alternative possibilities as an incarnational, untamable, Spirit-filled event.”⁴⁴

The second aspect of the performative dimensions of leadership necessitates that the eucharist is always celebrated a bit differently, such that these diverse performances “refuse to be contained in an archive or captured in a museum.”⁴⁵ She writes, “In Eucharist, there is alterity and irreducibility that liberates and reverses the status quo.”⁴⁶ This potential for resistance in the performative dimension is heightened by its communal and public nature. For Kim-Cragg, this eucharistic performance is, in a manner evocative of Copeland’s work, “a public performance of telling the story from the point of view of the conquered and the victims. It is a subversive memorial acclamation that Jesus’ death was not in vain and that his life lives in us as long as we remember it.”⁴⁷ While Kim-Cragg emphasizes the “subversive, countercultural, and resistant” dimensions of eucharist, she also tends to it as an oppressive ritual for those who are minoritized along lines of race, class, gender, or

sexuality. She labels these two sides of the eucharist as part of its “ambivalent nature.”⁴⁸

The third aspect of eucharist that Kim-Cragg critiques are the elements. She writes, “The elements used in the rite are themselves deeply colonial, Eurocentric, and capitalistic, and thus deserve a postcolonial optic and imagination. It is unnerving to acknowledge the patriarchal, colonial, and market-driven practices and traditions embedded and practiced in the Eucharist.”⁴⁹ Kim-Cragg argues for “diverse, localized, and pluriform” elements that attend to the forces of capitalism and globalization.⁵⁰

Bending the Eucharist

Copeland’s and Kim-Cragg’s works reflect the values of Carvalhaes’s “liturgical turn,” or what might be called within the frame of this essay a liturgical bending—that is, a bending away from dominant theological interpretations of the eucharist in a manner that results in these bent theologies moving at angles away from the dominant line complete with vastly different trajectories. As their work bends from the dominant and normative, it can help us begin to recognize the degrees to which our own eucharistic practices are still sharing the dominant trajectories of the eucharist that have not adequately critiqued the specters of occupation-eucharist.

To the degree that our eucharistic theories or practices do not frame the crucifixion which the eucharist signifies as a “first-century lynching” and also necessitate awareness of the lynching of “dark” bodies, our eucharistic practices may fall on the dominant line and require bending. To the degree that our eucharistic practices do not call us into the difficult work of standing in consistent, material solidarity with all “dark” bodies targeted by systems of whiteness and capitalism, our eucharistic practices may fall on the dominant line and require bending. To the degree that our eucharistic practices do not call us on the difficult journey of “change of heart, change of life, change of living” in relationship to the internalization and externalization of hierarchies of supremacy and inferiority, our eucharistic practices may fall on the dominant line and require bending. To the degree that our eucharistic practices are rigidly text-based, restricting—if only ever failing to completely eradicate—local insight and variation, our eucharistic practices may fall on the dominant line and require bending. To the degree that our eucharistic practices are consolidated under white, cis het, or male control, our eucharistic practices may fall on the

dominant line and require bending. To the degree that the elements we utilize to celebrate the body and blood of Jesus bear the blood of capital, extractive agricultural practices, and harmful European norms, our eucharistic practices may fall on the dominant line and require bending. To the degree that local, environmentally sustainable bounty of the earth is not allowed at our tables, our eucharistic practices may fall on the dominant line and require bending. To these degrees—and others—we can begin to locate our eucharistic practices in relationship to the un-bent trajectory shaped by the specters of occupation-eucharist.

The bending of the eucharist is itself an act of reconciliation, one that takes us on Walker-Barnes’s fourfold journey of reconciliation through “(1) confrontational truth-telling; (2) liberation and healing for the oppressed; (3) repentance and conversion for the oppressor; and (4) building beloved community.” Before the eucharist can serve as a site of and resource for Walker-Barnes’s framework of reconciliation, we must attend to the ways that it is still haunted. This fourfold reconciliation requires an *anamnesis* of occupation-eucharist and the hard truths that it reveals about whiteness, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and capitalism. This fourfold reconciliation requires a reframing of Christology around Jesus, the radical, Jewish revolutionary who was executed for resisting empire and advocating for his marginalized people.⁵¹ This fourfold reconciliation requires that we take full responsibility for our traditions and the white, cis het, male violence they have inflicted and continue to inflict—whether intentionally or not. This fourfold reconciliation requires that we turn away from eucharistic theories and practices that impose, exclude, or segregate.

Visions and practices of a bent eucharistic theology may themselves have the potential to shape our imagination of beloved community, a community that transgresses social—and perhaps ecclesial—boundaries along lines of race, class, gender, ability, or sexuality in acts of solidarity. A bent eucharist may provide a ritual of shared resources, equal access, empowered leadership, nondominant knowledge, and local significance. A bent eucharist—with an embedded memory of the terrors of occupation-eucharist—may even invite us into further moments of bearing witness to our communities’ places in the unfolding of colonial and imperial violence.

Bending the eucharist is a risky task in many contexts that might invite or even necessitate conversations addressing our congregations' assumptions about and formations into hierarchies of supremacy or inferiority. To bend the eucharist requires the naming of power, its bloody history, its systems with their tentacles spread throughout our lives, and the ways in which those tentacles oftentimes are intertwined around our communities of faith, even our "holy things." This task is complicated, because of the power of traditions—themselves laden with power that often replicates social patterns of dominance—that shape our expectations of what the eucharist can or should be.

Notes

1. This question utilized language echoing through history both from Martin Luther King Jr.'s words of struggle from a March 1968 sermon just prior to his assassination and the later words of then President-Elect Barack Obama's November 2008 victory speech marking his election as the first Black president of the United States of America. See Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution," March 31, 1968, accessed October 1, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFbt7cO30jQ 44:45. See also "Transcript of Barack Obama's Victory Speech," *NPR*, November 5, 2008, accessed October 1, 2021, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96624326.
2. "How far have we come on the arc of justice?" *CBS News*, September 20, 2016, accessed October 1, 2021, www.cbsnews.com/video/how-far-have-we-come-on-the-arc-of-justice/#x/.
3. I initially define reconciliation using Chanequa Walker-Barnes's definition from her book *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation*, as a difficult process of "(1) confrontational truth-telling; (2) liberation and healing for the oppressed; (3) repentance and conversion for the oppressor; and (4) building beloved community." Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 163.
4. I typically capitalize "eucharist"; however, in this work I am refraining from doing so. To capitalize that which has functioned as a ritual of evil—even an anti-sacrament—would be to further energize it.
5. The massive scale of the violence of occupation-eucharist and the resistance against it and other expressions of colonial domination are likely incalculable and commensurately incomprehensible. This act of remembrance is fraught. To remember and then afterward to only look away would be harmful voyeurism that energizes dominant systems. To remember this brutal history too thinly has the potential to render it bloodless and to leave dominant systems uncritiqued. To remember it through the lens of colonial myths would perpetuate lies of supremacy.
6. For a fuller treatment of this, see Andrew Wymer, "Wet, White Devils: Baptism, Race, and the Struggle for Baptismal Solidarity," in James Farwell and Martha Moore-Keish, *T&T Clark Handbook of Sacraments and Sacramentality* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, forthcoming 2022).
7. Willie Jennings, "Being Baptized: Race," in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 278.
8. David Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 13.
9. Stannard, *Holocaust*, 13.
10. Henrietta Stockel, *Salvation through Slavery* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 4, 130.
11. Stannard, *Holocaust*, 139.
12. Commission Deverite et Reconciliation du Canada, *Canada's Reconciliation Schools: Reconciliation*, vol. 6 (Montreal and Kinston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 224.
13. Stockel, *Salvation*, 4, 130.
14. Nicholas Beasley, *Christian Ritual and the Creation of British Slave Societies, 1650-1780* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 84.
15. Beasley, *Christian Ritual*, 106.
16. For a significant treatment of this issue in the context of Mexico, see Hans-Jürgen Prien, *Christianity in Latin America*, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Brill, 2013).
17. Alonso de Sandoval, *Treatise on Slavery: Selections from De Instauranda Aethiopia Salute* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2008), 158.
18. He writes, "Despite the formal orders of the ecclesiastical authority, obstacles to [admitting the Indians to] the communion table continued to pile up. The Indians were pictured as public sinners, and most of them as incorrigible drunkards, not capable of understanding the value and meaning of the sacrament. These were pretty frivolous arguments." See Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelicalizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523-1572* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 123.
19. Beasley, *Christian Ritual*, 100.
20. Beasley, *Christian Ritual*, 100.
21. Beasley, *Christian Ritual*, 106.
22. Beasley, *Christian Ritual*, 106.
23. Robert Lowell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 133.

24. Olwell, Masters, *Slaves, and Subjects*, 133–134.
25. Olwell, Masters, *Slaves, and Subjects*, 107–108.
26. Beasley, *Christian Ritual*, 108.
27. Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 333.
28. Wymer, “Wet, White Devils.”
29. I am indebted in the previous three paragraphs to my work in Wymer, “Wet, White Devils.” I have adapted my thought from this previous work on baptism to attend to the eucharist in this essay.
30. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2009), 110.
31. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 110.
32. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 110, quoting William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 251.
33. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 110, quoting Bernard Lonergan, “Third Lecture: The Ongoing Genesis of Methods,” in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F. Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985), 160.
34. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 122, quoting Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 7.
35. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 122, quoting Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998), 216, 217.
36. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 124.
37. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 124.
38. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 125.
39. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 126.
40. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Postcolonial Practices on Eucharist,” in Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns, eds., *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 77.
41. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 78.
42. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 80.
43. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 80.
44. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 81.
45. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 81.
46. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 81.
47. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 82.
48. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 83.
49. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 85.
50. Kim-Cragg, “Eucharist,” 85.
51. Obery Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* (Three Leaves Press, 2007).

Reaffirmation of Baptism and Renaming Liturgy

Created by Rev. Len Scales in consultation with Slats Toole

[To Congregation]

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), individuals are baptized once in their life. One may choose later to reaffirm their baptism. With much personal prayer and the support of this community, and the communities represented here, our beloved friend [N] reaffirms their baptism tonight. As with baptism, we celebrate reaffirmation of baptism in the midst of a congregation, so that we, as a community, can bear witness to God's great love and faithfulness.

At this time, I invite [N] to come forward.

[To individual]

In your baptism, God acted out of grace and love for you.

You entered the covenant God established.

You were joined to Christ
and welcomed into the household of faith.

The grace of God is eternal.
Nothing can separate you from God's love.
You are God's child,
and God cares for you.

I ask you therefore,
once again to reject sin,
to profess your faith in Christ Jesus,
and to confess the faith of the church,
the faith in which we are baptized.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,
do you turn from the ways of sin
and renounced evil and its power in the world?
I do.

Who is your Lord and Savior?

Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple,
obeying Jesus' Word and showing Jesus' love?
I will, with God's help.¹

We turn to these waters again [*minister takes water
in hand and lets it fall back in bowl*],
remembering God's promises to all of us, and
especially to you today.

You were first brought to the waters of baptism
with a different name, and we return today to
remember God's promises continue with you
throughout all of life.

We gather around these waters as a community to
mark your name change.

By what name shall you be known?

[Minister to the congregation]

The congregation is invited to join in recognizing
this moment by saying,
"We see you, [N]." And together,
"We see you, [N]."

Bear your name, [N], in the Name of Christ.
Share it in the name of mercy.
Offer it in the name of justice.²

[Minister makes the sign of the cross on their forehead
and lays hands on the person, saying]
[N], remember your baptism and be thankful and
be free.

O Lord, uphold [N] by your Holy Spirit.
Daily increase in them your gifts of grace:
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord,
the spirit of joy in your presence,
the spirit of freedom and love,
both now and forever. **Amen.**³

Len Scales is pastor for Outreach and Mission at Nassau Presbyterian Church and Presbyterian chaplain at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. Based in Minneapolis, Slats Toole (they/them/theirs) is a writer, activist, and board member of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.

Notes

1. Adapted from *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 485–486.
2. “Receiving or Claiming a New Name,” *Changes: Prayers and Services Honoring Rites of Passage* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), 48. (Also interesting example adapted from the preceding sources: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/01/liturgical-naming-rite-for-a-transgendered-church-member/>).
3. Adapted from *Book of Common Worship*, 1993, p. 484.



A Child Shall Lead Them

Lisle Gwynn Garrity

When reading this poetry of peace [Isa. 11:1–10], I found myself pausing at the line “and a child shall lead them.” The example of Naomi Wadler came to mind. After the Parkland, Florida, school shooting, Naomi, and eleven-year-old at the time, organized a walkout at her elementary school to honor victims of gun violence. She went on to speak courageously before crowds in Washington, DC, and on television shows about the need for gun reform.

The Confession of Belhar: Excerpts for Use during the Christian Year

Editor's note: This material was published previously in Call to Worship 49.1. We offer it again here in conjunction with the publication of Martin Laubscher's article on the use of the Belhar Confession in liturgy.

Season of Advent, Season of Christmas, Epiphany of the Lord

We believe that God has entrusted the church
with the message of reconciliation
in and through Jesus Christ.
We believe that the church is called
to be the salt of the earth
and the light of the world.
We believe that the church is called blessed
because it is a peacemaker.
We believe that the church is witness
both by word and by deed
to the new heaven and the new earth
in which righteousness dwells.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Time after Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord

We believe that the unity of the people of God
must be manifested and be active
in a variety of ways:
that we share one faith, have one calling,
are of one soul and one mind;
have one God and Father,
are filled with one Spirit,
are baptized with one baptism,
eat of one bread and drink of one cup,
confess one name,
are obedient to one Lord,
work for one cause, and share one hope.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Time after Epiphany, Transfiguration of the Lord

We believe that the church must together
come to know the height and the breadth
and the depth of the love of Christ.
We believe that together we are built up
to the stature of Christ, the new humanity.
We believe that we must together
know and bear one another's burdens,
thereby fulfilling the law of Christ.
We believe that we are called
to admonish and comfort one another;
to suffer with one another
for the sake of righteousness;
to pray together;
and together serve God in this world.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Ash Wednesday

We believe that, for God,
pure and undefiled religion
is to visit the orphans and the widows
in their suffering.
We believe that God wishes to teach the church
to do what is good and to seek the right.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Season of Lent

We believe that Christ's work of reconciliation
is made manifest in the church
as the community of believers
who have been reconciled with God and
with one another.
We believe that unity is, therefore,
both a gift and an obligation
for the church of Jesus Christ.
We believe that,
through the working of God's Spirit,
it is a binding force,
yet simultaneously a reality
which must be earnestly pursued and sought:

one which the people of God
must continually be built up to attain.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Maundy Thursday

We believe that the unity of the people of God
must be manifested and be active
in a variety of ways:
in that we love one another;
that we experience, practice, and pursue
community with one another;
that we are obligated to give ourselves
willingly and joyfully
to be of benefit and blessing to one another.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Good Friday

We believe that the unity of the church
must become visible
so that the world may believe
that separation, enmity, and hatred between people
and groups
is sin which Christ has already conquered,
and accordingly that anything
which threatens this unity
may have no place in the church
and must be resisted.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Season of Easter, Ascension of the Lord

We believe that God's
life-giving Word and Spirit
has conquered the powers of sin and death,
and therefore also
of irreconciliation and hatred,
bitterness and enmity,
that God's life-giving Word and Spirit
will enable the church to live
in a new obedience
which can open new possibilities of life
for society and the world.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Day of Pentecost

We believe that the unity of the church
can be established only in freedom
and not under constraint;
and that the variety of spiritual gifts,
opportunities, backgrounds, and convictions,
as well as the various languages and cultures,
are, by virtue of our reconciliation in Christ,
opportunities for mutual service and enrichment,
within the one visible people of God.
We believe that true faith in Jesus Christ
is the only condition for membership in this church.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Trinity Sunday

We believe in the triune God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
who gathers, protects, and cares for the church
through Word and Spirit.
This God has done
since the beginning of the world
and will do to the end.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

General Use / Time after Pentecost

We believe that God is the one
who wishes to bring about justice
and true peace among people.
We believe that God,
in a world full of injustice and enmity,
is in a special way
the God of the destitute,
the poor, and the wronged.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

General Use / Time after Pentecost

We believe that God
brings justice to the oppressed
and gives bread to the hungry.
We believe that God
frees the prisoner
and restores sight to the blind.
We believe that God
supports the downtrodden,
protects the stranger,
helps orphans and widows,
and blocks the path of the ungodly.
Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

General Use / Time after Pentecost

We believe that the church
must witness against and strive against
any form of injustice,
so that justice may roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an
ever-flowing stream.

We believe that the church
as the possession of God
must stand where the Lord stands,
namely against injustice
and with the wronged.

We believe that in following Christ
the church must witness against
all the powerful and privileged
who selfishly seek their own interest
and thus control and harm others.

Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

All Saints' Day

We believe in one holy,
universal Christian church,
the communion of saints
called from the entire human family.

Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

Christ the King / Reign of Christ

We believe that Jesus is Lord.
To the one and only God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be the honor and glory
forever and ever.

Adapted from the Confession of Belhar

I Lift My Eyes Toward Distant Hills

Text: William McConnell

Psalm 121

Suggested Tune: QUEBEC

8.8.8.8.

I lift my eyes toward distant hills,
walking new paths, steps insecure;
you who shape heav'n, mold earth at will,
guide now my journey safe and sure.

Judah's protector never sleeps.
Guardian and guide, your love unbound.
From morning's light to shadows deep,
in blazing sun, a shade around.

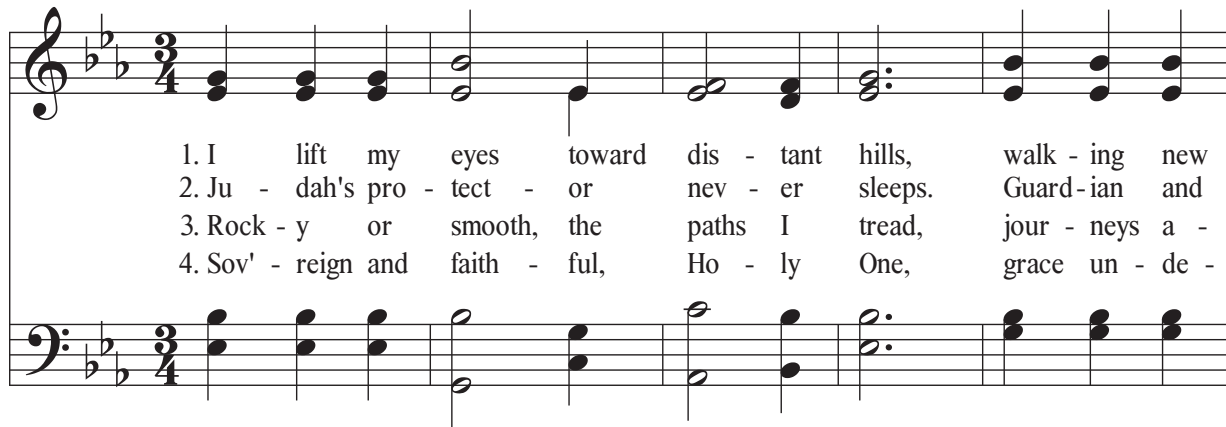
Rocky or smooth, the paths I tread,
journeys away or safe return.
Sheltering guardian, guiding Word,
light to my path, for you I yearn.

Sovereign and faithful, Holy One,
grace undeserved, strength from above.
From depths to heights, as ages run,
grant peace, grant hope, transforming love.

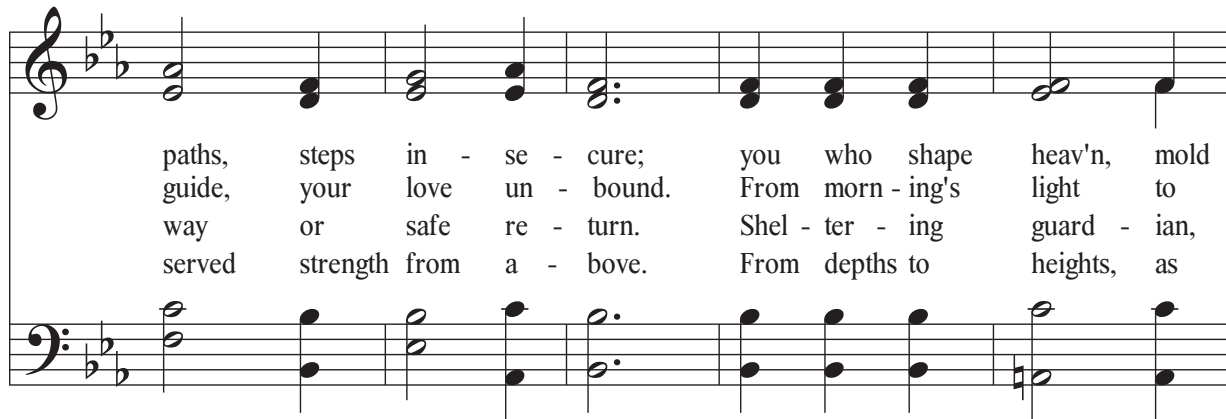
© 2021 William McConnell

I Lift My Eyes

Psalm 121



1. I lift my eyes toward dis - tant hills, walk - ing new
 2. Ju - dah's pro - tect - or nev - er sleeps. Guard - ian and
 3. Rock - y or smooth, the paths I tread, jour - neys a -
 4. Sov' - reign and faith - ful, Ho - ly One, grace un - de -



paths, steps in - se - cure; you who shape heav'n, mold
 guide, your love un - bound. From morn - ing's light to
 way or safe re - turn. Shel - ter - ing guard - ian,
 served strength from a - bove. From depths to heights, as



earth at will, guide now my jour - ney safe and sure.
 shad - ows deep, in blaz - ing sun, a shade a - round.
 guid - ing Word, light to my path, for you I yearn.
 a - ges run, grant peace, grant hope, trans - form - ing love.

Text: William McConnell © 2021
 Music: QUEBEC Henry Baker, 1854 - Public Domain

On Liturgy: Responding to God's Love through Reconciliation

Erika Rembert Smith

Week after week, faithful followers of Jesus Christ gather to worship the God of love. In physical and virtual sacred spaces, we offer praise to the God whose love knows no bounds. In our Sunday best and in everyday wear, we express gratitude to the God whose love knows no end. In the company of siblings in Christ, we resolutely declare that, even in the midst of troublesome times, God's love continues to keep us. And so, in humble adoration we lift jubilant voices and raise glad hands wherever we are, in the presence of our Holy God.

Week after week, people of faith gather in grateful response to the good news of the gospel: the good news of God's redeeming and reconciling love. In Christ, the God who so loved the world reconciled the world to God's self, not counting trespasses against us but extending mercy toward us. Instead of eternal punishment, God, through Christ, offers eternal life to those who believe in him. Instead of constant condemnation, God, in Christ, offers forgiveness to all who confess their sins. This is good news! God loves us in spite of ourselves—in spite of our sin and shortcomings, in spite of our doubting and disobedience, in spite of our willfulness and waywardness. When we look at our lives in the light of God's love, we see how great a gift we have been given.

In worship, we celebrate God's love through liturgy, song, and prayer, and we are challenged to live the love we have received. The underlying message of the word that is faithfully proclaimed during worship in fidelity to Scripture and dependence on the Holy Spirit always, in some way, points the hearers back to living lives of love. When Jesus was asked to tell the greatest commandment of all time, he summarized it by saying, "You shall love the Lord

your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37–40). In worship we are reminded of the call to love God and one another.

Whenever we hear the Word of God, we are challenged to respond. As we contemplate the word as it is proclaimed in worship, we are invited to respond in ways that are faithful, just, and loving. When we examine our lives through the lens of God's love, our response may be one of confession. If we are honest with ourselves, we can admit that there are times when we falter in doing the things we ought. God loves us, but we don't always love others as we should. God has forgiven us, but too often we refuse to forgive. God acts with kindness toward us, yet we often choose to hold grudges. God has been good to us, but at times we withhold the good we could give. Through Christ we receive peace with God, but we choose conflict. Christ came to tear down the wall that separates us from God and one another, yet people and structures in society are good at erecting walls that keep us divided.

Division is all around us. It shows up in nearly every corridor of life—in families and in friendships, in communities and in congregations, in social issues and in race relations, in biological, ideological, political, and theological arenas. There are a host of things that divide us. Often the things that divide us are related to differences around preferences, privilege, and power. However, our common humanity and the love of God enacted in Christ unites us. Jesus came to build bridges that unite us to God and to one another. Those who follow Christ are called to do the same. "To be

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reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as God's reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares God's labor of healing the enmities which separate [humanity] from God and from each other."¹ Ours is a ministry of reconciliation, a ministry that helps to build bridges between God and humanity.

We gather in worship to receive strength for the journey and hope to help us along the way. We come to the time of worship to be built up by the words and practices of our faith and the fellowship of fellow believers. We enter into the space of worship to be reminded of God's love and empowered through the Holy Spirit's presence for ministry and service to others. When we are open to the movement of the Spirit, we are better able to recognize and lay aside our preferences, and

perhaps, we will be more willing to acknowledge and give up privilege and power when they cause hurt and division within the community and get in the way of love and justice. What we do in worship should influence how we live our lives in the world.

Love begets love. When we truly grasp the love God pours out in our lives, we are called to share it with the world. Grace generates grace. In response to the grace we've received, we have an opportunity to be conduits of grace for others. Forgiveness compels forgiveness. For disciples of Christ, forgiveness is not a choice we are allowed to make, it is a requirement that we must meet. Confession leads to forgiveness, and acknowledgment leads to reconciliation.

Note

1. The Confession of 1967, Inclusive Language Version, *Book of Confessions*, 9.31.



Raise Your Head

Lauren Wright Pittman

Jesus says to respond to these apocalyptic signs [of Luke 21:25–36] with staggering hope and confidence. When it feels like the very foundations of the heavens are crumbling, we are to stand up. Just as the trees signal the changing of the seasons, these signs will prepare us for the coming of Christ. Stand up, raise your head, and get lost in the fact that this expansive, infinite God is drawing near to you.

On Music: Alt-hymnody

Marlon Hurst

It has been said that a hymnal is like a snapshot taken at a family reunion—a documentation of the family as it exists at a particular point in time. Over time the family changes, and the next time they gather to be photographed there will be those who were previously pictured who are no longer present, as well as the newly added presence of those who had not yet been welcomed into the family when the older photo was taken. (And even those who are present in both photos will appear differently than before because of changes brought about by the aging process.) Who among us has not looked at such a photo from times gone by and laughed at the styles and fashions that surely *must* have been chosen and worn with panache “back in the day,” but that now (possibly) appear painfully comical to behold? Perhaps an experience such as this offers us the opportunity to pause and reflect on how our current styles might appear outdated in the future. As the rock-and-roll poet/philosopher Neil Peart penned, “Changes aren’t permanent, but change is.”¹

Likewise, over time, as our understanding of God’s ever expansive mercy, grace, and justice grows, the language of a hymn that may have been a faithful expression of the church’s theology when it was included in a hymnal might now be found insufficient to express our current understanding of God’s love. To make the claim that we participate in the *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi Dei* (“the church reformed, and always being reformed according to the word of God”) implies that we are striving to be attentive to the leading of the Spirit, even if that means the possibility of being led into uncomfortable territory.

When *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* was published in 2013, it represented a growing understanding of the wideness of God’s mercy by including a broader range of linguistic expressions for God, an increased number of songs from non-Eurocentric traditions, and texts chosen to avoid stereotypes for “persons according to categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, age, or disabilities”² out of a conviction that “language used in worship has great power” and that “worshipful words joined to worshipful music deeply shape the faith and practices of the church.”³ Among the songs included in *Glory to God* are pieces composed in the time since the previous hymnal was published, classic hymns from the ecumenical tradition that, in their original form, continue to give voice to the faith of the church, as well as texts that are marked “alt.”—or “altered.” In fact, 265 of the 853 pieces in *Glory to God*, 31 percent of the contents, have texts identified as “alt.”

While a hymnal editor might choose to revise texts for any number of reasons, my sense is that one of the primary motivators to alter a hymn text is the desire to be more inclusive, welcoming, and hospitable to a wider circle of people. This could mean something as simple as changing a word like “men” to the more inclusive “friends” in “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” or as academic as creating a new translation of a text that more accurately reflects the meaning in the original language. It doesn’t take a Latin scholar to look at the phrase *Corde natus ex parentis*, traditionally translated as “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” and see that the Latin “parentis” is a more inclusive term than the English “father” (“born from the heart of a parent,” being a more exacting translation than the traditional).⁴

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Most often, texts that are altered are older ones that are in the public domain. But occasionally even a newer hymn is made more widely hospitable by a change in a word or a phrase.⁵ At the 2021 PAM Worship and Music Conference at Montreat, the worship planners made a simple change to a hymn text, substituting the words “woman and man” with the words “all genders here.” When the hymn was sung in worship it was obvious to me, from the response of a few people who were seated nearby, that this change in the text was meaningful and appreciated. Later, one of them shared with me that they had been raised in a more conservative religious environment in which the full expression of their humanity was *not* included among those who were accepted. Their singing the words “all genders here” alongside their siblings in Christ during a worship service was a deeply moving experience of *Christian* acceptance and affirmation for their full humanity.

Back home in my own congregation a few weeks later, I encountered a hymn text with the words “my brothers” and “my sisters.” Reflecting on the change made to the text at the Worship and Music Conference, I elected to change those more limiting words to the more inclusive word “together.” Had I simply made the change to the text without any stated explanation as to *why* the change was being made, it could have been seen as capricious and arbitrary. But when I shared with colleagues and choristers of how the alteration of the hymn text at Montreat had been a powerful vehicle of God’s transformative grace, the change I suggested was welcomed as one that more accurately reflects our conviction that God’s love extends to all, including

those whose gender self-identification may be more fluid and less binary than “brother” or “sister.”

While hymn texts are indeed often poetic in nature, they are also *more* than poetry. They give voice to a living faith, one that is open to being reformed by God’s Word and Spirit. Therefore, when a text no longer expresses our understanding of the wideness of God’s mercy, we can either choose to no longer sing that hymn or we can try to find ways to update the text that more faithfully reflect our growing understanding. Such alterations should never be made lightly, or without regard for the perceived intent of the author, or that in any way damages the linguistic or poetic integrity of the original. And, yet . . . given the power of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs to either draw us inside or outside of the community of faith, those of us who choose texts for congregations to sing have a holy responsibility to be ever mindful of ways in which we might draw the circle wider as a reflection of the wideness of God’s mercy.

Notes

1. Rush, “Tom Sawyer,” *Moving Pictures*, Anthem Entertainment/Mercury Records, 1981, LP.
2. “Appendix 2: A Statement on Language,” *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 929.
3. *Ibid.*, 928.
4. Thanks to Mary Louise Bringle for her assistance with this point.
5. When altering texts under copyright, it is necessary to secure appropriate permission from the copyright holder.

On Preaching

Stephen M. Fearing

Her story was painful to hear. She had a zeal for the gospel, a gift for music, and a fervent desire to combine the two in service to Jesus Christ. She played in the praise band and helped lead worship each and every week. There was, however, one problem: she had recently come out as gay and the congregation asked her to step down from her leadership position until she “repented of her sin and restored her relationship with God.”

Unfortunately, her story was not an uncommon one for LGBT+ students in and around the town where they attended the local university. Many of them had a deep love for contemporary-style worship, but all of the nearby congregations who worshiped that way were, to put it frankly, homophobic. And so, this small gathering of predominantly LGBT+ young adults decided to start their own congregation. Since they began just when the pandemic hit, they met exclusively on Zoom for the first year or so. A few months ago, their five pastors (all but one of them either persons of color, LGBT+, or both) contacted me to find out if the fellowship hall of the congregation I serve would be a safe place for them to call home as they looked forward to worshiping in-person for the first time ever as an emerging congregation. As it turned out, our congregation had joined More Light Presbyterians¹ only a few weeks prior, so the decision was easy. We knew the Holy Spirit had brought us together, and we welcomed them with open arms.

I’ve had the chance to worship with them several times over the past few months. As a solo pastor who finds himself leading worship pretty much every week, it’s a relief to just sit and listen, to pray and sing without it being “work.” What strikes

me the most about them is that I’ve never worshiped with a group of people who take hospitality and inclusivity so seriously. When you think about it, it makes perfect sense; those who know all too well the sting of exclusion are perhaps best equipped to model a more inclusive and welcoming community.

And so, I’ve been sitting at their feet and learning. After worshiping with them over the past few months, I’ve made the following observation: reconciliation begins with holy curiosity. Or, to put it another way: the moment we cease to be curious is the moment we cease to be human (at least the kind of human the Human One calls us to be).

They call themselves “Woven Church” because they believe the Christian life is the exploration and celebration of the fact that God weaves different people together to bring about reconciliation. And that tapestry can only be woven together *if* the different strands of humanity practice holy curiosity about the other. It’s not a new concept. Creation was and is God’s ultimate act of holy curiosity, and the life of faith is about preserving and sharing that holy curiosity. A curiosity of how the world *could be* if we returned to the unapologetically political message of the gospel: oppression, injustice, and the empire that harbors such have no place in the kin(g)dom of God. Those of us called to the pulpit must be practitioners of curiosity before we can be preachers of it. I suppose that’s why my homiletics professor made sure we knew by heart these lines in a poem by Mary Oliver: “I don’t know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention . . .”²

Those of us who are preaching to and/or from a place of privilege would do well to remind the congregation that such privilege *discourages* holy curiosity—because curiosity threatens the status quo. This is why dictators hate artists. Because

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the end of curiosity is the end of justice. However, our sermons cannot simply stop at holy curiosity as merely an academic or philosophic endeavor. What makes curiosity *holy* is when it becomes a *tangible* embodiment of the Beloved Community. When the folks who would become Woven Church saw a problem that needed addressing, they didn't form yet another committee. They didn't just do a book study. They didn't elect a task force to research the issue tirelessly and then come back in two years with appropriate recommendations. They put out the invitation that they were a safe place to worship God for those who had been traumatized and rejected by those who claimed to be gospel practitioners. Everything about their welcome was refreshingly *explicit*. And the result was a diverse group of people who share the common values of inclusivity, justice, and equity.

One of the things that I love about joining them for worship is that sometimes it's unclear to me when the worship service is officially "over." This is a new experience for me. As a life-long Presbyterian, I'm used to the Charge and Benediction being a pretty clear indicator that worship has ended. But sometimes the people at Woven Church don't wrap up worship with a tidy bow and call it a day. The

sacrament of communion sometimes simply *dissolves* into fellowship and chatting, everyone getting to know one another and being curious about what's going on in each other's lives. If you asked them when worship "ended" and fellowship hour "began," they would all give you different answers.

And perhaps that is the way it should be. For them, worship is woven seamlessly into their discipline of learning about one another from a place of authenticity, vulnerability, and care. This community has taught me that reconciliation is the practice—brick by brick, bird by bird—of a kind of curiosity that threatens those who wish to uphold unjust and inequitable systems based on race, gender, sexuality, physical ability, ethnicity, or otherwise. Dismantling those systems begins—but certainly doesn't end—with a simple wonder of how we might follow God's Spirit into the places where reconciliation is so deeply needed.

Notes

1. For more information about this organization, see www.mlp.org.
2. Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 60. Thank you, Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence!

On the Arts: The Bible Vessels

Amy E. Gray

Over the last two years I have made a difficult transition away from academia to . . . well, if I am honest, I still do not know. The timing of the changes collided with COVID in unexpected ways, leaving me at loose ends with all of my connections frayed. It was in this space that a new body of work began. I stepped away from my usual tools of silverpoint, egg tempera, and gold leaf to work with very simple materials: needle, thread, and paper. Not just any paper, but the pages of old Bibles.

In January 2019, I walked into my studio and said, “What if I do this?” and started. While this is absolutely true, it does not account for the previous decade spent searching for a way to engage theological and spiritual concerns in a way that felt true and honest. The lie would be to let people believe that the vessels are not deeply tied to my previous work and that they magically appeared out of nowhere. Despite being created from completely different materials, and existing in three dimensions, the Bible vessels are connected to my previous work by the linearity of the threads that bind them together.

There is something profoundly compelling about working with the Bible itself. Sitting on the shelf in my studio were several older Bibles from various family members who had passed. Making something with them seemed more respectful than recycling them or just throwing them away. Through the process of earlier experiments, I found that I felt deeply about using the entire book. It was clear from these early failed projects that it was going to be important to me to keep the text in order as much as possible. This aspect of the work continues to surprise me since I am not a biblical literalist. Each vessel begins with the careful process of removing the pages, slicing them and restacking them so that

they are woven into the vessel in the approximate order that they would be read. Each vessel uses all of the pages beginning with Genesis and ending with the last word of Revelation. The pages are twisted together to create a continuous cord that is then spiraled and sewn to create a new form. They each have their own shape which is organic and individual. When I begin, I have only a vague sense of what the final shape will be. Each vessel begins with the notion that it will be tall or wide, but after that the process dictates the final shape.

Early in the process, before COVID, I often had the work in progress with me. To be out and be seen while working rather than tucked away in a studio was a new experience. An artist practicing in public is not the norm. I received lots of questions. In the early phases of making the vessels they resemble baskets. When folks saw the vessels in this halfway place, they often responded to them with “What are you going to put in it?” or the more forceful “You should put X into it.” Others connected to the idea that it was made from a Bible and would insist that the process be made into a Bible study. But sometimes conversations started that drifted into very frank dialogue about people’s individual connections (or disconnections) to the text itself and their relationship to faith and to the church—conversations about God that I could never have imagined having with total strangers. Those are the ones that I have missed the most. They have connected to the deeper relational questions that are at the center of these pieces.

Conversations around religious art so often focus on the response of the viewer and ignore the experiences of the person who made the work. The artists in question are often already long dead, making the connection to their process less

Amy E. Gray is a visual artist and lifelong Presbyterian.



Prepare a World

Lauren Wright Pittman

The words of Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13 both soothe my soul and ignite longing in my bonds. I believe this discord in my bonds is actually a charge and calling—one that John Lewis named “the deepest calling of your hearts.” We were created to prepare the way for Shalom—complete wholeness and peace—to take shape on this earth, to ensure all of humanity can enjoy the fullness of creation.



Aisha Brooks-Johnson



John Sherer



Sudie Niesen-Thompson



David Gambrell



André Thomas



Carlos Rivera



Brandon A. Boyd



Justin Reed



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