



# Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Ministry  
Volume 56.4

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Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music*

Volume 56.4  
Ministry



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# Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music* (1971–2000) and *Reformed Liturgics* (1963–69), *Call to Worship* seeks to further the church's commitment to theological integrity, corporate worship, and excellence in music, preaching, and other liturgical art forms.

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# Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

Rev. Fred Rogers is famous for using his acceptance speech for his 1997 Emmy award as a time to invite everyone in the room to take ten seconds “to think of the people who have helped you become who you are.” Fred kept the time as the whole auditorium kept silence together.

Rev. Steve Bacon, who now smiles in the company of saints, is one of the many on my list. Steve was a mentor for me early in my ministry and often shared a peanut butter sandwich lunch with my colleagues and me while I served as a pastoral resident at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. Steve was our administrative supervisor, but during those peanut butter sandwich lunches at the round table in the office, we were pastors reflecting together on the strange and varied tasks of clergy, sharing a chuckle or a tear with our potato chips. It was there that I learned the necessity of colleagues in ministry. With seasoned presence and humble wisdom, Steve listened as we expressed some of the anxieties we faced in ministry and allowed us to listen as he did as well. His curiosity welcomed our unique instincts and new questions about how to order ministry anew in a changing world.

Whether a church member, pastor, musician, artist, or ruling elder, I’m sure we each have those people who have “loved us into being,” as Fred Rogers said. We may all have our own version of round table conversations over peanut butter sandwiches with colleagues in ministry. This journal is, in its own way, a lunch table we share from our various locations and contexts. The support, encouragement, and time we give one another during these conversations are vital to the health of the church.

This is the third in a series of three issues that take their name from the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document produced by the Faith and Order division of the World Council of Churches in 1982. The theme “Ministry” is a broad one. An exploration of ministry can leave us looking outward, considering conversations about evangelism and

mission partnerships. It can also leave us looking inward, reflecting on the role of ministers of all kinds in the work of the church and examining our own assumptions about what it means to be pastor, elder, member, musician. The articles in this issue call us in both directions, finding unity in a concern for the relationships we cultivate with one another. “Interdependence will save us,” preaches Erina Kim-Eubanks in her sermon “Bearing Burdens Together,” featured in this issue. Relationships built on mutuality, love, and respect on our church staffs and sessions and in our pews and choir lofts form us for ministry beyond the church walls. Offering gratitude and trust to one another in the spirit of God’s grace will carry us through urgent and exhausting times.

How are we to order ministry in these urgent and exhausting times? Cindy Kohlmann offers an investigation of ordination in theology and practice that begins with membership, and Nikki Collins, the coordinator for 1001 New Worshiping Communities, reflects on overtures passed at the 225th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that impact polity concerns around ordination. She asks whether the church is courageous enough to change policies that exclude pastors who are immigrants or leaders of new worshiping communities that have been formed in unique and various ways. Through a conversation with the *Book of Order*, Brian Coulter also wonders about how the Ministry of Word and Sacrament is being transformed because of the new ways we are called to do ministry in a hurting world. Phillip Morgan offers resources for choosing music in services of ministerial transitions and milestones, moments in the life of a congregation that offer space to reflect on the theology of ordered ministry in worship.

How can the arts serve as sites for discovery about God’s call and mission? Riana Shaw Robinson shares a sermon that asks questions about the voices we consider authoritative and invites us to listen actively to voices that have been silenced in

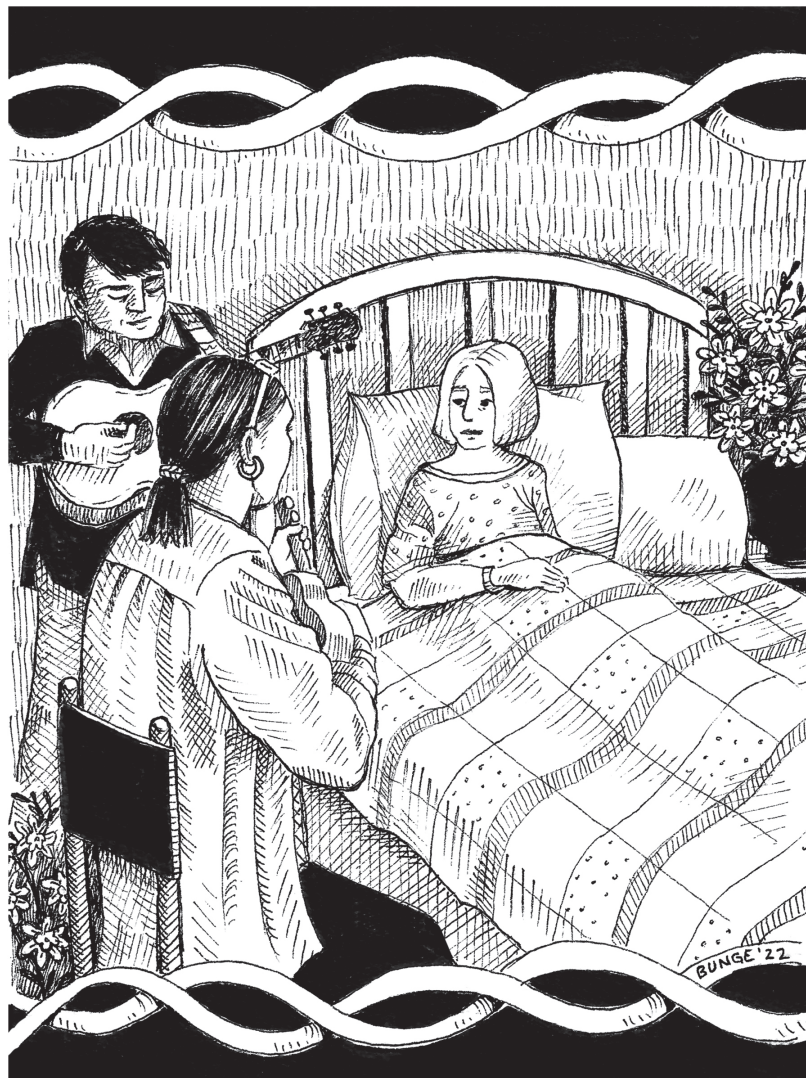
Scripture, in preaching, in our communities, and in the arts. Artist Steve Prince reflects on his work *Rosa Sparks* through the lens of an experience in which he became “a spark” to another in need. John Sawyer explores pandemic discoveries about the ministry of the voice as he investigates how congregational song has changed but remains vital as ever. Sally Lawrence Jenkins’s carefully woven words in her poem “Shepherds” reveal theological discoveries found in relationships of care.

In the Work of Our Hands section of this issue, Marissa I. Galván Valle and Lionel Derenoncourt share their experience making a prayer garden on their church grounds, a work of art that is also a gathering space for enacting liturgy, sharing conversation, and offering prayer. Lolimarta Ros Reiter writes about the influence of child theologies on her ministry and calls us to recognize the

current ministry of children and youth, who teach us the art of imagination and interdependence. Youth preachers Sydney McGough and Charles Robertson offer proclamations that demonstrate deep theological wisdom and call us to listen to the voices of ministers who are children and youth in our communities.

May we take time to give thanks for those of all ages and stages in life who have helped us become who we are, those who have upheld us, that we might uphold another in ministry along the way. Some of those may even be contributors to this issue! Take ten seconds to think of those whose ministries have invited you through the Holy Spirit to glimpse God’s abundant grace. I’ll keep the time.

*Sally Ann McKinsey, Managing Editor*



*Blest Be the Tie That Binds*  
ink on paper  
Jennifer Bunge

Feature Articles



# The Theology and Practice of Ordination

Cindy Kohlmann

An early chapter in the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) includes this list of ministry responsibilities:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- caring for God's creation,
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.<sup>1</sup>

Any of us could be forgiven for supposing that this list of responsibilities is connected with ordered ministries, the calling to serve in the church as a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder. These responsibilities seem to be marks of a life that has been set apart through election, examination, and

the laying on of hands, significant steps in our ordination process within the church.

This is what we find, though, when we back up to the paragraph that precedes this list. It reads:

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church. Such involvement includes . . .<sup>2</sup>

These are the marks of a faithful member in the church, one who takes joy in the privilege of being counted in the number of the body of Christ.

As I was considering the theme of "the theology and practice of ordination," I went, as any good Presbyterian would, to the *Book of Order*. What does our constitution say, I wondered, about ordination and our practice of it?

What I knew in the back of my head, and what was brought again into my full awareness, is that any discussion about ordination in the church has to begin with a discussion of membership. In fact, I believe that our theology of membership is the foundation upon which a strong theology of ordination will best stand.

After all, membership is a requirement for ordination. There is not a single ordered ministry in the church that does not first require commitment to a particular body of Christ. That, it seems, should be our starting place for this exploration.

It is clear that we have a robust and perhaps ambitious theology of membership. The list cited above combined with the descriptions of the church

Cindy Kohlmann is the connectional presbytery for New Castle Presbytery and was the co-moderator of the 223rd General Assembly.

in “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” make it clear that the ministry of members is a bedrock assumption in the life of a vital congregation. The second paragraph of the Foundations section supports that assumption:

The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God’s love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God’s mission.<sup>3</sup>

There is a footnote here that reminds us that the capitalization of Church refers to the Church Universal, “the Church as it is called to be in Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Nowhere in this paragraph defining what it is to be the Church “as it is called to be in Christ” is there a division in the ministry and mission.

Do you see that? The language here is consistently calling on all to participate in mission, all to proclaim, all to offer, all to invite, all to glorify, all to live in covenant fellowship, all to be disciples. There is no division between ordained and non-ordained, between deacon, ruling elder, and teaching elder. The mission and ministry of the Church as it is called to be in Christ is shared among all.

So before we can explore our theology and practice of ordination, we need to take a closer look at how we are engaging in the theology and practice of membership.

Membership is a tricky thing in the twenty-first century, as the culture shifts away from requiring or even expecting membership in faith and civic organizations and shifts towards targeted commitment in places of hands-on engagement that may never include a formal membership. Recognizing this shift, there are ongoing discussions about what we mean by membership in the PC(USA) and what that might look like in the future. For my purposes, I’m using membership as described by the *Book of Order* but including everyone who is active in the life and ministry of a particular body of Christ. Membership is required for ordination, but the formation expected as part of membership is and should be open to all.

Having said that, from my vantage point as a pastor and presbytery leader, it seems to me that we are doing very little in the way of ongoing intentional formation of our members in the Presbyterian church. As with any generalization, there are exceptions of amazing programs and congregations with high expectations of their members. In general, though, I don’t see a lot of language or education focused on equipping our members for living into the full meaning of membership.

Come with me as I connect the dots. If we are expecting the bare minimum from our members, simply to show up somewhat regularly for worship and to engage in some kind of financial support of the church, and communicating that this level of participation is enough, is it any surprise that it can be difficult to convince members to take the next step into ordered ministry as a deacon or elder?

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What would look different if we began to put into practice our expansive theology of membership, taking seriously the ways members are expected to be involved in every part of the life and ministry of a congregation according to our constitution?

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What would look different if we began to put into practice our expansive theology of membership, taking seriously the ways members are expected to be involved in every part of the life and ministry of a congregation according to our constitution?

In that case, the members of each body of Christ would have learned what it is to proclaim the good news, support the ministry of the church, respond to God’s activity in the world, live responsibly in all areas of life, work for peace and justice, and participate in the governing responsibilities of the church. Those called into ordered ministries would have firm foundations developed through the regular practice and formation of their faith in this model and would be drawn from a body where ongoing partnership in ministry is an intentional expectation.

How could we begin to shift our understanding and practice of membership in churches where resources are stretched as far as they can stretch

and the most constrained resource, time, is already tapped out? Let's start with where we are and what we have.

If our bare minimum expectation of members is that they participate in worship somewhat regularly, that's our starting point. Worship can become the first place where a deeper theology of membership begins to be explored, communicated, and explained. This can be through sermons, through a monthly special Sunday dedicated to a particular theme or lesson, or through intentionally beginning to invite members to practice some of the responsibilities outlined in the list from the *Book of Order* during the worship service.

Build from there. Begin a weekly or monthly discussion group exploring membership and discipleship more deeply. Offer occasional classes in how to read the Bible with curiosity, how to prepare a meditation or witness as part of learning to proclaim the good news, what it looks like to bring caring for God's creation into daily life and choices.

Another possibility would be to lead the whole congregation in an exploration of the ordination questions, which seem to me to link directly back to the list of responsibilities for a member. Imagine a church where everyone knew what it meant to "sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith" and everyone understood that they were called to "pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love."<sup>5</sup>

None of these steps needs to be fancy or overly involved. The whole purpose is to help people live more fully into their faith, and therefore more intentionally into their lives as part of the body of Christ. We can start small, with what we already have, and begin to shift what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in the Presbyterian church.

But wait, you might be saying, this is supposed to be about ordination! Why all this focus on the formation of members?

Well, those who are ordained are members first, and they bring what they experienced and learned as members, the good, bad, and ugly, into their leadership and ministry as deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders. How we practice our theology of membership has a direct impact on how we experience the practice of ordination.

I don't know if anyone has studied this, but I wonder if the increasing frequency of destructive

church conflict could be tied to the decrease of discipleship and spiritual formation. I wonder if the increasing frequency of pastors leaving ministry altogether in their first few years of ordained service can be connected to a diminished theology of membership and an expectation that the "professional Christian" is supposed to do it all. I wonder if the increasing desire for seminaries to include faith formation as part of their curriculum is a direct outcome of our churches not offering such formation as an expectation for every member.

I wonder.

If you look up "ordination" in our *Book of Confessions*, the connection between the ministry of members and the setting apart of ordination is made plain. In the Confession of 1967, these two paragraphs follow one another in Part II: The Ministry of Reconciliation; Section A: The Mission of the Church:

Each member is the church in the world, endowed by the Spirit with some gift of ministry and is responsible for the integrity of [their] witness in [their] own particular situation. [They are] entitled to the guidance and support of the Christian community and [are] subject to its advice and correction. [They] in turn, in [their] own competence, [help] to guide the church.<sup>6</sup>

In recognition of special gifts of the Spirit and for the ordering of its life as a community, the church calls, trains, and authorizes certain members for leadership and oversight. The persons qualified for these duties in accordance with the polity of the church are set apart by ordination or other appropriate act and thus made responsible for their special ministries.<sup>7</sup>

Did you catch the language in the first paragraph? Members are "entitled to the guidance and support of the Christian community." There is an expectation that the body of Christ will be active in the ongoing formation of each participant, which then equips each member to "help guide the church."

It is out of that equipped and formed membership that some are then called forth and set apart by ordination. This is for the ordering of the mission and ministry of the body of Christ, hence the term "ordered ministries."

We see here a theology of ordination that clearly depends on a strong theology and practice of membership. A further survey of the *Book of Confessions* reveals that many more words are devoted to what it means to be a member of the body of Christ, to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus, than what it means to be set apart in ordination. Again, membership always precedes, and in the case of our constitution, is given precedence over ordination.

What, then, is our theology and practice of ordination when it is built on the strong foundation of a robust expectation of membership?

Our practice of ordination is drawn first from examples found in Scripture, which is where our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ is also based. In both Testaments, we see people set apart by the call of God for specific tasks. In the Hebrew Scripture, Moses and Aaron are called to lead the people out of Egypt, and the seventy elders are appointed to help decide disputes and teach the people God's statutes and instructions. Judges are raised up to lead the people and decide among them, and prophets are sent to speak faithfully as God's messengers.

In the story of Jesus, we see that first essential step of discipling people into a new way of life and faith, followed by a shift into leadership roles, being sent to share good news and baptize, and gathering the people together for a remembrance meal as a community of believers. Apostles, teachers, and preachers are sent out, and the first deacons are set apart to oversee the caring ministries of the growing body of Christ. The practice of appointing elders to serve as leaders in the community continued in the early church, with men and women named in the letters of the New Testament.

We draw heavily from the first letter to the Corinthians in our services of ordination, proclaiming that all are given the gift of the Spirit for their God-intended purposes and that, as members of the body of Christ, each has a part to play. Some are appointed to particular roles, but those roles are tied directly back into the life of the community where all are expected to participate in mission and ministry together.

It is in the first letter to Timothy, chapter 3, that we are given qualifications of the *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*, translated as overseers and deacons from the Greek. These qualifications are coming out of their own contextual time but are clearly meant to provide guidance for choosing leaders that is above

and beyond the requirements of living faithfully as a member of the congregation. Here the focus is on character and standing in the community, boldness of faith and the ability to teach and manage daily affairs.

Having these scriptural images to guide us, we return to the *Book of Order* for further insight into our theology and practice of ordination. In chapter two of the Form of Government, the chapter specifically addressing the subjects of "Ordered Ministry, Commissioning, and Certification," we find this opening paragraph:

The Church's ministry is a gift from Jesus Christ to the whole Church. Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of [people] for the establishment and extension of God's new creation. Christ's ministry is the foundation and standard for all ministry, the pattern of the one who came "not to be served but to serve" (Matt. 20:28). The basic form of ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions. Members and those in ordered ministries serve together under the mandate of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Once again, our understanding of ordination is based first upon what it means to be part of the "whole people of God" under the authority of Jesus Christ. In fact, the following paragraph exploring Ordered Ministries baldly states, "The existence of these ordered ministries in no way diminishes the importance of the commitment of all members to the total ministry of the church."<sup>9</sup>

One of the key components of our theology and practice of ordination is that a call into an ordered ministry cannot be discerned solely by oneself. Just as we are nurtured and formed as followers within the body of Christ, a call to ministry as a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder can only be fully discerned within that community.

By requiring three parties in the work of discernment, we signal the seriousness with which we take ordination. As stated in our constitution, "This call is evidenced by the movement of the Holy Spirit in the individual conscience, the approval of a community of God's people, and the concurring judgment of a council of the Church."<sup>10</sup>

This three-way discernment makes the most sense within a community that has regularly participated in mission and ministry together, that has witnessed growth in faith and maturity, and that can describe the gifts or qualities for ministry that are key to being set apart through ordination. In such a congregation, a person's discernment of a particular call can be affirmed, sharpened, or redirected as necessary, all within the context of a shared life of faith and witness.

A second essential component of our theology and practice of ordination is the assertion that any gifts or abilities that would be exercised through ordained ministry come from God alone. It is not by our own might or power that we step into ordered ministry; it is, as is fitting, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the steadfast love of Jesus Christ.

When we consult the paragraph on Gifts and Qualifications, we again see that any particular gifts for ministry are possessed in addition to the marks of active membership within the body of Christ. In fact, the list of responsibilities for members is both longer and more complete than the gifts and qualifications associated with ordered ministries:

To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church.<sup>11</sup>

There is one other important component to our theology and practice of ordination, and that is the understanding that there is freedom of conscience within the bounds of Reformed faith and our polity. This incorporation of the freedom of conscience into our understanding of ordination has intentionally created room for differing views of Scripture and the shape of mission and ministry in each age.

By explicitly tying this provision to ordered ministries, we have put into our practice of ordination the path by which we can seek “a new openness

to the sovereign activity of God in the Church and in the world, to a more radical obedience to Christ, and to a more joyous celebration in worship and work.”<sup>12</sup> It is ruling and teaching elders who constitute the councils of the PC(USA) and vote according to their consciences, wrestling with and offering different interpretations of Scripture. Through their leadership, our practice and theology as a whole church has been and will continue to be challenged and changed.

Taken together, our discernment of call as a threefold conversation, our proclamation that God provides everything we need to be faithful in the work God calls us to, and our assertion that the freedom of conscience is a place where the Spirit can work in new ways contribute to form the framework upon which we build our theology and practice of ordination.

While providing a necessary framework, these three components all rely on and are built upon our theology and practice of membership. The practice of lifelong discipleship formation within the body of Christ is where a call to ordered ministry begins and where it continues to be rooted and deepened. A renewed focus on what it means to be a member of the community of faith within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will strengthen the ministry and mission of the whole church, while better equipping those called and set apart to serve.

## Notes

1. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2019–2021), G-1.0304. All quotes from the *Book of Order* will be taken from this edition.
2. *Book of Order*, G-1.0304.
3. *Book of Order*, F-1.01.
4. *Book of Order*, p. 1.
5. *Book of Order*, W-4.0404c and h.
6. The Confession of 1967, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part I, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016), 9.38.
7. The Confession of 1967, *Book of Confessions*, 9.39.
8. *Book of Confessions*, G-2.0101.
9. *Book of Order*, G-2.0102.
10. *Book of Order*, G-2.0103.
11. *Book of Order*, G- 2.0104.
12. *Book of Order*, F-1.0404.

# Towards a Welcoming Polity

*Nikki Collins*

The 225th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received and acted on seven overtures that speak directly to the representation of new worshipping communities and their leaders in our systems of governance. These overtures represent the voices of four presbyteries, a synod, and the Racial Equity Advocacy Committee to the Assembly. Collectively, the overtures received twenty-one concurrences from the breadth of the denomination. Presbyters in the Northeast, the Deep South, the West, and in between recognize the crucial and growing role of new worshipping communities in the life of the church, and together they presented the Assembly with the opportunity to forward Presbyterian polity in a way that serves the true diversity of the church and the movement of the Spirit among us. The overtures take note of the growing number of immigrant new worshipping communities in the life of the PC(USA) and the significant disparities in their representation at every level of church governance. Over the past few years, I have been privy to a series of conversations among mid council and new worshipping community leaders as they sought one another's wisdom and experiences in supporting the new leaders and communities in their midst. Some of those conversations ultimately resulted in one of the overtures being passed by the Assembly. This article will provide context for the issues before the Assembly and aims to highlight the stories emerging across the church.

In 2012, the 220th General Assembly of the PC(USA) launched a movement to start 1001 New Worshipping Communities over the next ten years. When they acted with bold courage and deep faith, they could not know the astounding breadth and

beauty of new communities that would spring up. While the commissioners could anticipate this action would later result in the need to make some polity adjustments, the desire at the time was to trust the Spirit to lead us and to trust the local presbyteries to discern the best ways to support and encourage the new communities in their own contexts. As the movement developed, together we would see what denominational actions would best serve the church that is becoming. We have arrived at that moment. Through the growth of new worshipping communities, the PC(USA) is becoming younger and more diverse. The ways Presbyterians worship and witness, gather and grow are multiplying. God is worshiped in fourteen languages each week in new worshipping communities that gather in coffee shops, yoga studios, on sailboats and paddle boards, in fellowship halls, community gardens, local parks, CrossFit gyms, schools, online, *and* in sanctuaries. We are deeper in our neighborhoods than we have ever been. The skills and competencies of the leaders fit to gather and grow these communities are different than those necessary for serving established congregations. The overtures to the 225th General Assembly call the church to recognize this reality and adapt our systems and structures in ways that ready us to respond.

The issues we are facing center in the credentialing of individual leaders who serve new worshipping communities and the representation of these communities themselves at our tables of governance. The overtures call for standardized criteria and methods for chartering new congregations and flexibility in the process of credentialing leaders. Of the seven items acted upon by the Assembly, three passed with strong support from the commissioners:

POL-15—a resolution proposed by the Racial

Nikki Collins is the coordinator of 1001 New Worshipping Communities and lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Equity Advocacy Committee that calls the church to be more flexible in receiving immigrant pastors as members of presbyteries, recognizing the wisdom of the global church and the linguistic challenges for recent immigrants in navigating the ordination examination process;

MC-07—also a resolution proposed by the Racial Equity Advocacy Committee that directs the Office of the General Assembly to standardize processes for the chartering of immigrant fellowships;

MC-10—a resolution from San Fernando Presbytery that establishes a task force to explore the theology and practice of ordination as well as membership, church structure, accountability, and chartering, and to recommend needed changes to the 226th General Assembly.

The formation of this task force with such a broad mandate was an effort by the committee to create one body to address the intersectionality of issues emerging in the church and represented in the overtures before them. Who is ordained and which churches are chartered determine whose voices are heard in our councils. Where membership is counted affects per capita payments. Decisions about these issues signal the degree to which newcomers are welcomed into our church. The good news is that new people are choosing to participate in Presbyterian new worshiping communities, but the sad reality is their presence among us is overlooked by our polity and in our process.

More than one million immigrants arrive in the United States each year, and immigrants and their descendants are projected to account for 88 percent of US population growth over the next forty years.<sup>1</sup> The demographics of the new worshiping communities in the 1001 movement reflect these shifts. Almost half of the communities formed in the PC(USA) since 2012 are among recent immigrants. Many of these new neighbors come from countries where the Presbyterian witness has been strong, and so they come seeking to connect with others who share their cultural, linguistic, and theological roots. Sometimes the welcome is hearty, and the process is relatively easy for the recognition of these immigrant pastors into the presbyteries in which they now live and work. However, leaders come in many different places along the educational and ordination process, and the transition to our system often is lengthy and cumbersome. Presbyteries frequently sponsor these leaders' visas so they can do the missionary work of starting a new church

here, but our own polity keeps them from fully leading even as they are integrally vested in the life of the presbytery and doing work on its behalf. The flexibility that is built into our form of government allows local presbyteries to determine appropriate means for education and examination of these ministers so that in some parts of the church the process has become simple, but in other places it remains inexplicably and unnecessarily opaque and impenetrable.

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As these immigrant pastors navigate our ordination process, which can take up to three years, they are also navigating the federal immigration system, building a congregation, and helping their new community build connections in their new American cities.

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As these immigrant pastors navigate our ordination process, which can take up to three years, they are also navigating the federal immigration system, building a congregation, and helping their new community build connections in their new American cities. If their visas permit, they are also working another part- or full-time job, as the salaries offered to immigrant pastors are rarely adequate to support a family. And as this new church forms, it is also dependent on outside pastors (usually white leaders) from the presbytery to preside at baptisms and the Lord's Supper. My colleague Michael Gehrling says it best, "To be sure, the love these ministers have for these NWCs is often profound, but the unintended consequences are not hard to see. Imagine the formative effects of an immigrant child growing up in a new worshiping community singing and hearing the Word proclaimed in the same language as their mother's lullabies, but only receiving the body and blood of Christ from white hands."<sup>2</sup>

If we want to love our neighbors and fully welcome them and support them in the formation of new faith communities, we can simplify our polity and our requirements to allow for, and indeed celebrate, the new leaders arriving to live and serve among us. This need not mean a dilution of our historic commitment to a well-educated clergy. The opportunity here is for the church to develop a

robust process centered in the Spirit of God that brings genuine curiosity and respect for the breadth of gifts bestowed by that same Spirit. In a world that is global, digitally enabled, and in which information flows quickly and in ever-expanding ways, insisting on traditional models of preparing and examining leaders for ministry hinders our ability to grow and adapt for the world in which we live and the church that is always being reformed.

The overtures passed by the 225th General Assembly and the work before the task force the Assembly established present great opportunities for the church to respond to the movement of the Spirit among us, to fashion new ways of creating

a connected, connectional church that seeks to nurture new worshiping communities among new Presbyterians. The question is this: Are we courageous enough to abandon policies, practices, and polity that have made us successful in the past in favor of those that suit the realities of today and prepare us for the unknown possibilities of tomorrow?

#### Notes

1. Abby Budiman, "Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants," Pew Research Center, August 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.
2. Michael Gehrling, in conversation with author, March 2022.



# Musical Resources for Services Marking Transitions in Ministry

Phillip Morgan

Milestones and celebrations in ministry play an important role in the worship lives of church communities. Services of ordination and installation, services of commissioning and occasions marking the conclusion of ministry in a particular context are joyful times in the life of a religious community, and thoughtful liturgy aids the fulfillment of our chief end of praising and glorifying God forever. The 2018 *Book of Common Worship* provides such liturgies for these and other occasions for ministry in the church. I believe that music further enhances and heightens the experience of worship. In reflecting on the commentary and liturgy provided in the *Book of Common Worship*, I hope to offer some suggestions for accompanying those rich and meaningful liturgies with music.

The Directory for Worship offers these words on the **Service of Ordination**:

In Baptism each Christian is called to ministry in Christ's name. God calls some persons from the midst of congregations to fulfill particular functions, so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish. In ordination the church sets apart with prayer and the laying on of hands those who have been called by God through the voice of the church to serve as deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of Word and Sacrament.<sup>1</sup>

Congregational song, as part of the gathered body's prayer, plays a significant and memorable role in services of ordination and installation for those being ordained to ministry in the church and for those who gather to affirm their call and join in prayer for the newly ordained and/or installed. These are life-changing rituals, and the music we

choose to accompany them continue to remind us of the moment when God's call was fully answered in our lives. There is no shortage of hymns from which to choose in *Glory to God*. The *Book of Common Worship* suggests that the hymns and songs found in the "Dedication and Stewardship" and "Discipleship and Mission" sections of the hymnal are especially suitable for services of ordination and installation. The collection of sixty hymns found on pages 688–748 of the hymnal are both familiar and new, widely-encompassing in style, and represent a wide range of cultures and traditions. Still, with many so well-loved choices available to us in our denominational source for hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs, new congregational songs continue to emerge, and expanding that body of music in public worship can be so meaningful in the life of a congregation. Often, newly composed hymns are great gifts both to a congregation and those being ordained. In that spirit I offer as a resource three relatively new hymn texts.

"Called and Gifted for Christ's Service" is a text written as a gift for friends of hymn writer David Bjorlin in 2017. The text, published in his collection *Protest of Praise*, is a beautiful reminder that we are all called to ministry and that some are called to particular service. Each stanza contains language evoking the spirit of community in our individual roles in ministry. The last stanza has especially moving poetry recalling traditions of ordination services—laying on of hands, kneeling, praying for the presence of the Holy Spirit, and receiving stoles. The text is paired with HYMN TO JOY.

Phillip Morgan is the director of music at Central Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and the music editor for the annual Lectionary Companion issue of *Call to Worship*.

“Called and Gifted for Christ’s Service”

Meter: 8 7 8 7 D

Called and gifted for Christ’s service,  
set apart by God’s design  
to proclaim in word and witness  
love—disruptive and divine.  
Not to stand in prideful priv’lege,  
or to sit in judgment’s seat;  
but to kneel in simple kindness  
humbly washing neighbors’ feet.

Called to tell God’s ceaseless story  
written on the hallowed page,  
ancient truths of love and justice  
newly grasped in ev’ry age.  
Words proclaiming Christ among us,  
Word made flesh, salvation’s theme,  
words creating worlds of wonder  
where we live and move and dream.

Called to share the signs of heaven:  
oil and water, wine and bread—  
gifts of God’s own self that keep us  
sealed and sated, washed and fed.  
Common things and common people  
here transfigured by God’s grace,  
shaped into the Christ we worship,  
formed as one in love’s embrace.

Called and claimed by word and symbol,  
passed through hist’ry, hand to hand,  
now receive the Spirit’s myst’ry:  
gift both promise and demand.  
Yoked to Christ and one another,  
kneel before the Source of all.  
Let us stand in adoration;  
let us go and live our call.

“Called and Gifted for Christ’s Service”

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Mary Louise Bringle’s “From Our Mothers’ Wombs, You Know Us,” included in her 2007 collection *In Wind and Wonder*, was written for the 2005 ordination of Rev. Meg Flannagan, who has also contributed her ideas on music related to ministry in this issue as the “On Music” columnist. In the published collection Bringle offers this note:

I received a request from a young woman anticipating her entry into Christian ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for a hymn to be sung at her service of ordination—but one with an unusual leitmotif: a hymn that would honor all those who minister by virtue of the grace of their baptism, whether or not our denominational governing bodies will yet permit them to be ordained. The resulting text—which can also be used for the installation of church officers or the dedication of Sunday School teachers—honors the fact that once we are bathed in the waters of baptism, God has sealed each one of use for special service within the family of faith.<sup>2</sup>

The text, originally paired with a hymn also composed for the service, finds a new partner in the GIA collection with *BLAENWERN*, a Welsh hymn tune composed in 1905 by William P. Rowlands. The tune is most often associated in the United Kingdom with the text “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” Other tunes that seem suitable and may be more familiar to an American congregation are *ABBOT’S LEIGH* and *BEACH SPRING*.

# FROM OUR MOTHERS' WOMBS, YOU KNOW US

Mary Louise Bringle

BLAENWERN  
William P. Rowlands, 1860–1937



1. From our moth - ers' wombs, you know us.  
2. \*Some as dea - cons, eld - ers, teach - ers;  
3. Some are called for con - se - cra - tion,  
4. Birth to death, you dai - ly feed us,



In each heart - beat sounds your claim.  
some as chil - dren, some as youth;  
sealed by lay - ing on of hands.  
quench our thirst with milk and wine.



With each swell - ing breath, you show us  
some as pas - tors, proph - ets, preach - ers,  
\*\*Some, de - priv'd of or - di - na - tion,  
In your right - eous paths, you lead us,



you have called us by our name.  
charged to seek and spread your truth:  
still pur - sue your love's de - mands.  
till with Christ - like light, we shine.



Bathed in bright bap - tis - mal wa - ters,



spar - kling fresh as morn - ing dew,



chris - tened as your sons and daugh - ters,



we are called to live for you.

\*or "Some as servants, leaders, teachers ..."

\*\*or "Some, unblessed by ordination ..."

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Written in 2021 as part of denominational  
resources for the Year of Leader Formation, David  
Gambrell’s “Each Christian Has a Calling” is a  
wonderful new option for services of ordination and  
installation. The first and last stanzas sing broadly  
of all Christians’ call, while the middle three stanzas  
speak to the specific vocation of deacons, elders,

and ministers of Word and Sacrament, in that order.  
Further enhancing this idea of collective ministry  
with individual calling is how Gambrell sets the  
tune musically with each stanza in unison and a  
refrain of “Together, as Christ’s body . . .” sung after  
each stanza in harmony. He accomplishes this in  
his newly composed *CALLING*, a 6/8 tune that has  
both a natural rhythm drawn from the text and a  
tune that provides melodic interest but also feels  
harmonically intuitive, making it easily singable by  
most congregations. Gambrell also offers a version  
of the text set to the more commonly known tune  
*VALET WILL ICH DIR GEBEN*, which will be familiar to most  
congregations as “All Glory, Laud, and Honor.”

# Each Christian Has a Calling

*Unison*

C G Am Am7 F C Dm G

1. Each Chris - tian has a call - ing to serve in Je - sus' name:  
 2. Some show the life of Je - sus by help - ing those in need:  
 3. Some seek the truth of Je - sus and serve as trust - ed guides:  
 4. Some teach the way of Je - sus by shar - ing sa - cred signs:  
 5. We join with all the faith - ful of ev - ery time and place:

C E7 Am D7 C G7 C G7

a mis - sion from the Spir - it, a pur - pose in God's reign.  
 with acts of great com - pas - sion, with lov - ing words and deeds.  
 they mea - sure, lead, and nur - ture, they or - der and pro - vide.  
 the sto - ries of the scrip - tures, the wa - ter, bread, and wine.  
 all ser - vants of the gos - pel, all min - is - ters of grace.

*Harmony*

C G C C7 F C Dm G

To - geth - er, as Christ's bod - y, we work and sing and pray

C E7 Am D7 C G7 C

with thanks and praise to Je - sus: the life, the truth, the way.

Written for the 2021 Year of Leader Formation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), this hymn affirms the Christian vocation of each member of the church, rooted in our common baptism. The verses, sung in unison, describe the particular forms of service of those called to ordered ministry—as deacons (verse 2), ruling elders (verse 3), and ministers of Word and Sacrament (verse 4). The refrain, sung in harmony, emphasizes the communal nature of Christian ministry.

Text and Tune: David Gambrell, © 2020  
 G-1.0301, G-2.0201, G-2.0301, G-2.0501; John 14:6

CALLING  
 7.6.7.6 D

“Each Christian Has a Calling”/ CALLING  
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 david.gambrell@pcusa.org.

**Services of Commissioning** are ordinarily part of a complete Service for the Lord’s Day. As such, these occasions and services of ordination and installation might be an opportunity for a choir to provide an

anthem or soloist to offer a vocal solo with a text focused on ministry. Below are lists of suggestions for both. All suggestions for vocal solo are available in multiple keys and suitable for any voice.

### Suggestions for Choral Anthems

- “I Thank My God,” J. Aaron McDermid,  
MorningStar Music Publishers, SATB, piano
- “In the Year That King Uzziah Died,” David McKay  
Williams, Alfred Publishing, SATB, organ
- “Many Gifts, One Spirit,” Allen Pote, Theodore  
Presser Co., SATB, piano
- “Beloved God’s Chosen,” Robert Hobby,  
MorningStar Music Publishers, two part mixed,  
piano, flute
- “How Lovely Are the Messengers,” *Saint Paul*, Felix  
Mendelssohn, public domain, SATB, keyboard
- “Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord,” Aaron David  
Miller, Augsburg Fortress, unison, piano

### Suggestions for Vocal Solos

- “Here I Am, Lord,” arr. Craig Courtney, *Sacred Solos  
of Craig Courtney*, Beckenhorst, voice, piano,  
flute
- “Guide My Feet,” arr. Jacqueline Hairston, Classical  
Vocal Reprints, voice, piano
- “The Lord Is My Light,” Francis Allitsen, G. Schirmer,  
voice, organ

“Be Thou My Vision,” arr. Tom Trenney, . . . *still  
all my song shall be*, MorningStar Music, voice,  
piano, violin

The *Book of Common Worship* also includes liturgies for celebrating moments of transition in the life of a congregation with services for **Recognition of a Pastor’s Retirement** and **Recognition and Thanksgiving for Faithful Service**. At the time of a pastor’s retirement a hymn, psalm, or spiritual song may precede the brief liturgy included in the BCW. David Gambrell and Vini Frizzo’s hymn “Give Thanks for Women of Great Faith” is an excellent choice for such an occasion. It is a rare and wonderful text that celebrates women in ministry. The third stanza, although specific in its use of “women” in the text, has a broader message to break down the barriers to God’s call to those who have been excluded. The tune is strong and sturdy and although newly composed feels warm and familiar. The march-like rhythm and melodic contour, with open intervals enforcing the stability of the D major, capture the spirit of celebration in the text’s repeated “Give thanks.”

# Give Thanks for Women of Great Faith

*With great thanksgiving for the ministry of Cynthia M. Campbell*



1. Give thanks for wo - men of great faith who come from some for -  
 2. Give heed to wo - men of great faith who chal - lenge what the  
 3. Make way for wo - men of great faith and let the realm of  
 4. Sing praise for wo - men of great faith to God from whom all

got - ten place, yet dare to shout and sum - mon grace for  
 world has taught, who o - pen and en - large our thought for  
 God in - crease, with jus - tice, right - eous - ness, and our peace for  
 bles - sings flow, the love be - yond all love we know. Let

1, 2, 3.  
 all the chil - dren of the earth. Give thanks, give thanks!  
 all the peo - ple of the earth. Give heed, give heed!  
 all the na - tions of the earth. Make way, make way!  
 all the crea - tures of the earth sing

4.  
 praise, sing praise! Sing praise, sing praise!

“Woman, great is your faith!” (Matt. 15:28). This hymn is inspired by Jesus’ praise of the Canaanite (or Syrophenician; cf. Mark 7:24–30) woman who intercedes for her daughter and, in doing so, seems to expand the scope of Jesus’ mission at a pivotal point in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. The text and tune celebrate the ministry, teaching, leadership, and service of Rev. Dr. Cynthia M. Campbell on the occasion of her retirement from Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville.

Text: David Gambrell, © 2020; Matthew 15:21–28  
 Music: Carlo Vincetti Frizzo, © 2020

CAMPBELL  
 LM with refrain

“Give Thanks for Women of Great Faith”/ CAMPBELL  
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 Music by Carlo Vincetti Frizzo, © 2020  
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 org and vini.frizzo@hpcloouisville.org.

An appropriate text for both Recognition of a Pastor’s Retirement and Recognition and Thanksgiving for Faithful Service is “For All Who Craft Their Words with Skill,” also included in David Bjorlin’s *Protest of Praise*. The text, set to the shape note tune RESIGNATION, contains stanzas appropriate for various

ministries in the church, giving thanks to God for those who share gifts that encompass the full scope of preaching, music, liturgy, and the arts. Each stanza beautifully conveys that many tasks of vocation are in service of our ministry, and for the gift and skill of those who do them we should give thanks. As a church musician, I am moved by the third stanza that there is gratitude for all the preparation that goes into sharing our gifts with congregations.

“For All Who Craft Their Words with Skill”

Meter: CMD

For all who craft their words with skill  
to make your story heard,  
for those who study, write, and preach:  
we thank you, Christ our Word.  
And we rejoice in those whose speech  
extends the Spirit’s breath  
to build a shelter for the lost  
and summon life from death.

For all who host the holy meals  
to keep the faithful fed,  
for those who bless and break and share:  
we thank you, Christ our Bread.  
And we rejoice in those whose feasts  
defy each fence and wall,  
where hunger is the only foe  
and room is made for all.

For all who lead your hymns of praise  
to make weak voices strong,  
for those who practice, tune and sing:  
we thank you, Christ our Song.  
And we rejoice in those whose ears  
are trained by love and care  
to help all find their note of hope  
in seasons of despair.

For all who live the words they preach,  
and practice what they sing,  
for all whose lives are raised to you—  
a living offering,  
for all who hear your holy call and will not  
be deterred,  
we thank you Christ, the source of life:  
our Song, our Bread, our Word.

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Just as there are moments of joy in ministry remembered by congregations, there are also moments of transition that are more difficult to navigate and manage. A gift of the *Book of Common Worship* is its reminder that our worshiping lives can guide us through these valleys as much as our corporate prayers of jubilation are central to celebration. The BCW includes services for Dissolution of a Pastoral Call and Dissolving a Congregation. Although I have never had occasion to use either, I am thankful that they are there when we need them. In the same way we know that music can provide us great comfort in Services to the Witness of the Resurrection, I think music, especially congregational singing, can provide the same comfort and assurance of God’s promise to us when our circumstances may seem very uncertain.

The service for **Dissolution of a Pastoral Call**, tucked between Thanksgiving for Faithful Service and Recognition of a Pastor’s Retirement, is a short liturgy in three parts. In a litany led alternately by presbytery or session representatives, those present pray for God’s saving presence, ask for the mercy of God, and give thanks for the journey together. Following the litany is the dissolution with questions to the congregation and concluding prayers. Before departing, those gathered receive the final Blessing and Charge.

The opening worship rubric says that this liturgy should follow the concluding hymn, psalm, or spiritual song. The words of the prayer of dissolution remind us that God’s love for us is strong and unbreakable. Although a relationship may seem to be severed in this act, nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus. Hymns such as “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” (*Glory to God*, 833) or “Shall Tribulation or Distress” (GTG, 823) both remind us of this truth.

A moment of congregational song plays a pivotal role in the short order of worship for **Dissolving a Congregation**. After the declaration, a hymn is included with the following rubrics:



The moderator leads a procession from the building during the singing.

Furnishings, including the pulpit or lectern Bible, baptismal and communion vessels, and paraments may be carried out by clergy, elders, deacons, and members of the dissolved congregation and/ or other congregations present. All gather outside the building for the charge and blessing.<sup>3</sup>

Again, it would be appropriate to remember and affirm God's promise to all generations. Options for congregational singing might include "God of Our Life" (GTG, 686) or "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" (GTG, 39). When I read the above rubric, my mind immediately imagines the procession accompanied by "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" (GTG, 687), the well-loved paraphrase of Psalm 90 that generations of the faithful have sung to remind themselves God is indeed our help in all times and "our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."

Effective congregational song for both of these services could also include texts that remind us the way that seems so final is not the ending. This reminder might be easiest to find in a text associated with the Easter season. Some hymns that may be

appropriate found in the "Jesus Christ: Resurrection" section of *Glory to God* include "Day of Arising" (GTG 252), "Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain" (GTG, 234), and "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" (GTG, 250). The latter, written by Natalie Sleeth and inspired by T. S. Elliot, concludes with this stanza:

In our end is our beginning, in our time,  
infinity;  
in our doubt there is believing; in our life,  
eternity.  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last,  
a victory,  
unrevealed until its season, something God  
alone can see.<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

1. Directory for Worship, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2019), W-4.0401.
2. Mary Louise Bringle, *In Wind and Wonder*, ©2007 GIA Publications, 34.
3. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 555.
4. "In the Bulb There Is a Flower," *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 250. Words & music: Natalie Sleeth, © 1986 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

# The Work of Our Hands: The Story of Beechmont Presbyterian Church's Peace Garden

*Lionel Derenoncourt and Marissa I. Galván Valle*



Lionel Derenoncourt is originally from Haiti and has served as the regional representative of Church World Service in West Africa (based in Dakar, Senegal), the associate coordinator of the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and the associate for international hunger concerns in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the PC(USA). He has been a member of Beechmont Presbyterian Church since 1999.

Marissa I. Galván Valle is the pastor of Beechmont Presbyterian Church and the senior editor for Spanish-language resources for the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation.

*We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God. If you yourself are at peace, then there is at least some peace in the world.*

—Thomas Merton

The Peace Garden at Beechmont Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, was built during the summer and fall of 2020. This project came about as a result of reflections on our congregation's various ministries and affirmations of our members' determination to overcome the daily difficulties that have threatened our existence in recent years. This is a story of the "little church that could," a congregation with its sights on those that surround it.

We are a small congregation, counting about fifty members, plus several additional participants in our various ministries. A core group of individuals have been members since the 1950s and '60s, when the congregation was much larger. They

have continuously provided an anchor as the congregation has changed over the years. In the 1990s, the church membership became increasingly more diverse with the addition of various clergy and lay people working for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) national offices in Louisville and new immigrant members from Africa, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Still, for a long time our congregation remained very small, and we became saddled with the maintenance of a relatively large and underused facility. To make matters worse, a few crises at the beginning of this millennium resulted in the loss of our pastor and a few members as well.

Fortunately, we were blessed to have among us a few pastors willing to volunteer their services and guide the congregation through this turmoil. Rev. Brad Kent and Rev. Tony Aja provided leadership, assisted by several additional pastors from the congregation. Soon, we reconstituted our financial reserves to a level that was sufficient to cover the cost of a part-time, regular pastor. We strengthened our identity as an intercultural and multiethnic

reflect

change

participate

care

respect

heal

believe

justice brings peace



Lionel Derenoncourt in the first stages of the construction process



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Through all the turmoil we had experienced, it became clear to many of us that violence was one of the gravest issues facing our community. Most, if not all, of the members of our congregation and our partner organizations were affected directly or indirectly by violence. The concept of a Peace Garden emerged.

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congregation with a very diverse membership, including Latinx, Haitian, and African members in addition to those who had been members for many years. We began to live into our call and identity by offering bilingual worship services in English and Spanish. In the 2010s we launched a conflict management and peacemaking ministry with the South Sudanese community of Louisville, accompanying them in their transition as refugees

from a very violent and prolonged war of liberation in their homeland. We organized seminars and cultural activities with South Sudanese youth and assisted parents as they navigated life in the United States. Soon enough, some of our Latinx members needed help in responding to the surge of new immigrants from Central and South America fleeing violence in their respective countries. During that same period, we extended our outreach in the

## El Respeto Al Derecho Ajeno Es La Paz



Members gather for peacemaking event in the garden.



Members plant flowers and greenery in the peace garden.

larger community of South Louisville by offering the use of a wing of our facilities to South Louisville Community Ministries, an ecumenical community ministry organization.

Through all the turmoil we had experienced, it became clear to many of us that violence was one of the gravest issues facing our community. Most, if not all, of the members of our congregation and our partner organizations were affected directly or indirectly by violence. The concept of a Peace

Garden emerged. We hoped the Peace Garden would provide an open and sacred space set apart, yet informal enough to invite relaxation, conversations, meditation, and prayers amid the trauma around us.

Lionel Derenoncourt, one of our members from Haiti who retired from service at the national level of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), led the project. He approached the pastor and a few members with the idea and eventually received approval from the

**For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. — Isaiah 55:12**



Peace Garden “chancel” area, in preparation for a communion service

session to construct the Peace Garden on the church grounds. At first, members of the project team considered numerous design ideas, from a prayer labyrinth to a prayer garden. As with any project, we discovered constraints. A large, open labyrinth was not feasible because there was not enough space to construct paths of sufficient length. So we opted for a small prayer garden to be located on the side of the sanctuary, a sacred space surrounded by flowers, greenery, and a small water feature that would become an invitation to meditation and the renewal of our souls.

However, questions of funding arose. How could we undertake such a project without financial resources to cover the cost of materials and labor? It seemed a daunting task, but we discovered that

our gifts were greater than our challenges. Setting our lack of financial resources aside, we knew that our congregation was rich with talent, energy, generosity, and dedication. In addition, we were well connected to the network of Presbyterian churches and institutions in our area. We approached the PC(USA) national offices for a small grant and received support from our presbytery through Cedar Ridge Camp, which donated the cedar timber and rocks necessary for the project. Volunteers from the congregation helped with the physical labor, working together to construct a space for the community.

In the spring of 2020, Lionel collected cedar timber from the Cedar Ridge Camp and built and installed a portal as an entrance to the garden.

Between April and September, he designed and constructed three large cedarwood benches and, together with James Evanston, Daniel Braaksma, and K. T. Ockels, started the landscaping work on the garden. The congregation contributed plants and flowers. Prayer poles, sometimes called peace poles, were a crucial part of the original design envisioned for the garden. Lionel built four of these poles out

of cedar trees from the camp and distributed them to be painted by various families and individuals representing different cultural and ethnic groups in the congregation. One of the peace poles has a prayer that says “God, help us to be the church you envision.” One of them has Bible passages that remind visitors about God’s persistence in speaking about peace: “For you shall go out with joy and be



Details, prayer poles marking the four corners of the Peace Garden, painted by members of the community



Left: Details, prayer pole marking one of the four corners of the Peace Garden, painted by members of the community. Right: Members adorn the cedar entrance portal to the garden.

led back in peace . . .” (Isa. 55:12). A Mexican family included words attributed to Benito Juárez, a famous Mexican statesman, that say, “El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz” (Respect for the rights of others means peace). And another is a reminder to reflect, change, participate, care, respect, heal, and believe. Some of the poles include small bird houses and were completed and mounted on concrete bases to allow for repositioning as appropriate. They stand in the garden as though shepherding the space with the presence of the members of the community and marking it as a space for enacting the realm of God.

On October 24, 2020, the Peace Garden was declared completed. I was the church’s pastor at the time, and on November 8, 2020, I stood and prayed this prayer of dedication and blessing:

We give you thanks, O God, for the nature that surrounds us and for the peace that it provides for all your creatures.

Send your blessing upon us and upon this Peace Garden, which we set apart today to your praise and honor.



Grant that this Peace Garden may always be a place where your will is done, peace is sought, and your name is glorified; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Bless this fountain that reminds us of your sustenance, of how you created order out of chaos, of your covenant with your children and of your baptism. May people who gather here be reminded of your love and your presence. Amen.

Bless these peace poles and their messages, that they might stand as both inspiration and encouragement until their messages become reality. Amen.

Bless these flowers that remind us of God's creativity and diversity. God is a masterful painter and the colors of nature invite us to celebrate our difference while recognizing that we are all one in Christ.

May this garden grant those who visit a sense of God's presence, love, power and peace. Amen.

GOD  
HELP  
us be the  
CHURCH  
that  
YOU  
ENVISION

Since its completion, our Peace Garden has hosted numerous events as a gathering place for peacemaking efforts in the community. The garden has been the site of conversations with Nicole George, the council person for our community, and interviews with journalists on critical justice issues in our city, especially conversations around the death of Breonna Taylor by police. The garden has hosted conversations with members of the congregation who have shared their stories with the church family, helping members build relationship and trust as they get to know each other better. Our greatest joy is that our peace garden has become a center of ministry for our congregation, especially with the children and youth attending a ministry called the Learning Hub, which was initiated as a collaboration between Ministerio Presbiteriano Hispano/Latino de Preston Highway (Hispanic/Latino Presbyterian Ministry of Preston Highway), Beechmont Presbyterian Church, and other organizations to help children from Central and South America whose families arrived recently to the Louisville area, mostly as asylum seekers. The Peace Garden is also a place of retreat for meditation and hope for staff taking a break and community folks waiting to receive services from the South Louisville Community Ministries offices.

Birds chirp and fly above in the trees nearby, drink water and take a bath in the small water feature in the middle of the garden. Some of them have now established their home in the bird houses on top of the prayer poles. Butterflies have found a new source of flowers to collect nectar from, and squirrels have been busy digging our flower beds to bury nuts. Life is renewed all around and a place of peace made in the city. Glory be to God for this.





*Just As I Am*  
ink on paper  
Jennifer Bunge

# God Delivered Me

Steve Prince



*Rosa Sparks*, linoleum cut on paper, 36" x 50", edition of 50, printed at Segura Art Center at Notre Dame, 2017

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than

about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. (Matt. 18:10–14)

**I**n 2017 I did a residency at the Segura Art Studio, housed at the University of Notre Dame’s Center for Art and Culture on South Bend’s West Side. For ten days I worked in a small gymnasium

Steve Prince is the director of engagement and distinguished artist in residence at the Muscarelle Museum of Art at William and Mary University. Prince has shown his art internationally, and his artwork is in several museum collections across the United States. Prince’s art philosophy is steeped in the rich New Orleans Jazz tradition of the Dirge and the Second Line.

that was converted into an art studio. The high windows that cascaded light into the room by day and parquet floors were the only remnants left from days past that hinted at what once filled the room. Halfway through my residency, a beautiful, majestic, sharply dressed elderly Black woman in a wheelchair visited the space partly pushed by memory, but also by a desire to meet me and see what I was conjuring with my art. With a smile in her eyes, I saw the spark of pride in seeing a Black man in her community doing something positive and uplifting for the people. She told me stories of the community I was planted in and said this was the gymnasium of her childhood where she played basketball with her friends. Across the street was the *one* community pool that Blacks could attend during those days. The heyday of the predominantly Black community had passed. It was a shell of itself, but there were flickers of hope expressed by many of the descendants I encountered who knew what once was there and were now working to preserve the history, restore the buildings, and envision what and how they could feed the coming generation.

I went to South Bend with an ambitious plan to create art. I endeavored to create two prints, one inspired by Rosa Parks and another about the Greensboro Four. Rosa Parks was immortalized on December 1, 1955, when she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. The events that ensued are forever etched into the annals of history as an act of civil disobedience, sparking a bus boycott that lasted for over a year and propelled a twenty-six-year-old pastor named Martin Luther King Jr. into the national spotlight. Five years later, on February 1, 1960, four African American men named Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., and David Richmond devised a plan in Greensboro, North Carolina, in their North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University dorm rooms to wage a nonviolent war against segregation in a Woolworth store. The four gentlemen are affectionately known as the Greensboro Four, and they were the catalyst for over seventy thousand citizens across the United States staging sit-ins to challenge an unjust system.

Armed with a piece of linoleum and limestone, I painstakingly redrew images from my sketchbook and imagination onto the two substrates. I made marks with permanent markers and a greasy crayon on the linoleum and limestone into the wee hours each day. Prior to going to South Bend I had been

asked by my hosts if I would consider conducting a hands-on workshop for elementary-aged students that would be shown on the local PBS station; I said yes. Towards the end of my residency, three teacher chaperones and twenty half-my-size human beings filled the room with wonder, inquisitiveness, and eagerness to create. I matched their energy by amplifying it through call and response songs and chants. I taught the children how to make watercolor monotypes, which is a fun, expressive, nontoxic art process that always yields surprise from participants and jovial responses full of “ooohhs and aaahhs!” One of the teacher chaperones stood out to me—a young woman with shoulder-length, curly brown hair, an infectious smile, and a spirit that matched the children’s excitement. She chuckled and laughed at all my corny jokes designed for the kids. We made a connection. When I do public speaking, I seek affirmation from the Holy Spirit in the eyes of the audience/congregation, where I find understanding and encouragement for me to keep teaching/preaching.

At the end of my workshop the PBS reporter interviewed me about my artwork creation in South Bend. I took the newsmen on a journey through the art, explaining the symbolic, historical, and spiritual metaphors that I embedded into the piece. The work is constructed with iconography and carefully juxtaposed visual text hidden in plain view to conjure my audience to decode and read. On the right side of the composition Rosa Parks sits with her arms and legs crossed and her head turned, defiantly ignoring the bus driver’s orders for her to relinquish her seat. Paul, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, proposes that we must “put on the whole armor of God. . . . For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:11–12). Parks is adorned with a breastplate of righteousness and a shield with the letters “AOG” (armor of God); her feet are shod with readiness, and her head is crowned with a spiritual halo signifying the helmet of salvation. Parks will not be moved. Masses of people mobilize to boycott the unequal system outside the window of the bus. Their bodies are layered like a palimpsest demystifying the borders. A sign with the words “I AM” alludes to Moses being called by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

For over a year the Black residents ventured to work by carpooling, walking, and riding bikes until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. Viewing this piece, one may rejoice and celebrate a victory won. Veering to the left side of the composition, one will see that I have constructed the conceptual back of a bus, which is loaded with the stains of the past and present. Lurking like ghosts, white figures loom over the people like a low-hanging fog. One figure wears a cap with the letters "ET," not for extraterrestrial, but for a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who went south to visit family for the summer in Money, Mississippi. The currency of his life was spent because of a gesture he supposedly made towards a white woman in a convenience store. The boy was abducted, beaten, shot, and lynched. His corpse was tied with barbed wire to an engine block and thrown into the Tallahassee River. Three days later they exhumed his body from the river and sent his remains to Chicago for his mother to identify. His name was Emmett Till. More symbols reveal martyrs and individuals who have been trapped in the hailstorm of hate stemming from the institution of slavery to the present. An "X" on the hat represents Malcolm X, and a crown on the shoulder stands for Martin Luther King Jr., two leaders who were assassinated in 1965 and 1968 respectively, fighting for justice.

A Black man with his hands upraised represents Michael Brown, who was slain in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014; the words "Hands Up Don't Shoot" were proclaimed by protestors. Next to him a young man with a hoodie and a can of tea represents Trayvon Martin, who was slain in 2012 in Sanford, Florida. The letters "K-o-o-l" adorn Trayvon's hoodie, symbolizing a pack of cigarettes and Eric Garner, who was slain in Staten Island, New York, in 2014

for selling single cigarettes. Garner cried, "I can't breathe!" and sadly, ironically, they are the same words that George Floyd uttered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2020 before his death under the knee of a police officer. A mother and child sit, calling for peace amid the hate storm. The two are sacred figures minus the halos that would traditionally adorn the head of Mary and Christ. They represent the everyday deities that I believe we all are. Each one of our lives, regardless of race, ethnicity, or class, are sacred and beautiful. The woman holds a Bible open to Matthew 5:3-11; verse 9 becomes our urban credo—"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." We must continue to be a light in the face of darkness, work for beauty, seek truth, and fight for justice. We are called to be fishers of men, and when we march for equality we will be protected!

The reporter thanked me for my words and message for the South Bend community and asked me if I had a title for the piece. I replied, "I am tentatively calling the piece *Rosa Sparks*. At that instant, the chaperone who hung on my every word quickly turned and walked to the corner of the room frantically fanning her face to regain her composure. My eyes followed her with concern, and I finished my last words with the reporter. I quickly made my way to the young woman and asked if she was alright. Fighting back tears, she intimated to me that she was unable to get out of bed that morning due to depression, but something told her to get up and go. She expressed her love for the workshop, the beautiful way in which I connected with the children, and she understood the voice she heard: I was sent for her. She said that I was doing what she was called to do, and that what I exemplified in the workshop encouraged and blessed her. I replied, "Praise God, I am so thankful God used me in this way." The tears in her eyes began to fall like a river overflowing its banks. She said, "And then you said my name. I am Sparks." We both wept.

When I look back and reflect on my experience in South Bend, I realize I went to South Bend to create art, but God had something far greater for me to do; God delivered me to be a *spark*.

# Shepherds

*Sally Lawrence Jenkins*

Her neighbor's gait had slowed  
And, though his meandering mind  
Still flowed,  
It wandered farther and farther  
Beyond its well-worn banks—  
Used-to-be efficient exchanges of niceties  
Now stretched to sizeable chunks  
Of priceless hours.  
Yet she chose to invest  
Even more of the treasure  
Of her time—  
Giving her ears and smiles and nods,  
Lengthening her visits,  
Shortening the minutes that remained  
To attend to her own chores and meetings  
and self-indulgences . . .  
With no regret.

Feed. My. Lambs.

The relative  
With the worst track record  
Continued to run out of gas  
Along life's journey  
And make wrong turns  
And have self-induced collisions.  
Though he had judged and coached  
And even "rescued,"  
He finally settled on  
Encouragement and affirmation—  
Realizing, alas, that he was not  
The driver, or even the mechanic,  
Of another's life—  
His love, though,  
Seemed to be  
A mighty powerful fuel  
When he offered it up as his gift.

Tend. My. Sheep.

Soulmates—  
Double-Dutch partners in first grade,  
Carpooling each other's kids,  
Providing lifeboats  
In the turbulent storms of life.  
Yet, fissures formed  
In the bedrock of their friendship.  
Somehow  
They voted differently,  
And mocked each other's values  
And championed characters  
Whom the other found unreliable . . . or worse.  
And when one argued, she felt mean—  
And when one feigned agreement, she felt weak—  
Until . . .  
They decided to share the seesaw,  
Each committing to listen  
Each committing to challenge  
Each committing to teach  
And learn from one another  
In the rich, unending classroom of life.

Feed. My. Sheep.

Sally Lawrence Jenkins is a retired middle school English teacher, a nature enthusiast,  
an eager traveler, and a sometimes poet.

# “How Can I Keep from Singing?” The Ministry of Congregational Song in Online Worship

. John Hardin Sawyer

The COVID-19 pandemic was so disruptive to personal and church life that, nearly three years on, just about everyone I know is ready to get “back to normal.” Of course, “normal” is a relative term, and ministry in a post-COVID world will always look and feel abnormally different from the pre-COVID world that most pastors and parishioners remember. One major difference is that churches have incorporated livestreaming of worship into their regular post-pandemic practice, and there is no going back. There is also “no going back” to in-person worship for a small subset of congregants who have decided, for health or other reasons, not to return to in-person worship, which raises the question: in what ways do those who actively participate in online worship connect with what is taking place on the screen?

While there may be some who are presently studying the impact of livestreaming worship on prayer or the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, I have been thinking about congregational singing in livestreamed worship. How do songs—sung at home through participation in online worship—make an impact on the faith lives of a congregation that is “present” at a distance? The pandemic has proven to be an interesting time to study this question because just about everyone who participated in worship was forced to be at a distance and not in-person at one point or another. My interest in exploring congregational song in online worship has taken me to my own congregation, Bedford Presbyterian Church, and become part of my research in my

doctor of ministry studies at Columbia Theological Seminary. This article shares some of that research.

At Bedford Presbyterian Church (BPC) in Bedford, New Hampshire,<sup>1</sup> congregational singing has been an essential part of worship for over two centuries. When the pandemic began, the question of what to do about music was very present in the minds of many. Not all congregations had live music, much less live singing, as part of the online worship service format during the pandemic. Some churches did not have the capability to offer music. Some churches, for reasons of safety, only offered prerecorded music or ensembles of singers stitched together through editing wizardry. Bedford Presbyterian Church decided to keep one or two singers, adequately spaced for safe singing of the hymns, in the sanctuary with piano, organ, or guitar accompaniment live during worship. As a pastor and lifelong musician, I am passionate about singing in worship, but I did wonder if singing into a camera, alone, week in, week out as I led worship, made a difference in the lives of people on the other end of the Internet connection.

Thankfully, even though the world looked and felt so different during the pandemic, at Bedford Presbyterian Church, the congregation—scattered across the miles, throughout southern New Hampshire and around the country and world—found that songs that were sung as part of online worship (1) provided *comfort*, (2) offered *challenges*, and (3) deepened *connections* that were communal, historical, and theological.

The Reverend Dr. John Hardin Sawyer sings and serves as pastor and head of staff  
of Bedford Presbyterian Church in Bedford, New Hampshire.

## Comfort

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, BPC had never considered livestreaming their worship services. From a practical standpoint, the historic church sanctuary did not have the technological infrastructure for such a feat. And yet, the church—in coordination with a local community access television station—slowly made the investment in the needed technology to reach members of the community who were “locked down” at home. On the first two Sundays of the pandemic, prior to being able to livestream a video of the worship services, the pastor, music director, and an elder of the church were present in the sanctuary to record an audio podcast of the worship service. A decision was made to shorten the service but to keep the usual format and tone. This decision was a pastoral one, keeping in mind those who would need to hear something familiar in a new and unfamiliar time. The opening hymn on the first Sunday of online worship (March 22, 2020) was a setting of Psalm 23, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.”<sup>2</sup> The leadership hoped that those listening would hear one thing: God’s providential grace is present, even in the shadow of death.

Aside from the traditional Gloria Patri and Doxology, the only other singing that took place in those first online services was the closing song, “May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You,” from the Northumbria Community in northeastern England. The words of the song are as follows:

May the Peace of the Lord Christ go with you  
wherever he may send you.  
May he guide you through the wilderness,  
protect you through the storm.  
May he bring you home, rejoicing, at the  
wonders he has shown you.  
May he bring you home, rejoicing, once  
again into our doors.<sup>3</sup>

By Peter Sutcliffe. Taken from Morning Prayer from the Northumbria Community’s Celtic Daily Prayer published by Collins, © 2015. Used with permission.

Throughout the rest of the pandemic, all of the other music used in worship at Bedford Presbyterian Church would change, but this closing song would remain at the end of the service until November of 2021. As part of my research exploring BPC’s music during the pandemic, I conducted a congregation-

wide survey, in which many respondents expressed that singing the same song each week brought comfort. Some of these responses read

- This hymn (“May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You”), although it can also make me cry, provides comfort.<sup>4</sup>
- Music at Bedford Presbyterian Church . . . was comforting during a stressful time and brings me peace when I hear it.<sup>5</sup>
- The familiarity of hearing and singing [“May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You”] each week brings a certain sense of peace and comfort.<sup>6</sup>
- Love singing the same song [“May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You”] repeatedly as a tradition. Very comforting.<sup>7</sup>
- Music in worship during the pandemic has been a source of great comfort and hope that all will be well.<sup>8</sup>

Another component of the survey asked about whether congregants sang during online worship. Eighty percent responded that they did sing to varying degrees at some time during online worship, wherever they happened to be. Andrea, a retiree who grew up at BPC, said,

I felt awkward at first because [my husband] Brian and I would be sitting in the living room watching [online worship] and I would sing softly because I don’t have, I don’t think, a very good voice. And I felt kind of awkward because it was just he and I. And then, as each week went by, I found comfort in the routine of the two songs, the “Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines on Me”<sup>9</sup> and the closing hymn. I found the comfort in that routine. And so that I would sing with gusto. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Even though the people participating in online worship felt a sense of comfort, they were also challenged in a variety of ways.

## Challenges

In an August of 2020 article in *The Presbyterian Outlook* called “Yearning to Sing, Yearning to Breathe,” Eric Wall wrote at the time that one of the challenges about at-home participation in online worship was the stark reality of hearing one’s own



voice. Instead of one's voice being bolstered by other voices, someone singing "solo" at home while watching another person leading the hymns "solo" on a screen can feel very plain and awkward. But, as Wall writes, "singing at home (alone) . . . may also invite us to re-claim some of the plainer beauties of music and our own voices."<sup>11</sup>

While some people might be more willing to sing a familiar song on their own, online worship went on so long that newer and unfamiliar songs began to be chosen for worship to reflect the Scripture readings or theme of the worship service. Heather Josselyn-Cranson writes that in the hymn-singing tradition of many mainline Protestant churches, songs are used to complement/respond to "the many activities included in worship, including prayer, praise, collecting an offering, and celebrating the sacraments . . . [and] the reading of scripture."<sup>12</sup>

During the pandemic—as in non-pandemic times—at BPC, the singing of newer or unfamiliar hymns has been embraced by some but seen as a challenge by others. Cliff, a former clerk of session at BPC, said in a focus group that he appreciates a good mixture of old and new:

I love the old hymns. They bring comfort and bring familiarity. You know, it's a type of grounding or something that anchors your faith—these are the ones you grew up on. But I also enjoy the new ones. And with those is more of a particular message they bring and the melody they bring, you know, they're not familiar *yet*. They will be but they're not yet. But in a way, I think you focus more. At least, I focus more on the message . . . of the new [songs] because they're not so familiar.<sup>13</sup>

Cliff's thoughts about new hymns offering an opportunity to hear a new message leads me to consider an additional challenge when it comes to singing in online worship. Sometimes the hymn texts being sung are challenging to the mind, and heart, and spirit—especially those "new hymns" that may seek to spur the singer toward acts of discipleship, service, and sacrifice, toward a *lived theology*. When it comes to what someone hears, says, and sings in worship, online or in-person, the question often arises: will the words and music have an effect on the way a participant lives their life? Is the worship service integrated into the lives of

those present—does what is heard, said, and sung contribute toward a certain way of life? It is hard to find an answer to this question in any measurable way, but there are instances when yes, I think a connection is made and it is possible for the words and music of worship to become integrated into everyday life.

## Connections

Both in the survey and in focus groups at BPC, participants indicated that they made some practical and emotional connections through the act of singing in online worship. They connected with their own voices—learning to hear, accept, and appreciate their own singing. They connected with the church sanctuary shown on the screen and all the sanctuary represented to them. They connected with their church family leading in worship on screen. Over time, they also connected with familiar liturgy and songs that were repeated each week. Singers also made some historical connections, imagining previous generations of singers who have sung old and familiar hymns. And, finally, singers made theological connections between what was sung and how God was—and is—calling them to live.

Various parts of Christian spirituality reference the concept of a "breath prayer," a prayer that is said with every breath. The scriptural and theological basis for a breath prayer comes from Paul's letters, in which we read, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). One example of this comes from Eastern Orthodox Christianity and is known as the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."<sup>14</sup> In *The Way of a Pilgrim*, an anonymous narrator tells the story of learning to pray the Jesus Prayer, repeating it so many times that

I felt that the prayer began to move of its own accord from my lips into my heart. That is to say, it seemed as if my heart, while beating naturally, somehow began to repeat within itself the words of the prayer in rhythm with its natural beating. . . . I stopped reciting the words of the prayer with my lips and began to listen attentively to the words of my heart. . . .<sup>15</sup>

There is something powerful that can occur when the words of a prayer—or a song—move from the lips to the heart. In "Yearning to Sing, Yearning to Breathe," Eric Wall brings up a concept called

“heart songs,” or songs that are known by heart—songs that, by the memories associated with them or the fact that the song is literally memorized, people know by heart. In an interview, Wall said that he is not convinced that everyone has a heart song, but believes that “we all have some [kind of heart song] to the degree that music means something to us. We carry something around . . . the memory of words or the sound of a tune. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

If there is one heart song that people from BPC will associate with the pandemic it is “May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You” from the Northumbria Community. As mentioned earlier, the routine of singing this song brought comfort to some. Others carried the song—in their hearts and on their lips—out into the world. As Don Saliers writes in *Music and Theology*, “once a hymn text is released into the bloodstream of a congregation’s repertoire, it plays a deeply formative role in the shared theology of the assembly.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of “May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You,” this seems to be the case for BPC.

Andrea said that she would find herself going back to the archived worship services on BPC’s YouTube Channel<sup>18</sup> and skipping ahead to places where she knew her two favorite songs would be:

I have to admit that [before we could return to the sanctuary for worship] during “only online” worship, I would find myself during the week saying, “Oh, I need a pick-me-up. I need something.” So, I would go on and [find] any worship service. It didn’t matter if it was the prior one or not. And I would listen to the “Glory to God” and sing with it. And then the ending, the closing song. And if we hadn’t had that, I wouldn’t [have sung]. I don’t know if I’m tone deaf or what, but I need to hear it and sing with it. And so, having the online recording of it, it’s just it did it for me. So, I would occasionally during the week, listen to it in that manner. . . . I wasn’t sure if I should admit this or not because one day [my husband] Brian says to me, “What are you doing?” And I said, “I’m singing.”<sup>19</sup>

John Bell writes, “What the church sings . . . is determinative of the faith which the singers hold,” and “What we sing shapes what we believe.”<sup>20</sup> The sight of a familiar place that feels like home, a hug from a familiar person, or the sound of a familiar

song can be very comforting. Faith deepens and expands the comfort of a familiar song sung during online worship. A simple song from Taizé, “The Lord Is My Light,” might be a song that is comforting in an emotional sense. But when faith enters the picture (or, rather, the song) and the singer sings, “The Lord is my light . . . and my salvation / In God I trust / In God I trust,”<sup>21</sup> and the singer trusts these words to be true, emotional comfort is imbued with spiritual hope. As Don Saliers writes, “Music itself becomes a theologically relevant action.”<sup>22</sup> The singer trusts and has hope in something beyond an emotion from within the human heart, mind, and spirit. Instead, the trust and hope that well up from within come from another place, another source, which helps to shape our present circumstances as we look for God’s future reality. As John Bell writes, “We sing to shape the future”<sup>23</sup>—both our own future and the future of the world, with God’s help.

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The presence of the Holy Spirit is the primary means by which this connection between life as it is and a hoped-for new reality is made.

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The presence of the Holy Spirit is the primary means by which this connection between life as it is and a hoped-for new reality is made. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin writes that “faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit . . . and has no other source than the Spirit.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, human beings do not come to faith on their own. For Calvin, the work of faith is an interior work—a Spirit-filled working on the inside of a person to change and strengthen the mind and heart of an individual believer. It is the Spirit, as part of this interior life, that helps people, as Don Saliers writes, “to discern and appropriate what is present in the signs enacted, the stories told, and the commands to act in daily life.”<sup>25</sup> To this brief list, one could add that the Holy Spirit, in the interior life, helps a singer to discern and appropriate what is present in the song being sung. This takes place through the physical act of singing and reflection on the meaning of the lyrics, to be sure, but also when the Spirit is at work instilling and inspiring the faith of the singer, inspiring the very act of praise and any act of faith-filled response.

Again, the song “May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You” held great meaning because it acknowledged the need for the peace of Christ in a year when very little was “at peace” in the midst of a pandemic, a divisive presidential election, and racial discord. And yet, the song is not simply a prayer for peace. The first line of the song is “May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you, *wherever he may send you.*” Just as the singers voice a longing for peace, in their singing they also acknowledge that Jesus sends them out into the world to bring the peace of Jesus Christ with them. Even those who were quarantining at home and singing this hymn knew that, at some point, they were going to be sent out to the grocery, or back to work, or back to school. What sort of peace would they be able to take with them and offer the world as they lived through a time of so much wilderness and so many storms? Would they be vessels of God’s peace? Would the peace they carried shape the present and the future?

One focus group participant, Lorraine, shared how singing songs from church made a tremendous difference during a medical procedure:

Back in the spring, I had to go through a couple of MRIs ahead of some surgery. . . . And being inside of an MRI tube, just about made me lose my mind. . . . And then I realized that I had something within me that would help me to survive these 30 minutes of torture in a chamber. It started with “Jesus Loves Me.” In the beginning, I was so panicked, that I couldn’t even think of the words “Jesus Loves Me.” . . . And then what got me calmed down actually was picturing [the] singing at church. . . . And finally, that calm that came over me, and every spiritual song I ever . . . sang in my life, finally came back to me . . . and they got to hear me sing at the top of my lungs.<sup>26</sup>

Lorraine’s experience in the MRI machine is the very definition of what a heart song can do—bring comfort and hope that all will be well during difficult times.

The stories of those who sang songs of faith during the pandemic hint at a hope borne of faith—Andrea needed a mid-week singing pick-me-up, and Lorraine sang the song in the MRI machine and as she underwent surgery. This is the spiritual place that makes the connection between what is sung

and what is lived. The lyrics on their own might not have made the impression that they did when they were filled with weight and meaning by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit made an impression—one that has lasted. The action of singing the lyrics makes them easier to remember and, in the end, to live.

It is hard to say whether or not, as a whole, the people of Bedford Presbyterian Church who sang their way through the COVID-19 pandemic sang to shape the future, but there are those who did make the connection between a faith that is sung and a faith that is lived. Music at both in-person and online worship services seeks comfort, hope, and a faithful way of life through song each week and continues to connect singing with everyday life. Even as many consider these times “post-pandemic,” participants continue to worship online. It is a medium that—just a short time ago—was new to almost all of them, yet they fully participate, reading, praying, listening, and singing their way in the world where God is active and alive and at work for good in the face of so much that is not good. We can catch a glimpse of God’s future in and through the words of songs, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who have sung their way through the difficulties of the past are working and living toward this future. Whether they are aware of it or not, they are singing to shape the future. God is at work throughout history—even in the midst of an event as historic as a global pandemic and all that has followed it—by the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing the promised future to fulfillment through those who live what they sing. The Spirit leads all who have hope in God’s future, both in this world and the world that is to come, in faithful song.

## Notes

1. Bedford Presbyterian Church is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has about 450 members, and—pre-pandemic—regularly had between 125 and 150 in worship. The church was founded in 1749 in the town of Bedford, New Hampshire, which is about fifty miles north of Boston, Massachusetts.
2. Henry Williams Baker, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), no. 802.
3. Peter Sutcliffe, “May the Peace of the Lord Christ Go with You,” Northumbria Community Trust © 1999 CN Publishing admin. by Copycare, P.O. Box 77, Hailsham, East Sussex BN27 3EF, UK.
4. M.B., survey response to author, October 7, 2021.

5. E.K., survey response to author, October 7, 2021.
6. L.W., survey response to author, October 6, 2021.
7. S.M., survey response to author, October 6, 2021.
8. F.B., survey response to author, October 6, 2021.
9. Paul M. Vasile, "Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines on Me," *Glory to God*, no. 582.
10. Focus group response from Andrea Martel, September 29, 2021.
11. Eric Wall, "Yearning to Sing, Yearning to Breathe," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, August 24, 2020: 29.
12. Heather Josselyn-Cranson, *The Reason Why We Sing: Function and Congregational Song in Different Musical Traditions* (Ashland City, TN: OSL Publications, 2016), 60.
13. Focus group response by Cliff Creel, September 19, 2021.
14. Anonymous, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, trans. Olga Savin (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 7.
15. Anonymous/Savin, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 15.
16. Eric Wall, interview on June 30, 2021, at Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC.
17. Don Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 39–40.
18. Bedford Presbyterian Church NH YouTube page, accessed October 6, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD502fdlrUf7mBlcqYb\\_B-A](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD502fdlrUf7mBlcqYb_B-A).
19. Focus group response from Andrea Martel, September 26, 2021.
20. John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000), 57, 65.
21. Jacques Berthier, "The Lord Is My Light," *Glory to God*, no. 842.
22. Saliers, *Music and Theology*, 44.
23. Bell, *The Singing Thing*, 53.
24. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III.i.4, p. 541.
25. Don Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality* (Ashland City, TN, OSL Publications, 2015), 32.
26. Focus group response from Lorraine Emerson, September 19, 2021.

# The Ever-Expanding Ministry of Word and Sacrament

Brian Christopher Coulter

I have been ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament for almost fifteen years now. That seems like a short amount of time as I write it, but it's felt like an incredibly long time as I've lived it. Either way, a lot has changed within that span of time.

I had been doing ministry in various settings for almost a decade before my ordination. I would help with youth groups. I would volunteer to take the lead on church mission trips. I spent each summer doing camp ministry. I could transition effortlessly from icebreakers to Bible study to guitar—I thought I had this whole ministry thing figured out.

That's what I told the Committee for Preparation on Ministry when they asked me why I wanted to become a minister of Word and Sacrament back then. I told them I had already been doing ministry, and so I just figured I would make it official by going to seminary and getting ordained. They listened to what I said, then, with good reason, questioned what my statement implied.

They asked me to go home and read the section in our *Book of Order* about ordination to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament and to make sure that was what I was feeling called into. And at that time, the PC(USA) *Book of Order* stated in G-6.0201:

*As the Lord has set aside through calling and training certain members to perform a special ministry of the Word and Sacrament and has committed to them a variety of work to do, the church through the presbytery calls them to the responsibility and office of ministers of the Word and Sacrament.*<sup>1</sup>

As I read these words for the first time, I quickly realized I was drawn more to words like “variety” and “special” than I was to words like “responsibility” and “office.” I was going to have to be accountable to the presbytery and the committees that seemed to enjoy assigning me homework such as this. Maybe this was going to be completely different from what I had imagined?

The next section in that edition of the *Book of Order* was entitled “Names Expressive of Duties” (G-6.0202). I thought it would help clarify a few more items in this ordination conundrum for me, but it only served to confuse me more. The following are the lines as they appeared in that edition of our *Book of Order*, written as a conversation with my own thoughts at the time:

*“The person who fulfills this responsibility has, in Scripture, obtained different names expressive of his or her various duties. As he or she has the oversight of the flock of Christ, he or she is termed bishop.”*<sup>2</sup>

I like this part. I like the idea of working with a group of people and helping to shape that community. But I remember a rather heated sermon in the past in which another minister of Word and Sacrament insisted that the PC(USA) didn't have bishops?! I wonder if this ordination system is conflicted.

*“. . . as he or she feeds them with spiritual food, he or she is termed pastor.”*<sup>3</sup>

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I like the use of the term “pastor.” It is a religious term, but still appears to go right along with the notion of community organizer that is appealing to me. But what’s this spiritual food that I’ve got to come up with? And how often would I have to feed them?

*“. . . as a servant of Christ in the Church, the term minister is given.”<sup>4</sup>*

This term “minister” is making me a bit uncomfortable, but I know it is what I’m signing up for. As long as we don’t include “of Word and Sacrament” as a postscript every time we use it, the term itself still seems relatively benign to me at this stage of life.

*“As it is his or her duty to be grave and prudent, and an example to the flock, and to govern well in the house and Kingdom of Christ, he or she is termed presbyter or elder.”<sup>5</sup>*

This line added on seems to take itself a little too seriously in my opinion. Words like “duty” and “grave” and “govern” sound too serious for someone like me who is still finding success in the ministry of s’mores and campfire sing-alongs.

*“As he or she is sent to declare the will of God to sinners, and to beseech them to be reconciled to God, through Christ, he or she is termed ambassador.”<sup>6</sup>*

This one also seems heavy and too much of a stretch for me. I’ve never been much of a beseecher. And “declaring” is very different from the “conversing” of my Bible study teaching style.

*“And as he or she dispenses the manifold grace of God and the ordinances instituted by Christ, he or she is termed steward of the mysteries of God.”<sup>7</sup>*

I feel more than a little overwhelmed. I’m beginning to think that this might not be for me after all. Sounds like these ordained people are expected to be all things to everybody. Sounds like they are forced to wear multiple hats all at the same time.

Sounds like too much. Sounds exhausting.

As I finished reading these words, I also noticed an all-important asterisk, noting that this section (G-6.0202) had been added to our *Book of Order* at the 213th General Assembly that took place in 2001, but the content was originally from the 1789 Form of Government.

So, let’s recap. Those words were in there. They were then taken out. Then they were added back in?! They were trying to affirm and clarify our Presbyterian heritage regarding this confusing pastoral office to which I am possibly pursuing, but it just muddies things even more in my mind.

To add yet another level of confusion into the mix, the very next edition of our *Book of Order* removed that language once again and even changed the emphasis of our ordination by changing the very title of the office itself:

*Teaching elders (also called ministers of the Word and Sacrament) shall in all things be committed to teaching the faith and equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). They may serve in a variety of ministries, as authorized by the presbytery. When they serve as preachers and teachers of the Word, they shall preach and teach the faith of the church, so that the people are shaped by the pattern of the gospel and strengthened for witness and service. When they serve at font and table, they shall interpret the mysteries of grace and lift the people’s vision toward the hope of God’s new creation. When they serve as pastors, they shall support the people in the disciplines of the faith amid the struggles of daily life. When they serve as presbyters, they shall participate in the responsibilities of governance, seeking always to discern the mind of Christ and to build up Christ’s body through devotion, debate, and decision.”<sup>8</sup>*

No more language directly dealing with our former role as bishop, ambassador, or steward as well as a definite downplay of the word “minister,” which is only included as a parenthetical aside now. And even though it appeared we were trying to

get away from the “Word and Sacrament” in name, the emphasis on our role to stand at the baptismal font and the communion table for the sacraments is more present here, as well as an added emphasis on preaching and teaching the Word.

Are you confused yet?

I was as well. I am as well.

I want to thank the Committee for Preparation on Ministry for sending me on the search to clarify my calling to this unique ordained ministry, but I also want to tell them that I am still unclear about what all this means fifteen years into it!

\* \* \*

Will Willimon made a somewhat jarring comment a few years after the events of 9/11. He said we had just lived through a once-in-a-lifetime event. Our citizens were shaken. Our nation was shocked. The American people were confused and looking for answers, and they turned to the church, but we weren't ready for them. Willimon said we missed a huge opportunity to proclaim the good news of the gospel to a people who were desperately trying to hear it. We forfeited perhaps the greatest opportunity we've ever had to meet people in those moments as stewards of God's mysteries.

In my more pessimistic moments, I wonder if this is happening again as we continue to sluggishly emerge from the pandemic.

Rewind back to March of 2020. People were baffled. Everyone was reeling. The entire world was responding differently to this novel coronavirus, and nobody really knew if we were responding in the right way or not. Scientists were arguing. Doctors were debating. And the people were simply looking for a path to get through all this. They would turn to the Center for Disease Control for the *how* to go on, but they were turning to us for the *why*. Once again people came to us with questions, and I'm not sure how well we responded.

I say all of this to simply affirm that we are living in a confusing time. The questions of our days also leave questions for us about God's call for the church and for our ministries. What does it mean to be ordained in confusing times?

Are we televangelists? Are we front-line workers? Are we trauma specialists? It's not just the *Book of Order* description of our office that has changed time and time again. The needs to which our office

responds have also changed, transforming our understanding of our roles and vocational identities. Coming out of a global pandemic, ministry has changed. Have we?

\* \* \*

I picked up a new hobby in the pandemic, a new way to spend hours upon hours of my life. Didn't everybody?

My new hobby was fascinating to me but strange to my family and friends. Rather than baking bread or gardening, I began binge watching sermons. A lot of sermons. A massive number of sermons. For the first time ever, I could stream an almost limitless number of sermons by preachers who had never had their sermons online in the past: classmates from seminary, former peers who went through the ordination process with me, other Presbyterian preachers in my presbytery, and Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopalian colleagues in my town. Their sermons were all online, and I binged on them all!

One thing I noticed as I watched these sermons in those early months of the pandemic was that most preachers seemed to take one of two approaches. They either ignored the oddity of the moment and tried to lend people a sense of normalcy in an abnormal time by preaching in the same manner as they always had. Or they focused exclusively on the pandemic and attempted to convey a pastoral (read: parental) tone of responsibility and safety.

I have no judgement on either of these approaches or any of these preachers. Most of my sermons in those months resembled one or the other of those approaches as well. But I realized this pattern existed only after I saw someone break it for the first time. A friend of mine, Rev. Josh Kerr in Claremore, Oklahoma, preached a sermon on April 26, 2020, about the walls of Jericho falling down. As he preached, he slowly took off various pieces of personal protective equipment that he was wearing. First the mask, then the gloves, then the surgical gown. After he had stripped down to his regular clothing, he picked up the camera and walked outside as he continued filming. He walked out his door. He walked down his driveway. He walked up the sidewalk, and he didn't stop walking until he got to the empty church building. He did all this as he continued to preach!

He compared the walls of Jericho to the walls we were using to protect ourselves—both literal as well

as metaphorical. As we were all feeling enclosed, he didn't prescribe ways to live beyond the walls of our homes without endangering ourselves or others, but he did remind us that God is not bound in the same ways that we sometimes expect God to be. No wall would ever keep God out!

It was a creative and inspiring sermon. It made me stop. It made me think. (It made me more than a little envious that I hadn't come up with it!) It was a sermon that broke through the convention of the moment and spoke God's Word to me in a fresh, new way.

Paul Scott Wilson once wrote in *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, "Every age must find its own way to revitalize the preaching task." I think ministry in the age of the pandemic forced us to learn more about what it means to keep this Ministry of Word going. Living in an age of highly glossed TED talks and sound-bite Tik-Toks, we realized that pivoting to video sermons wasn't as easy as we had imagined, which forced us to reconsider the *why* of our preaching. It forced us to go back to the basics in some ways and to question the familiar form of twenty-two minutes, three points, and a poem. Yes, it was hard. No, we didn't do it perfectly. But our understanding of the Ministry of the Word was transformed in ways that we are still discovering.

\* \* \*

Our understanding of the Ministry of Sacrament also took on some new forms in the pandemic.

I have a sense that for the first few months many of us tried to ignore this aspect of our ministry because we weren't exactly sure what to do with it. How are we supposed to officiate at the table if we are not together? How do we sprinkle or pour if the font is in an empty sanctuary?

After a couple of months, however, we realized that we were going to have to come up with another plan. I saw a few baptisms done in some front yards in which the pastor proclaimed the baptismal formula through a mask and cupped the water with gloved hands. I watched one baptism that was done with a water gun, perhaps not the *best* imagery for the moment, especially considering the simultaneous pandemic of gun violence and police brutality. And I heard of another baptism done dry-clean style in which there is no water and no physical touch—was there Spirit? All these methods respond to the challenges of the moment,

but they leave something lacking. They fall short of a full baptismal experience.

As with my analysis of pandemic preaching, I realized a pattern when I saw someone break it for the first time. While many celebrations of baptism in the pandemic seemed impersonal and distant, a baptism led by a friend on Zoom from Huntsville, Alabama, in May of 2020 felt different. This one surprised me. Though the setting felt so odd, the presider, Tara Bulger, managed to make the experience familiar at the same time, with several important decisions. First, the baptism was live (imagine that!). It was an interactive moment rather than a prerecorded add-on to worship. Second, a ruling elder participated, which wasn't always the case in other early celebrations of this sacrament. Third, there was added theological depth as they talked through how this was all going to work.

The pastor spent a great amount of time talking about what was taking place as she led her congregation through this sacrament. She noted the familiar and the unfamiliar. She noted what it meant to "gather" in this way as she named ways for the congregation to show support to this child and his family in the near and distant future. The pastor prayed over the water in front of her and connected it to the water sprinkled onto the child's head. And as she recited the baptismal Trinitarian formula, the water actually splashed onto the camera the couple was using. Whether it was intentional or unintentional, all who were a part of that experience remembered their own baptism! The element of chance made everyone aware of the liveness of the event, an irreplaceable element of the sacramental experience.

The Latin word *sacramentum*, meaning "mystery," is where we get our English word "sacrament." I saw many baptisms that seemed to cheapen the mystery in the moment, but somehow this baptism added a depth that enhanced the mystery in some wholly holy ways.

Inspired by Pastor Tara Bulger's honest acknowledgement of the awkwardness of doing a baptism over Zoom, yet feeling a sense of complete awe witnessing it, I and my congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Aiken, South Carolina, decided it was time for us to parse out our new practice of communion.

In May of 2020 the clerk of session, Clark McCants, my colleagues Holly Shoaf-O'Kula and Terry Wimberly, and I recorded a video ahead of



a virtual service of communion in which we spoke about the actions of communion and what we believe about what happens at table. We outlined the practical steps of getting “bread” and “fruit of the vine” to use at home. We talked about the transcendence of the Lord’s Table, that the table stretches beyond all time and space constraints, even into each of our homes. We acknowledged that practicing intinction online would not be the same as walking down the aisle together, but that our actions of holding a cup from each of our kitchens at once for the same purpose embodied the idea of a common cup. (We had just recently given out church swag that included Tervis tumblers with our church logo on them—many families chose to use that one!)

Looking back, communion online was not perfect. Some theological questions arose. We had some blips in the recorded audio. I misspoke a couple of times. But despite all the reasons we might miss experiencing the holiness of the sacrament, I think we were lifted into the spiritual presence of Christ anyway.

I had more positive comments about that communion educational video than any sermon I preached during the pandemic. This is a sad realization for me, but an honest reflection on how God can always find a way. God will not be walled in—not even by those tiny boxes on Zoom!

It’s not that we taught them all they ever needed to know about the Eucharist in the video, but that we invited them to be the people of God in a new way for that new day. We are simply called to be “stewards of God’s mysteries,”<sup>10</sup> not defenders of the way we’ve always experienced them in the past. And through these simple words (read: Word) we participated in another expansion in this Ministry of Sacrament.

\* \* \*

I remember the first time I heard Lee Hinson-Hasty talk about the “pig in the python” predicament we Presbyterians were about to experience. The “pig” was the baby boomers. And the “python” was the length of ministry before retirement. Hinson-Hasty noted that the pig had almost passed all the way through the python at this point—which meant that we were about to experience a clergy shortage.

I first heard Hinson-Hasty talk about this while I was still in seminary. He is still writing about it

today.<sup>11</sup> But it has become even more complicated today with declining enrollment in master of divinity degree programs, fewer ordination-track graduates from seminaries, and church leaders continuing to shift away from traditional parish ministry toward other ministries or vocations. Within the next ten years, many predict that full-time pastors are no longer going to be available to congregations with fewer than 150 members. That would leave only 25.9 percent<sup>12</sup> of our congregations with people filling the role of minister of Word and Sacrament in a way that would look familiar to many today!

My first internship in seminary was with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). I went to Kenya and served in the Makongeni parish just outside of Thika, which was about an hour away from Nairobi. I learned many things in this internship. Most importantly, I learned firsthand something that may seem obvious: that “church” can look very different in different places.

Not only did most of the congregations in Thika have three worship services every Sunday in three different languages, but most pastors serving in the PCEA had several congregations under their care each week, a parish model of ministry in which each pastor partners with four to eight congregations in ministry. Ruling elders led worship and preached most of the time while the ordained minister of Word and Sacrament visited as many congregations as possible each Sunday.

My first Sunday there I preached five times with translators for three of those sermons (ironically, I was preaching on the story of the Tower of Babel). I watched the pastor I was shadowing lead communion six times in the same Sunday and baptize upwards of twenty people. It was a case in which the minister of Word and Sacrament was doing what was most needed—Word and Sacrament. Ruling elders carried out the other tasks of ministry like teaching and caregiving. (Pastors informed me that they did not like the term “teaching elder” because they didn’t have time to teach.)

Could we be heading for a parish model of ministry? Should we be planning ahead for something like this? We already have situations in which one pastor supports several congregations in yoked contexts. As we are expanding our understanding of the tasks of ministers of Word and Sacrament, we also consider changing models of ministry. How can we expand our understanding of ministry to best fit our future?

All of this brings me back to our initial list of various duties and expressive names for the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament dating back to 1789. This is a unique calling that many of us have gone into—and it's becoming more unique by the minute! As I read through this list from the *Book of Order* again, I give you some of my current inner thoughts:

*The person who fulfills this responsibility has, in Scripture, obtained different names expressive of his or her various duties. As he or she has the oversight of the flock of Christ, he or she is termed bishop.*<sup>13</sup>

Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss this term "bishop." Maybe it is useful not in the ecclesiastical power kind of way, but in the oversight and jurisdiction over a region kind of way. And perhaps our notion of "flock" will continue to expand to include those not currently in the singular-congregational fold (read: mold).

*... he or she feeds them with spiritual food ...*<sup>14</sup>

We will have to continue to be creative when it comes to proclaiming the Word in a contextualized, current kind of a way. Considering all that competes for people's attention and that consumers of media can choose to consume material from within their own context and worldview, what does it mean to choose to listen for God's Word in this post-Christendom world?

*... a servant of Christ in the Church ...*<sup>15</sup>

I notice that Christ is listed first and foremost. But that the church is still a part of this equation. Do we believe that Christ is still present in our congregations, and are we willing to serve the Christ we encounter there, even if it means evolving to the point that some people might claim they no longer recognize the church?

*... it is his or her duty to be grave and prudent ...*<sup>16</sup>

Our calling has never been to sugarcoat the truth, but many have been able to get away with it in the past. With declining numbers and hard decisions lying ahead, we need to be honest and practical with how we begin to restructure and reorganize ourselves in ministry. I seem to like the terms "grave" and "prudent" more as I age.

*... he or she is termed ambassador ...*<sup>17</sup>

We are merely the ambassadors when we stand behind the font or the table. We are just the representatives there to help draw attention to our living God who shows up in the water, wine, and the breaking of bread. Sometimes I fear that we allow ourselves, our role, and our traditions to get in the way of our simple calling to get out of the way of God's mysterious presence in these moments. Are we being creative for the purpose of showing off our creativity, or are we responding to and making way for God's presence among us?

*And as he or she dispenses the manifold grace of God and the ordinances instituted by Christ, he or she is termed steward of the mysteries of God.*<sup>18</sup>

As I reach the end of these words, I once again feel more than a little bit overwhelmed! I have been ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament for almost fifteen years now, and I have seen a lot change in that span of time. God willing, I will be in it for at least another fifteen years with just enough energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to help with an ever-expanding ministry of Word and Sacrament.

## Notes

1. *Book of Order* 2009–2011 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A., 2009), G-6.0201.
2. *Book of Order* 2009–2011, G-6.0202.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. *Book of Order* 2011–2013, G-2.0501.
9. Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), 9.
10. 1 Corinthians 4:1, NRSVUE.
11. “What Is the Future of Pastoral Leadership in the PC(USA)?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 2, 2022, <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/09/what-is-the-future-of-pastoral-leadership-in-the-pcusa/>.
12. [https://pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2021\\_stats\\_comparativesummary\\_update06\\_2022.pdf/](https://pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2021_stats_comparativesummary_update06_2022.pdf/).
13. *Book of Order* 2009–2011, G-6.0202.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

# Childlike Is Not Childish: An Approach to Worship

Lolimarta Ros Reiter

**W**e were on a weekend church retreat, and that night at worship I found out my dad was going to be sent to Colombia as a missionary. When my parents went up to the front for prayer, I felt very alone in the pew. No one had asked for my opinion about this! Nobody told me anything about this! And while everyone around me was celebrating and praising God for this great new ministry, all I could think about was my dad being sent to a dangerous country far, far away.

So, while everyone had their eyes closed in prayer and praise, I went outside. It was peaceful and quiet, and the night air was cool. I looked up at the stars, working up my courage. Then I put my hands on my hips and prayed out loud for the first time in my life. No one could hear me from inside anyway since the music had begun and people were all worked up in the Spirit. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I know I *demand*ed that God take care of my dad. I remember reciting a verse from Psalm 91, "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." It was one we memorized in Sunday school. I added emphasis by saying, "Not one toe, God! Not one toe!" I closed my prayer with ". . . please . . . in Jesus' name, Amen." I was five years old.

As I reflect on that memory, I am grateful for a number of things. My family, both at church and at home, had taught me that as a child I could approach God on my own, that I could intercede on behalf of others, that I could depend on God's promises to us and expect God to keep them, and that God's word was in my head and in my heart. I am grateful, but I also feel a little guilty, because now I am the mother and pastor. Have I provided my kids with these same tools and convictions? Have we as a church provided our children with sufficient opportunities to learn, talk about, use, and keep God's word in

their heads and their hearts? I do not believe that the nondenominational church that nurtured me in those early years had read many books on the theology of the child or Christian education, but they did something right by empowering me to claim the promises of the faith as my very own so early on and by helping me to recognize that I had access to God just like anyone else.

Children have what Dr. Lisa Miller calls an "inborn natural spirituality." In her book *The Spiritual Child*, she observes that from birth we are hardwired to be in a "transcendent relationship," a dynamic dialogue with a higher power, and she reports a number of studies to back this up.<sup>1</sup> I hope this is not news to the Christian community. In the Reformed tradition, we affirm that God's covenant with God's people extends to all people, including our children, the moment they are born. It is helpful, though, to have information from other fields of study to support this claim. Miller's studies reveal that giving attention to our spirituality during the developments of the first two decades of our lives becomes an integral part of our mental health and overall wellness. This is particularly true during puberty and adolescence, when we see a surge in spiritual awareness and a deep capacity to understand the inner spiritual life.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, more focus has been placed on the mental health of our young people. As a society, we may be more aware of the surge in cases of anxiety and depression in youth, but we still seem to feel unequipped to handle it. As a church, how can we help them remember and claim the love for each of them revealed in Christ's incarnation? How can we help them to feel the hope of the resurrection knowing that abundant life, not death, has the final say?

Loli Reiter is the pastor at the Presbyterian Church of Seffner in Florida, where she partners in ministry with her kinfolk in Christ and shares a happy life with husband, John, and their two daughters.

Everyone seems to say they want children and youth as part of their church community, but we have to ask ourselves why. Is it for adornment, because children are cute, and they make it look like our church still has some life in her? Are we afraid that *liveliness* is scarce? Is it because children remind us of the way things used to be? Or do we want more children and youth for our own enjoyment, because they *do* say the darndest things, and they look so angelic when they sing Christmas carols? None of these are good reasons. None of these reasons indicate that we believe children are full members of God's covenant community, nor do they recognize children as God's people and recipients of Christ's salvation. God has given children gifts and abilities to serve the church and build God's kingdom, too. Theologian Marcia Bunge observes that children are thinking beings and can do for themselves; they have growing moral capacities, spiritual questions, and experiences of their own to share.<sup>3</sup>

In her edited volume *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives*, Bunge gathers theologians from all over the world and from different Christian traditions whose work focuses on what has come to be called child theology, a discourse that considers theology from a childlike perspective. She recognizes that these theologians share similarities with feminist, womanist, Black, Dalit, and liberation theologians who recognize "the dignity and full humanity of a group of people who are often voiceless, marginalized or exploited."<sup>4</sup> The popular saying "Children are better seen, not heard" has greatly influenced the way children are treated and understood in our society, even if it is not often used today in those exact words. Children are not often given a trusted seat at the table or received as full persons in a room. Statistically, children also make up the largest percentage of victims of abuse and poverty. Children fit the description of a marginalized and exploited demographic whose voices are not always heard.

What would it look like if the perspectives and ideas of children were not just heard in our nurseries and Sunday schools, but also at session meetings, in finance and stewardship committee meetings, and in our worship planning? What if their voices were present all year round all across the church, not just on youth Sunday? Are we making space and creating opportunities for children to fully live out their baptismal identity and call? Do we

provide spaces where the imago Dei in each child's perspective can better inform our understanding of God and God's will for us? My hope is to explore a couple of examples that show how child theology can enrich our worship practices so we may better be the church in the world today.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Matt. 18:1-5).

Dr. Perry Hamalis is a professor of religious studies at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, and an ordained elder in the Eastern Orthodox Church. In his essay "Reclaiming the Virtue of Humility through a Child-Inclusive Lens," he seeks to rethink and reevaluate the way we approach the Christian virtue of humility using a child-inclusive perspective.<sup>5</sup> Though Dr. Hamalis does not mention interviewing children to gain his perspective in this particular essay, he does raise a valid point that children are vulnerable and dependent. Of course, the danger of asking those who are most vulnerable to practice humility is that it may promote passive acceptance of the inequalities they experience. Indeed, the church has been criticized for its misuse of the virtue, but here Hamalis references Matthew 18 to help us think of humility in a different way.

The presence of this child among the disciples in this narrative not only teaches them who enters the kingdom of heaven but also shows them who is the greatest. This child does not seem to be concerned with status or with holding a place of honor. The child is simply concerned with being a child, dependent on others for survival. Could Jesus be calling our attention to our fundamental need for each other? For Hamalis, Jesus' claim in Matthew 18 means that our connection to each other is not just nice, it is necessary. "In other words, Jesus' statement, 'unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of

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What better way to understand ourselves as Christians and children of God, than to acknowledge our need for each other and the importance of our connection to one another?

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heaven' (Matt. 18:3), can be rephrased as, 'unless you change your mindset of self-sufficiency and acknowledge your need for God and neighbor, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>6</sup>

In Christ's incarnation, he needed Mary and Joseph and his community to survive as an infant and as a child. What better way to understand ourselves as Christians and children of God, than to acknowledge our need for each other and the importance of our connection to one another? If we take *this* understanding of humility and examine our liturgical practices in light of it, we'll find fertile ground for growth opportunities. While liturgy is, at its best, the work of the people, I often worry that once the people find their pew on Sunday morning, worship does not, in fact, involve much connection with others. We sing and share prayers together, but for the most part we are looking at our bulletins with our gazes locked in the forward position. What if we took some time to reimagine the elements of worship to be more interactive?

What if our practices in worship made space to bring our hopes, fears, struggles, gifts, and strengths to God, not just privately but in the community of faith, enabling us to support, celebrate, and partner with one another? Yes, I can already see some of my church members squirming, but I find that when children are involved in fresh ways to enact worship, people become a lot more receptive to new ideas, surprised by the wisdom children bring. Of course, this is not the reason to include children. We include children because they are full, participating members of the covenant and recipients of Christ's salvation. Increasing receptivity to inclusion in the congregation is the icing on the cake.

We can make our proclamations of the word, our sermons, more interactive by finding those places in Scripture that lend themselves to the spiritual practice of *wondering*. Take the narrative in Matthew 18, for example, in which Jesus welcomes a child in response to the disciples' question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt. 18:1). Part of the sermon could include an invitation to the children or youth present to wonder: "I wonder how that child felt? Do you think that child

was happy to have that attention or scared to have that attention? What do you think this child did to be used as a good example by Jesus? When have you or one of your friends done something that made Jesus happy—something he may even use as a "good example"? I wonder if Jesus was lifting this child up as a good example because of something they did or simply because they were a child very much loved by God?"

The narrative nature of Scripture provides us with plenty of opportunities to wonder and imagine, "What if that was me? What would I do in that situation? What would my actions be like? Is that what God calls me to do?" We need to work on asking good questions with answers that are not always "yes," "no," or "Jesus." Invite children and their families to discuss questions at home and then share in worship what they discovered. Email a family or two asking if they would be willing to discuss a question at home and share in worship what they discovered. On Baptism of the Lord Sunday, for example, invite children and their families to share pictures and stories with the congregation of what has been told to them about their baptism. During Advent, ask families to pick a Nativity set or a special ornament that has to do with the theme for that Sunday and to share its meaning. During special holy celebrations and on all the ordinary days in between, how can we make opportunities in which children are invited to surprise us, to deepen our awareness of what connects us, all that we share in common, and how much we truly do need one another?

Child theologies can also help the church better appreciate the gift children have for using their imagination. This gift is particularly important to the church as it seeks to enact the reign of God in the world. In his essay in "Reimagining Hope with and Like Children," Dirk J. Smit highlights the power of children's imaginations to visualize what is not or is not *yet*. He references theologians in South Africa and other African contexts who look to children's powerful use of imagination as a model for Christian eschatological hope.<sup>7</sup> Children pretend and create "alternative" realities, and they put these realities

into practice. This becomes a way to think about Christian practices of visualizing and actualizing the promises of deliverance through years of suffering and struggle. As Smit writes, “[These theologians] honored, engaged, and listened to children as well as incorporated childlike knowing and hoping into their works and actions as they imagined and worked toward a better tomorrow.”<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting on the meditation “This Is Our Comfort” by W. D. Jonker, Smit writes about another way that childlike knowing can influence our theology. He references the painful experiences of family and friends with a loved one who has dementia or other illness that affects cognitive abilities. He assures us that “belonging to God does not depend on our knowledge of God.”<sup>9</sup> Though it references an experience toward the end of life, this idea echoes Reformed understandings of infant baptism: God has claimed us before we know God. God claims us in all the seasons of our lives, whether or not we are conscious of ourselves, of others, or even of God. “The hand of God over us when we were born is also over us when our consciousness ebbs. This is our comfort.”<sup>10</sup> We didn’t know God when we were babies, but God knew us. Our loved ones may not recognize us or themselves anymore, but God knows them. God watches their coming and going into whatever states of consciousness they experience. They are not alone. God is present.

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Faith needs imagination to be able to perceive what it means to be forgiven unequivocally, so we can forgive others in turn. Faith needs imagination to be able to perceive what it means to be loved unconditionally, so we can love others as Christ calls us. Faith needs imagination to be able to perceive what it means to bear witness to the reign of God, so we can live lives seeking the justice of God’s kingdom of peace.

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It is not a comfort unless we believe it. The assurance that God’s hand is over us, regardless of our ability to recognize it, comes from faith, and

faith requires imagination. Faith needs imagination to be able to perceive what it means to be forgiven unequivocally, so we can forgive others in turn. Faith needs imagination to be able to perceive what it means to be loved unconditionally, so we can love others as Christ calls us. Faith needs imagination to be able to perceive what it means to bear witness to the reign of God, so we can live lives seeking the justice of God’s kingdom of peace. Imagination makes it possible for us to live into God’s promises now. These promises may not be fulfilled, but we trust they are as good as done because God made them—this is already and not yet. Knowing like children and hoping like children empowers the church to live out what it means to be assured of things hoped for and enables us to be convinced of things we have yet to see. We enact the reign of God not by future-casting and fortune-telling but by remembering God’s promises in the words of prophets, fulfilled in Christ, and manifested in the endurance and growth of the church in all corners of the world.

The sacraments offer particular opportunities to practice a child-inclusive approach and live into child theologies. How do we incorporate the creative power of imagination into our celebrations of the sacraments, where much of our talk about God’s coming reign takes place? Churches may already have opportunities outside the worship service for education on the sacraments, but what are some ways we can empower children to be a part of the celebration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in worship? Passover prayers in Jewish traditions incorporate questions asked by children who are present. While we have to be careful not to appropriate from traditions that are not our own, I wonder if we might take influence from the Seder’s inclusion of children by including children in writing the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving or other liturgies. Children’s voices can also become part of the writing of liturgy. At communion we thank God, we remember Jesus, we ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we proclaim the coming of the kingdom. These movements in the communion liturgy can become teaching tools in Sunday school classes. Teachers might invite children to list things they are grateful for that God has made, share some of the things they remember Jesus doing when he was here on earth, and imagine the kind of world God intends through the Holy Spirit. We can ask, “What are some of the things God will give us and what

are some things God will take away to make the world be like heaven?" These reflections could be incorporated into the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving the following week.

Baptism is also a great place to involve children as we are all formed in our understanding of and participation in building the kingdom of God, a world where there is justice and peace. I think it is important to give kids a "front-row seat" to each baptism so that they can more effectively participate in the liturgy and be reminded of their role as "big siblings" in Christ for the newly baptized. What if we gave each child and the parents of the baptized child little wooden blocks with the phrase "builders of the kingdom"? We would share with them that at baptism we are reminded that God claimed and chose each of us to be builders of the kingdom of God here and now, working to make the world a better place. You can also invite youth to come to the front during a baptism and ask them to share what kind of world they would like their new sibling in Christ to live in.

I've recently started struggling with some of the challenges of middle age in regard to my body, my mind, and my outlook on life. The recognition that I'm getting old plus the ongoing stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic, the warring madness of the political landscape in this country, and constant news of tragedies all over the world have left me in a funk. I wonder, are we progressing in building the reign of God here on earth as in heaven? Are we moving forward in our quest to make the world better? Are we working for justice and for the well-being of all? Or are we on a carousel, repeating the same historical mistakes over and over again? Recently, I remembered a conversation I had with my then twelve-year-old daughter. She overheard a conversation in which, out of my weariness at structural and systemic racism, I shared with someone that I'm not sure we'll ever be able to solve the problem of racism. My daughter asked in the car ride home, "Mom, do you really believe that?" (She doesn't seem to hear me when I tell her to pick up her folded laundry, but she caught that!) I

backpaddled and tried to talk my way around it, but she eventually said, "Well, I think we *will* be able to one day solve that problem. We will live in an equal world." I got a little choked up and said, "You are right! That's what the Bible says."

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:12-14).

I believe one of the gifts that children and youth bring to our world and our church is that they believe this. They believe that things can be different and better, and they will play a part in it. They can imagine a better way that is not tied to convention or limited by "the way we've always done things." How do we make spaces in our worship and our church life for these wise younger prophets to challenge and inspire us with the message God places in their hearts and minds for the church today?

## Notes

1. Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 53.
2. Miller, *The Spiritual Child*, 67.
3. Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 20.
4. Bunge, *Child Theology*, 15.
5. Perry Hamalis, "Reclaiming the Virtue of Humility through a Child-Inclusive Lens," in Bunge, *Child Theology*, 182.
6. Hamalis, "Reclaiming the Virtue of Humility," 187.
7. Dirk J. Smit, "Reimagining Hope with and Like Children," in Bunge, *Child Theology*, 241.
8. Smit, "Reimagining Hope," 242.
9. Smit, "Reimagining Hope," 250.
10. Smit, "Reimagining Hope," 250.

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I wonder, are we progressing in building the reign of God here on earth as in heaven?  
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for justice and for the well-being of all? Or are we on a carousel, repeating the  
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# So Much from So Little

*Sydney McGough*

Preached at Spring Hill Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama, on  
November 14, 2021

## **John 6:1–14**

**G**ood morning! My name is Sydney, and I am a fifth grader and go to Mary B. Austin Elementary School. I will be your preacher this morning.

After Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a crowd followed him. They saw how he helped the sick. He performed miracles. Jesus went on top of a mountain and sat down with his disciples. He looked up and saw a huge crowd coming towards him, and the first thing he said was, “How are we going to feed this crowd!?” This shows that Jesus cared.

The disciples freaked out. Phillip answered, “We can’t pay for this! What are we going to do?” There was a moment of silence while they thought. One of his disciples, Andrew, said to him, “There is a small boy with five loaves and two fish.” That day there was a crowd of five thousand—and that was just the men! Logically, you couldn’t feed five thousand people with just five loaves and two fish. There wasn’t enough! Unless there was a miracle.

Jesus told his disciples to make the people sit down. So they sat. Jesus was smart, because five thousand people is a lot of people, and without organization things can get very chaotic.

Then Jesus took the loaves and the fish and he gave thanks. In this story, a holiday was coming up for the disciples—the Jewish Passover festival was near. We have another holiday coming up that is a time to give thanks—Thanksgiving! Giving thanks is important. It reminds us we have a lot to be thankful for. I am thankful for family, church family, friends, my dog, my house, and teachers. Like Jesus did, we give thanks for the food on the table when we sit

down to dinner. I wonder what Jesus was thankful for. Maybe he was thankful to do God’s work, for his disciples, for miracles he performed and for the people he helped, and for the boy, the five loaves, and the two fish—not much food, but for Jesus, it was enough. He and his disciples distributed the food. Everyone got as much as they wanted. It was a feast—plenty for all.

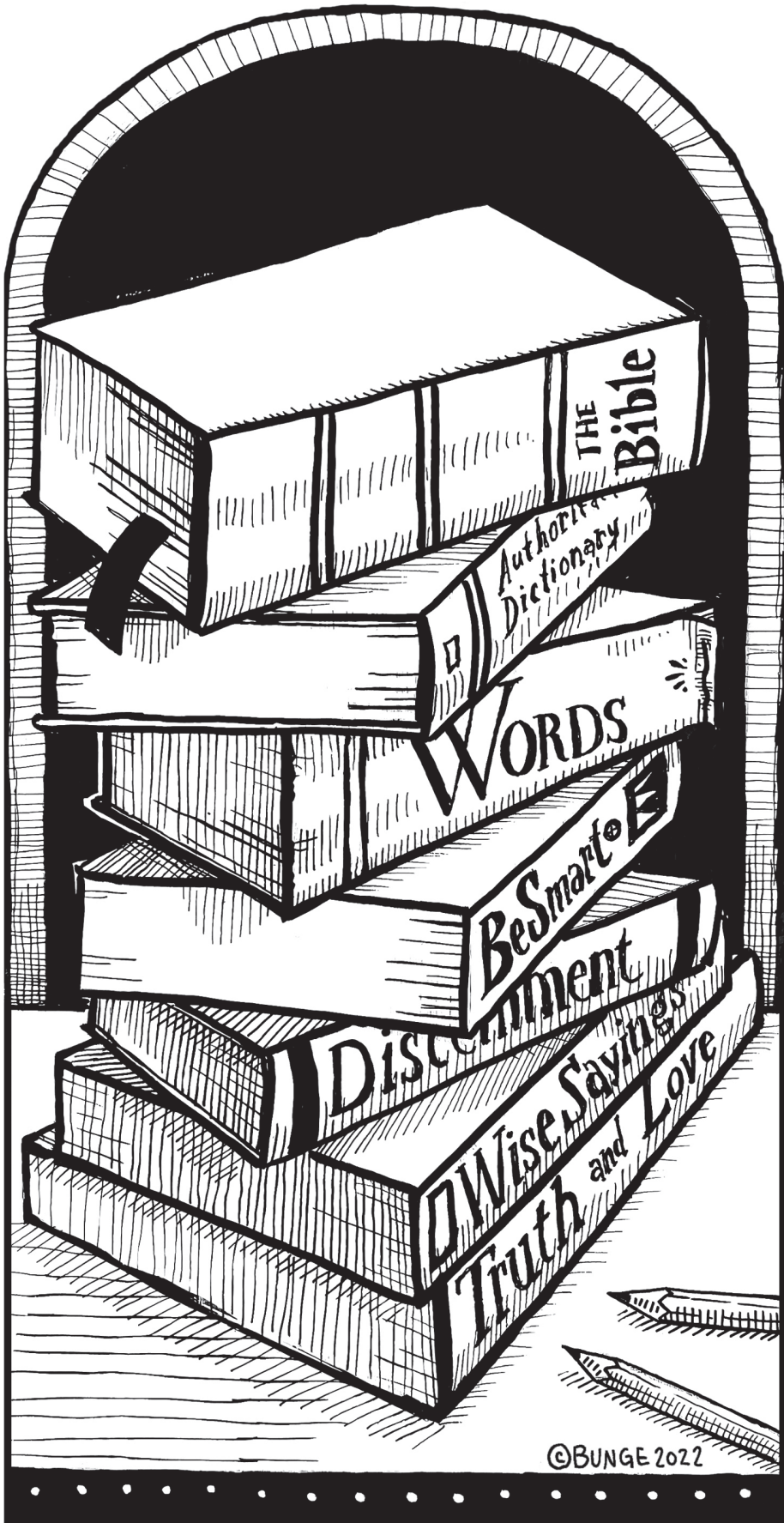
When the crowd was full, Jesus told his disciples to gather up leftovers so that nothing was lost. We waste a lot today, and we shouldn’t. There are so many people in the world who can’t waste.

Jesus is resourceful. He takes what is available and uses it for what he needs for others. He doesn’t waste anything—he uses everything in God’s name. They filled twelve whole baskets with food. Who knows how many more people could have had the feast, too!

When the people saw the miracle Jesus performed, they said, “He is indeed the prophet who has come into the world.” In my opinion, Jesus is more than a prophet. He is *the* prophet—God’s own Son. What I take away from this story is that I can use what I have to help so many others. So can you.

When I was in kindergarten, my teacher asked me to help a new student. He came from another country and spoke a different language from me. The teacher asked me to help him, and I did almost every day as I made a new friend. He is still at my school and has lots of friends. The teacher gave me an opportunity to use my experience and time to welcome someone else. God can turn so little into so much. He can turn all our lives around, forgive all our sins, and make us wholly who we are. Leave today thinking of this. Go do some good. Amen.

Sydney McGough is a member of the community at Spring Hill Presbyterian Church in Mobile, Alabama. She is currently in sixth grade and enjoys music, soccer, and trivia. Sydney’s joyful spirit, empathy, and contagious smile is a blessing to her family, friends, and church community.



*O Jesus, I Have Promised*  
acrylic and ink on wood  
Jennifer Bunge

# Gleanings

Charles Robertson

Preached at First Presbyterian Church in Greenville, North Carolina,  
on Youth Sunday, May 15, 2022

## Leviticus 19:9–18

Good morning. My name is Charlie Robertson, and I am a senior at D. H. Conley High School. In the fall I will attend North Carolina State University, where I will major in agronomy. Agronomy is the study of soil management and crop production. I plan to work in eastern North Carolina's agriculture industry after college. First Presbyterian Church has been a big part of my life from a very young age. I have been active in many different parts of our church since I was a little child in vacation Bible school. I have attended Sunday school and confirmation, helped with congregational activities, and gone on mission trips and fellowship trips. Taking part in these activities has allowed me to meet lifelong friends, strengthen my relationship with the Lord, and gain many new experiences through helping others. My experiences in confirmation and Christian education really rooted my faith and allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of Scripture and the ways in which Jesus can work and live through each of us. Those times also allowed me to profess my faith and to become a member of this church, and I am really grateful for a space in which to do that.

The Scripture lesson today comes from the book of Leviticus, chapter 19, verses 9 through 18. Much of this reading has ties to agriculture, and like I tell everyone, you can always relate anything back to agriculture because it is involved in everything that we do. I chose this Scripture because my interests and career path help me to hear the good news in it. Here we read about the sundry laws and how they teach us to look out for our fellow human beings. As sophisticated as life has become, all

these lessons still apply to many areas of our lives millennia after they were written. I find that to be very powerful. Verse 9 says, "Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest." If you have not heard of the term *gleaning*, it is the process of going to the field and picking up the produce that is left behind by a farmer after harvest. Many of the products that are left behind are still edible but might not be the prettiest. For thousands of years, farmers have followed this process of leaving some crops behind, and it allows people who need food to gather it. This is still practiced today with produce and sweet potatoes in North Carolina.

The reason the Israelites performed this practice was to allow the poor and needy to have access to the fruits of their labor. This was one of the ways that God showed the Israelites that just as God provided for them, they should provide for others. Verse 9 also says, "You shall not reap to the very corners of your field." This allows for easy access for those who need it. Many farmers still practice this today because of the meaning found in leaving food at the edges of the field, knowing that you might help someone who greatly needs the food in an unspoken way that draws little attention.

Verse 10 continues, "Nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger." I find this to be really meaningful because it raises my awareness that someone is always going to be worse off than I am, and that if we can do something to help someone out, then we are living more Christ-like lives. I have always enjoyed serving others, and I aim to live my life by these ideas as much as I possibly can. I have already learned so much about

Charles Robertson is a lifelong Presbyterian and a freshman at North Carolina State University, where he studies agronomy.

serving others in my youth career by working at the food bank, building handicap accessible ramps for those in need, and doing yardwork.

Just as the farmer sows seed every year, I have done the same in my experience as a youth here at First Presbyterian Church. This planting season, as I sow the seeds of my faith, I prepare for the harvest of my future. The good news is that along the way, God promises to provide enough food from the corners of the field for everyone in need. As both literal and metaphorical farmers, we have a responsibility to give what we can, knowing that we will have needs, too.

I want to give a huge thank-you to my family for supporting me and standing behind me in everything I do. I also would like to thank Brian Dilday for getting me involved in the youth group and for taking such good care of us on all our adventures and for being such a wonderful role

model and beacon of energy throughout everything. I also want to thank Dr. John Ogle for being Mr. Dilday's "right-hand man" and showing up to every youth event with his sense of humor and unwavering support of each of us. We have had some really good times, and I hope to continue to strengthen that relationship with both Mr. Dilday and Dr. Ogle.

I would like to thank my sponsoring elder from confirmation class, Mr. Bill Fariior, for his support in each area of my life. I will always remember the spiritual guidance and good memories we made while eating dinner together at Cubbie's and hanging out at the farm. Finally, I would like to thank each person sitting here today and every person who has been part of my spiritual journey thus far in this church. I have learned about God's goodness through each of you, and I cannot thank you enough.

# Bearing Burdens Together

*Erina Kim-Eubanks*

Preached at Bethel Community Presbyterian Church  
in San Leandro, California, on July 19, 2022

## *Numbers 11:4–17*

Friends, this morning, I have a question for you:

### **What emotions come up for you when you have to ask for help?**

Do you feel embarrassed? Nervous? Excited? Guilty? All of these emotions are real!

For me, asking for help is not an easy thing, and two specific feelings come to mind at the thought of having to ask for help. First, asking for help makes me feel guilty. As an Asian American woman, I had this sense growing up that being a burden to other people is one of the worst things you could do or be. So there is a certain amount of guilt and shame that comes up for me when I have to ask for help.

Second, asking for help makes me feel anxious. I am, admittedly, an anxious person (though a high-functioning anxious person), so asking for help is sometimes hard for me because, as stressed as I am doing something and no matter how long my to-do list, I know that if I do it myself it will get done the way I think it should be done.

### **So asking for help is hard. But today I want to propose that it is essential for our survival.**

As we continue our sermon series *Life Together in the Spirit*, this morning we are focusing on the practice of sharing burdens with one another. In the face of all the various emotions that we feel about asking for help, about being dependent or, I should say, interdependent, with others, this remains true:

### **None of us are meant to live life by ourselves.**

### **None of us are meant to carry all our burdens alone.**

This story of Moses and the exodus community from the book of Numbers reminds us of that truth. Many of us are probably less familiar with the book of Numbers, a text that traces the journey of Moses and the people of God through the wilderness. In fact, “In the Wilderness” is the Hebrew title for this book.

In chapter 11 we find a story within a story. The people of Israel complain and grumble and ultimately receive judgment from God, but within this narrative, we also hear about Moses and what happens to him in the midst of trying to serve God and lead his community in this time of transition.

You see, the people of God have been delivered out of Egypt. They have crossed the Red Sea, they have received the law from Moses, and they are trying to figure out what it means to live life, not only in the wilderness, *but as free people in the wilderness.*

And we see in the beginning of Numbers 11 that some problems arise. A group of people begin complaining. Specifically, some translations call this group of people “the rabble.” The meaning of this term is unclear, but some think it refers to a mixed multitude of people, Jewish people as well as Egyptian exiles who also escaped from Egypt alongside the people of Israel, likely those in the lower grades of society.

These people are complaining about the food that is available to them. They want meat and fish and spices, and instead they have only manna. Even though they were enslaved in Egypt and are now free people, they complain—at least they ate better

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there. And Moses hears those complaints rising into weeping in their camp.

Imagine this Moses, who has already endured so much. He has taken on a leadership role he didn't want in the first place as somebody who would be identified as having a disability—a speech impediment. He has taken on Pharaoh head-to-head, delivered the people out of Egypt in a series of dramatic and somewhat traumatic events, walked through parted seas, led them wandering through the wilderness, and encountered God on the mountaintop in the theophany.

He's seen God do unimaginable acts to set his people free. And all they can do is complain about eating meat. It's in this moment that he hits his breaking point, saying: "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once" (Num. 11:14–15).

It's all too much for him. He is exhausted. He is at his end. And so God ends up giving Moses some help. God says to Moses: "I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself" (v. 17).

**God orchestrates a situation in which Moses will share the load. And we see that it is here in the wilderness that a vision for shared leadership emerges. The community ethic YHWH ushers in is outside of the norms of the Egyptian Empire, which is built on hierarchy and exploitation. It is a community ethic built on shared burdens and shared leadership. Moses does not have to bear it all alone.**

Friends, we, too, live in a world that wants us to believe that the burden is all ours to carry alone, a world where the ethos of Egypt and Empire still freely reigns. We are bombarded with the narratives of grind culture and capitalism, which make us value profit and productivity over people.

We are bombarded with the Western ideals of hyper-individualism and humanism, which make us believe that we are self-made, that we can achieve whatever we set out to without the help of others.

We are bombarded with the church's narratives of saviorism and exceptionalism that make us think that we can do it all, as if there are no limits to what we can do and who we can "help."

**And friends, I'm sorry to say, these myths simply are not true.**

**We are living in a moment that has reminded us of that.**

The pandemic has reminded us that we are all inextricably connected. The unrelenting nature of all we've endured has caused many of us to hit breaking points and has shown us that we can't just keep pushing through forever. The burdens are too much for us to carry alone.

A few weeks ago on my monthly spiritual direction call, I had my own Moses moment.

I had just experienced an intensely busy month, and I was feeling exhausted. The burdens of being a pastor, the burdens of being a queer woman of color living in these days and times, the burdens of parenting two kids under five years of age in a pandemic, the burdens of providing care and holding space for so many people without space or time for a real break, the burdens of our world and all that's happening in an unending pandemic: I was feeling the weight of it all.

In many ways, I think I began to feel like Moses did, that I was in a position where I had to be God to people. I felt I had to hold, carry, and bear the burdens of everyone else in my life. That I had to meet everyone's needs.

But also, I had forgotten what it meant to ask for help. To ask God for help. To ask others for help. To allow myself to be hosted, and pastored, and cared for and needy. Even though I was exhausted and overwhelmed, I convinced myself that asking others for help would be too much work for me.

My spiritual director invited me into a time of engaging God to see what God might have to say about how I was feeling. And in a time of silence, I was reminded of this particular scene in the movie *Encanto*, a 2021 Disney animated movie that tells a story about the descendants of a family, the Madrigals, who fled violence in their home village in Colombia and entered Encanto, a magical land. In Encanto, the family's house is built and sustained by the magic of a constantly burning candle that protects them from harm and grants gifts to each child in the Madrigal family.

Toward the end of the movie, though, the candle's flame has flickered and its powers wane, causing the Madrigal home to fall apart. As the Madrigal family is faced with the enormous task of rebuilding their house that lies in ruins, the song "All of You" plays. At one point in the song, Mirabel, one of the Madrigal descendants, sees all the townspeople coming and hears them say:

Lay down your load (lay down your load)  
We are only down the road (we are only  
down the road)  
We have no gifts, but we are many.”

Though the Madrigal family bears many burdens, they aren't alone. Their community comes in to help bear the load.

As I imagined this scene, I was reminded again that I am not alone, that I don't have to carry the load alone. Specifically, I was reminded that when it comes to church work, I don't have to do everything by myself. In fact, doing so will lead to death—my own death and the death of the church. Instead, we have the opportunity to do things a different way, to stand as a counter witness to the narratives of Empire that focus on individualism and production by saying, “We are gonna do this *all together*.”

**WE get to share the load.**

Friends, we are living in some pivotal times. And I believe that God is inviting us back into this practice of sharing burdens, of interdependence. We are called to bear the image of a triune God—a God of community, a God of relationship, a God of interdependence and mutuality.

In this Disability Pride Month, may we learn from the witness and the gifts of many in the disabled community who already know and embody this reality so deeply. This week I was reminded of

our ancestor, Stacey Park Milbern, and her work co-creating Disability Justice Culture Club, which is both a community of collective care and a house and hub for queer, trans, disabled people of color living in the east bay. During the pandemic and over the years, Disability Justice Culture Club has been a hub for community care. They not only believe in interdependence, but also practice it.

This is why they provided hygiene kits for homeless encampments during the beginnings of the pandemic. This is why they provided resources to people with disabilities who lost electricity during power outages in the fall of 2019. This is why they created mutual aid funds for vulnerable people with disabilities throughout the pandemic. As Stacey said back in 2020, “Interdependence is going to be what saves us.”

Interdependence is going to be what saves us.

In order to liberate ourselves from the oppressing ways and narratives of Empire, we are going to have to learn how to share the load together.

So let us learn how to share our burdens with one another.

Let us practice the act of both asking for help and extending it to others.

Let us experience the life and salvation that comes from interdependence.

Amen?

Amen.



# Longer Tables, Shorter Walls: Every Gender Belongs

*Rev. Riana Shaw Robinson*

Delivered to San Francisco City Church, July 17, 2022

## Acts 16:13–19

About two years ago, I got ordained. My ordination service happened in the height of COVID. Everything was on Zoom. It was all women. When I say all women, I mean like, only women. Women were the elders. Women were the musicians. We had somebody who was dancing as a part of it. The leader and preacher were women. I gathered all of the women from the classis as ministers of Word and Sacrament. I knew that as I was stepping into this new thing—stepping into this new vocation—I needed midwives, and I needed mamas to be the ones who would help me take this step.

It was doulas, midwives, teachers, and sisters who supported me on the long and isolating journey to becoming a pastor.

Women that knew the awkward glances when you walk into a room of men who are bold enough to ask if you're lost or if you can grab them a cup of coffee. Women familiar with questions about whether you are the pastor's wife. Women who had practiced timing a sermon so there would be time to nurse a baby between services. Women who told the truth but learned how to soften the blows for those that weren't ready to hear it. Women who knew the joy of being a role model to all of our daughters and the weight of our existence being prophetic witnesses to those that questioned our calls.

I tell you what, it felt like it was spectacular. It was so beautiful and affirming and liberating to be surrounded by my sisters and my mothers and my daughters. I needed the strength of these women knowing that the spaces that I would step into as a pastor would not always be so affirming and welcoming.

Like my ordination, this passage shows us that **God uses multiple expressions of womanhood and femininity to embody the good news of liberation.** Paul is blessed by women in this passage. Without the women, Paul and his boy gang would not have been able to fulfill their call to preach in Macedonia. Without women, ministries cannot thrive.

**Worshiping women blessed Paul with WELCOME.** Faithful women gave him the opportunity to share in the space they had carved out for themselves. Let's start at the beginning of the first way that Paul was blessed in this passage. Paul and his disciples make their way into the city and say, "We're pretty sure that there's a community of people worshiping by the water. Let's go there."

I will offer grace to Paul and believe that he showed up in a space full of women and said, "First, let me hear you before I tell you how it's done, or what it shouldn't be, or what you didn't know you already knew." So, we're going to pretend that Paul listened first. When he listened, he heard the stories of these women. He learned from them what it meant to create a space when you were not welcomed in other spaces. Paul learned what community looked like from these women who gathered and cared for each other, loved each other, preached the gospel, and worshiped.

I really hope that he brought some food to share or offered to clean up after. If Paul listened well, I know the women would tell him about the ins and outs of the city, who to talk to and who to be cautious of. These women would tell Paul all the ways that God was already at work in the city.

I don't know if Paul fully grasped the gift of these women. But these worshiping women had deep

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wisdom about how to survive in a hostile world and worship anyhow. I really hope Paul, Timothy, and Silas listened to the worshipping women.

**Lydia blessed Paul with RECIPROCITY.** Like any woman that is explicitly named in Scripture, folks have a lot to say about Lydia. Lydia was a boss. Not even a girl boss. She was just a boss. She was a businesswoman. She was in charge of her household. She ticked that box on her taxes. She was also an immigrant. Lydia was a woman from a different city who had somehow come into a new city and made her space. She held her own and became a leader in a worshipping community. Many say that she was the first European convert. Lydia was a boss and amazing in so many ways. And you know what she offered Paul? She blessed him with reciprocity.

Some people hated Paul. Some people fawned over Paul. Lydia invited Paul to see her as someone, as a woman, who could bless him. First, she invites Paul to recognize and name her faithfulness. Then, Lydia invites Paul to be blessed by her hospitality. Lydia helped Paul to see that she had something to offer to the ministry. Paul wouldn't have survived without the women. I hope while he was staying in her home, Paul was still listening to Lydia.

A commitment to reciprocity challenges our savior complexes. Do we put on our *ally* shirt but refuse to acknowledge the work that has already been done? Do we show up in places poised to give and save? Are we willing to be blessed by those who, not too long ago, ignored, dismissed, or straight-up oppressed?

Let me tell you about a time when reciprocity knocked me on my holy rear end. I was going out in East Oakland for a night walk to engage with women who are victims of human trafficking. The walks are done with an amazing group called Love Never Fails. We just walked. We said hello. We asked people's names. We offered water and hand sanitizer. I'm not going to lie, I was afraid and unsure. We had our first encounter. There were two young women, probably about the age of my daughter who was in her twenties, and they were climbing out of a van in outfits that were not conducive to the cold weather.

I went to the women and said, "I want to let you know God loves you so much." And you know what she said to me? She goes, "Oh, I know." She asks, "Can I sing a song for you?" This woman belts out at the top of her lungs "Oh, how he loves me. He is jealous for me." She is singing so loud the people on

the other side of the block were listening. We were weeping and we were crying because we thought we were going to tell her something about God. And in that moment, God said with her song, "Oh, you didn't realize you were coming to be blessed by her."

**The unnamed slave girl blessed Paul with TRUTH.** I had a visceral reaction when I got to this part of the text. We go from these powerful moments of Paul listening and receiving the wisdom and hospitality of women, to Paul silencing a young girl. A girl who was already marginalized in so many ways. A girl who was speaking the truth. "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

The text says that Paul was annoyed.

In Matthew 16, when Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus acknowledges that certain truths only come from the Lord.

The unnamed slave girl spoke the truth. But she was too loud. Too poor. Too female. Too annoying. **So Paul silenced her.** Some commentaries suggest that Paul liberated the unnamed female slave from demonic possession. That has been a convenient narrative to dismiss, ignore, and silence faithful women who are too loud.

The text doesn't say that Paul liberated her from the people who owned her. Paul "liberated" the unnamed slave girl from the little bit of agency and power that she had, but he was not committed to her freedom.

I'm sure that no one in this room would say that women shouldn't preach or lead. We all believe that women's voices are necessary. Some of us might even have a shirt that says *feminist*. But are we willing to acknowledge that we still carry baggage around who is the right type of woman? Can we pause for a moment as we may pat ourselves on the backs? Can we be honest that we are still looking for the right type of woman? We want the Lydias. We want the women who have it all together. We want the women who can make a significant contribution to the ministry. We want the women who are available when things go bad. Can we listen to the slave girl? Can we listen to the woman who's too loud and too poor and too anything else?

That question took me to a famous speech by the formerly enslaved abolitionist Sojourner Truth. There's an entire speech in which she asked over and over and over, "Ain't I a woman?" In response to a man who said women should be helped into

carriages and over mud puddles, she was saying, "What about me?" In response to a man who said women should be fertile, she was saying, "What about me and my children?" In response to a man who said women should be strong, she was like, "Let me show you that I can be strong." She worked as hard as a man and bore thirteen children, and yet she had to ask over and over and over, "Ain't I a woman who should be protected, should be listened to, should be cared for, and honored?"

**Her final words in that speech speaks to the power of women.**

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it; the men better let them.

Are we seeking out the women who have built communities of faith on the margins? Or, do we ask them to clean up before coming to our churches and volunteering with the children's ministry? Are we acknowledging the holy wisdom of the women who clean our hotel rooms or take care of our children? Are we able to hear the truth from our family who were assigned female at birth but don't fit into certain molds of femininity? Are we listening to our trans sisters when they tell us that they are afraid? Are we screaming their names when the news would seek to forget them?

**We may have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.**

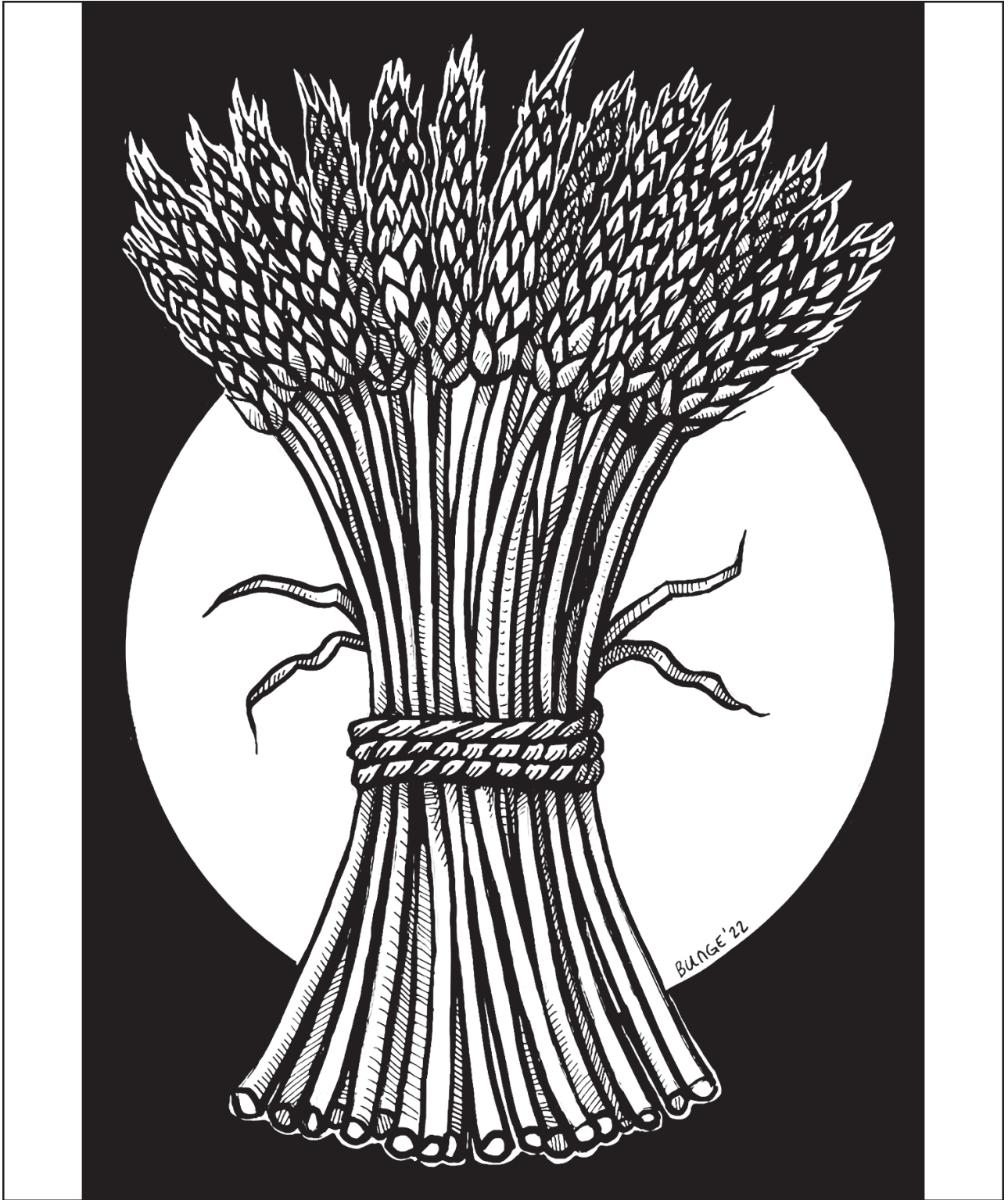
God shows us in this passage and throughout

Scripture that all women are the right type of women. I'm gonna say that again. God says that all women are the right type of women. The very old women who people have dismissed as being barren. Those are the right type of women to make way for the Lord. The little girls, the young women with no agency. That's the one that God chose to bring Jesus into this world. The hard-core warrior women who are willing to do the dirty work that other people are afraid to do. The women who are willing to lead. The women who bless the babies at the temple. The women who showed up in resistance to Pharaoh and said I will not kill these babies. Throughout Scripture, God tells us over and over that every woman is the right woman to speak God's words of liberation, grace, and love.

My prayer for us is that we will believe God, and we will believe women, not just the right ones. Not only will we believe them and welcome them because we're good at welcoming, but we will create the spaces where women can really belong. And bless the world. And bless the church.

Pray with me.

*God, you are good. You are a good mother who lays us down when we're tired. You are a mother who journeys with us when we are afraid and scared. You are the mother that sets the table and sits us down and feeds us. You are the mother who anoints our head and reminds us of who we were created to be. Would you help us to see you more clearly in the women, the nonbinary fam, and everybody who is expressing and embodying your divine femininity? Amen.*



*Come, Ye Thankful People, Come*  
acrylic and ink on wood  
Jennifer Bunge



# On Liturgy: Liturgy and Life

Alexandra Jacob

One recent Saturday afternoon, I opened the Notes app on my phone to make a grocery list. I opened my “Grocery List” note and read the following:

## **Grocery List:**

Black beans

Corn

Climate Change

Migrants

Those who lack access to water, food,  
and shelter

Clearly, a prayer request list had made its way into my grocery list. I recalled the previous night’s junior high church lock-in, which included some time for evening prayer in between rounds of hide and seek. That evening as we sat cross-legged in a circle in our church recreation room, I wondered what kinds of prayer requests I might hear within the circle. Prayer time with our junior high students often includes a wide range of content—from silly to serious, and everything in between. To my surprise, the prayer requests the students shared this particular evening were on the more serious side. Their minds and hearts were heavy with the news of the world—the effects of climate change on vulnerable global populations; a recent horrific headline of migrants being shuttled to northeastern states without their full consent; police raids of homeless encampments in our own city; and many, many more. I had anticipated a quick prayer time that evening, with youth eager to return to one of their favorite raucous lock-in games around the church. I was unprepared for just how quickly they were able and willing to engage that energy in the work of prayer. I shouldn’t have been so surprised.

I am reminded of the peaceable kingdom image from Isaiah 11: “and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6b).

Moments like the one I describe of the grocery-list-turned-prayer-list are few and far between. As much as I wish I could say that I remember my baptism every time I drink a glass of water or wash my face, or that I give thanks for the Eucharist every time I enjoy freshly baked bread at my favorite restaurant, the truth is that I rarely do. Often, those small intersections between the mundane and the holy simply go unnoticed.

In the final section of the PC(USA) Directory for Worship, we read the following: “The church’s mission springs from its worship, where we glimpse the reality and the promise of God’s eternal realm. The church’s mission flows back into worship as we bring to God the joy and suffering of the world.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, when worship is at its richest, it speaks to the real joy and suffering of the world. And when our lives are at their richest, our daily living brings forth glimpses of God’s realm. I think of this as the “permeability” of worship—the movement of worship out into our lives, and back again. The youth at the Friday night church lock-in were living out an element of this permeability, whether they knew it or not. They had carried the joy and the pain of the world around them into that brief time of worship, eager to translate it into the familiar language of prayer. I hope, too, that the permeability worked both ways: that the youth went home the next morning wondering what their small part might be in healing the world’s pain and relishing in the world’s joy.

As I struggle to perceive the flow from world to worship and worship to world, I have found some valuable conversation partners, often in the form

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of written resources. You will find below a list of such resources. Of course, no one book or podcast can lead us fully into the flow of lived liturgy, or of offering ourselves fully to God in worship. I have found, though, that devoting a bit of attention to this holy flow, this liturgical permeability, can invite us into that holy rhythm in ways that contribute to true transformation.

**Book: *Ordinary Blessings: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Everyday Life*, by Meta Herrick Carlson<sup>2</sup>**

Herrick Carlson's blessings beautifully bridge the gap between life and liturgy. Among many others, she includes blessings for everyday moments like paying bills, difficult experiences like losing a loved one, and "B-list" holidays like winter solstice and Tax Day. A favorite of mine is her blessing "For Looking in the Mirror." Herrick Carlson also just published a lovely collection of everyday blessings for parents and caregivers, *Ordinary Blessings for Parents*.<sup>3</sup>

**Instagram Account: @blackliturgies<sup>4</sup>**

Black author and liturgist Cole Arthur Riley's Instagram account and web content include the author's own writing about the intersections between life and liturgy. Her work often includes rich quotations from Black authors like Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and James Baldwin. A favorite liturgy of mine is her "Liturgy for the New Year," posted at @blackliturgies on December 31, 2021.<sup>5</sup>

**Podcast: Pray As You Go<sup>6</sup>**

The Pray As You Go podcast is a brief (under ten minutes) daily podcast that invites the listener into lectio divina prayer based on daily lectionary

readings for the day. The podcast includes meditative music from a variety of sources, and includes thoughtful prayer and meditation prompts to encourage a life of prayer.

**Book: *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the End of the World*, by Cláudio Carvalhaes<sup>7</sup>**

A product of a Council for World Mission project in 2018–2019, this book of liturgies is grounded in Carvalhaes's work with communities experiencing poverty and violence. The prayers, liturgies, ritual acts, and songs were written collaboratively, and the pieces bring voice to the unique lived realities of communities and individuals across the world.

**Notes**

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2. Meta Herrick Carlson, *Ordinary Blessings: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Everyday Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020).
3. Meta Herrick Carlson, *Ordinary Blessings for Parents: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Family Life*, The Ordinary Blessings Series, 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).
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# On Music: A Love Letter to Church Musicians

Mary Margaret Flannagan

Dear Friend,

How are you doing? To be a musician in ministry these days means that you are a survivor. You made it through a season of silence—through weeks and months without ensembles or congregations making a joyful noise together. You made it through a season of minimalism, without the usual activities and people and rhythms that keep us in sync. You made it through a season of stretching and bending in ways you never expected—breathing through protective (though stifling) layers and leading virtual choirs and ensembles. You found a way to embody congregational music in a season without a congregation present. You found ways to give more and work harder than you ever had. And, like many survivors of trauma, you put one foot in front of the other, one song after another, determined to make it to the next thing.

After all that we have seen and done, we are tired. So tired. Like inflation, the pace of ministry increased significantly but may not have adjusted back to our pre-pandemic status quo. Neither salaries nor job descriptions were adjusted to reflect the extra time and tasks poured into our programs. Now we must juggle both virtual and in-person worshippers. There is pressure for us to be part of the church that survives and even succeeds beyond the pandemic, though many leaders are exhausted and unsure if they have the energy to continue. Many of us need healing. Most of us want to reclaim a happy balance of life and ministry, though our questions of “how” remain unanswered.

We need to take time to intentionally acknowledge our survivor status, celebrating and mourning and nurturing the parts of ourselves still recovering from that wild season. We need to be

gentle with ourselves and each other, naming the things within us that have changed. For we are entering a season of reckoning, recognizing the changed landscape of ministry. Certainly, there are Ebenezers marking the places where we met God mid-pandemic, though we probably raised them in awe-filled moments without time to stop and wonder. Now we need to revisit those memorials, taking the time we didn’t have then to give thanks for who God was in that space and marvel at the ways it has shaped our ministry since. We also need to attend to the scars that we carry from exhaustion and emptiness and difficult conversations. These wounds may or may not be incapacitating, but they are certainly life changing and call altering.

In a recent article published by *The Christian Century*, Belden Lane wrote about his retreat into the New Mexico desert. He sought emotional and spiritual healing after health crises and his adult son’s death. Surrounded by natural rock formations and dry creek beds, he realized that “to encounter a canyon, we have to resist the temptation to fill what needs to be left open.” He went on to quote Goethe: “It is the nature of grace always to fill spaces that have been empty.” Then Lane continued, “All God needs is a hole that’s left open.”<sup>1</sup> God didn’t need Lane to return to some version of his former self. God didn’t need Lane to heal himself. God didn’t need Lane to smooth out the rocky places or fill the dry creeks or grow shade trees where there was barrenness. God needed space to make Lane into a new, *good* creation, filled with grace.

This story is permission-giving for all of us who have worked hard to fill the pandemic canyons and hold everything together for so many months. It’s time to stop and recognize the hole within

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ourselves—without blame or shame. Is that a creation canyon or a death valley? What is the wind song blowing through that space? How might God fill that hole?

We are on the edge of the next season. A new thing is springing forth—do you not perceive it?<sup>2</sup> God will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. God will fill the hungry with good things, bind up the broken-hearted, and fill the canyons with grace. It may not look anything like we expected (or even wanted), but it will be *good* because God is good, and God's creation is good.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has written at length about the Hebrew people's journey through the wilderness, toward the promised land, and later into exile. When the people suffered, they dreamed with holy imagination of what life on the other side could hold. The prophets foresaw God's promised goodness. In his book *A Gospel of Hope*, Brueggemann describes the people's yearning in their sung call for a new creation:

The new song never describes the world the way it now is. The new song imagines how the world will be in God's good time to come. The new song is a protest against the way the world now is. The new song is refusal to accept the present world as it is, a refusal to believe this is right or that the present will last. The church is always at its most daring and risking and dangerous and free when it sings a new song. Because then it sings that the power of the gospel will not let the world finally stay as it is.<sup>3</sup>

The world cannot, and will not, stay as it was. The world cannot, and will not, stay as it is. So we, ministers of music and ministers with music, sing a new song that calls the church to refuse the brokenness of now. We lead the people in a song of hope for who we will be someday. It is audacious

and daring, yet we do not stop singing when some laugh or cry "foolish!" Instead, we continue singing the song until those around us catch the vision and join the chorus.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,  
and think my work's in vain,  
but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.  
There is a balm in Gilead to make the  
wounded whole;  
there is a balm in Gilead to heal the  
sin-sick soul.<sup>4</sup>

Friends, you are doing faithful work. You are well loved, even when the suffering people cannot name it for themselves. Your gifts are changing the world one song at a time. Your songs are blowing through the pandemic's canyons, filling our hearts with goodness, grace, and hope.

I am grateful for the healing God is bringing within us. I am listening eagerly for the new song stirring among us. I pray that you will be reenergized for future years of service. Consider attending the Presbyterian Association of Musicians summer Worship & Music Conference in Montreat, North Carolina. Join one of the organization's regional groups. Testify to one another what you have heard and seen, then invite others to join the song.

With admiration and gratitude,  
your colleague in ministry,  
Meg

#### Notes

1. Belden C. Lane, "Back to the Canyons," *The Christian Century* (March 9, 2022): 23.
2. Isaiah 43:19.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 96.
4. "There Is a Balm in Gilead," African American spiritual.

# On Preaching: Ordination Sermon

Colleen Cook

It's that time of year. The officer nominating committee has met (repeatedly), the congregational meeting has been held, and newly elected elders are poised to be trained and ordained. At my smallish church, we maintain a session of eight or nine ruling elders, so our slate of nominations often includes both those previously ordained and one “newbie.” For the past four years, I have met with those who will be newly ordained to share the riches of the PC(USA) constitution. Generally, our treasurer trains about financial processes and the manual of operations. I get to talk about the good stuff! And I find that it feeds me every time.

In the best of situations, I get to encourage new ruling elders by reversing their expectations and breaking down the stereotypes that the *Book of Confessions*, Part One of the PC(USA) constitution, is made of dust-dry theological treatises and that Part Two, the *Book of Order*, is merely made up of a minutiae of rules meant to make Presbyterians ever more decent and in order. I get to share how *I* feel about these foundational documents.

To me, the constitution of the PC(USA) is exciting and risky and heroic. In its best expression, it resists fascism, pierces institutionalized racism, and puts into practice our great hopes: that God's new heaven and new earth shape us in the here and now. What could be more badass than an institution that makes this claim: “The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life” (*Book of Order*, F1.0301)!

On two occasions I have had the joy of sharing the constitution with individuals who wore wounds from extricating themselves as adults from evangelical theologies and traditions. Both were

women with incredible gifts for ministry, and both seemed to be holding their breath, wondering whether Presbyterian theology would really feel different after all, wondering if they could actually make vows binding them to another way of doing church.

We bear a responsibility to be gentle and truthful toward those who have been wounded by damaging theologies, those who were raised to understand the Bible as literal and morality as self-evident and those who were robbed of the power of their intellect and faith because of their gender. The PC(USA) constitution holds the key for such persons to reclaim a place at Christ's table.

Long before we approach the vagaries of the structure of Presbyterian government, we dip into the fresh water of the great ends of the church. Finally, someone is telling us what the church is really meant to accomplish—nothing less than the salvation of humankind, the maintenance of divine worship, and the preservation of the truth.

We see how councils solved christological arguments and how German resisters in World War II drew a line, making the bold and dangerous declaration, “We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him” (*Book of Confessions*, 8.15). The Reformed leaders of our past give us courage in *this* era of Christian nationalism.

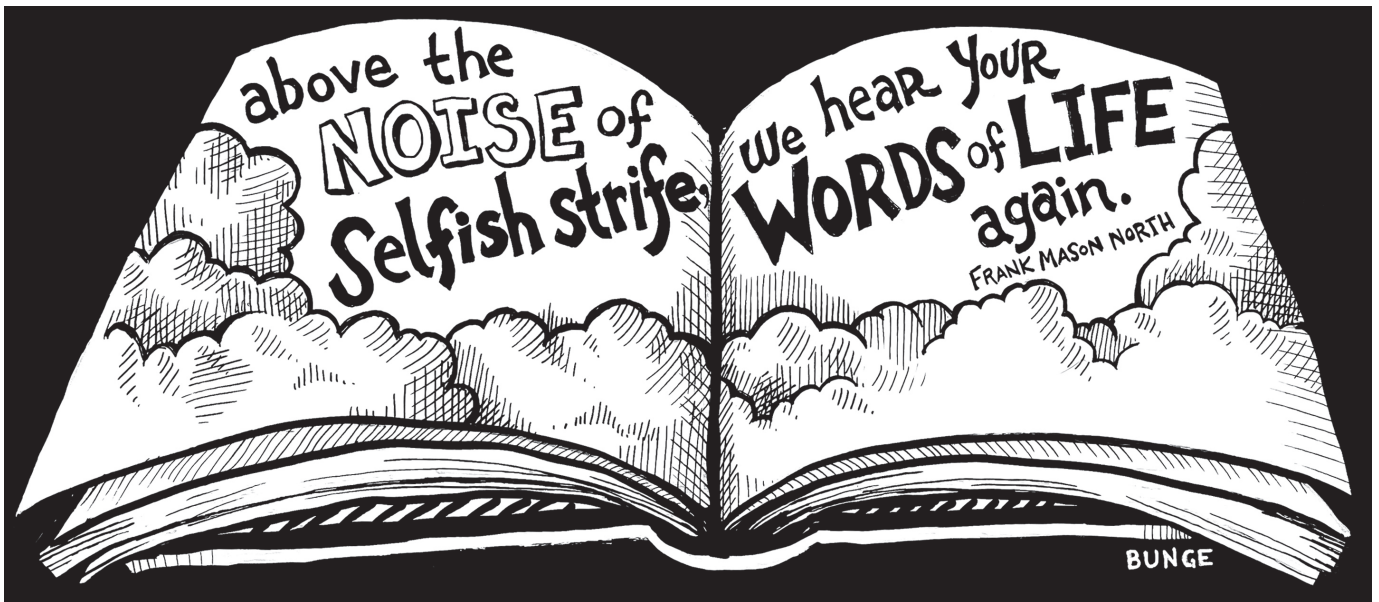
We linger over the bright, small jewels of the Heidelberg Catechism: “Q: What is your only comfort in life and in death? A: That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ” (*Book of Confessions*, 4.001). We notice places throughout

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the confessions that we would most certainly not confess today: the anti-Catholic flavor of the Scots Confession and the exclusively male pronouns in the Confession of 1967 where humanity is spoken of as “men,” for example. This is a church that is learning to progress. This is who we were, and we are being reformed. We dare not forget it.

We spend time parsing out what we believe are the “central tenets” to which we must give our assent in the ordination service. We decide whether we believe in it all. We rush through the layers of councils, the rules about calling a congregational meeting, the necessity and density of the discipline.

And as we do, my fire burns a little hotter for my work. I store up the good questions, fodder for sermons and devotion. I tear up, knowing the stories of the one who sits before me. They have decided to trust again. They have accepted a mantle of leadership in a church that has so often failed them. I am grateful to bursting for the gift of doubt that rejoices so when it is met with truth and order. I start to form a sermon for their ordination service, a sermon that affirms their call and their humanity, their preciousness to God.



*Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life*  
acrylic and ink on wood  
Jennifer Bunge

# On the Arts: Ministry of the People

David A. VanderMeer

This column is appearing in the third of three issues of *Call to Worship* recognizing the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)*, a document produced by the Faith and Order division of the World Council of Churches in 1982. In the previous issues contributors wrote about art related to baptism and Eucharist, and now we focus on the third topic, ministry. *BEM* considers ministry primarily from two perspectives, the ministry of mission and the ministry of the ordained clergy. I am instead going to focus on arts as it relates to the ministry of the people. When I say “the people” in this context, I am not talking about professional artists or even super-crafty lay artists. I am talking about members of the community, people who want to contribute their time and energy, people who value what the arts bring to them in worship and want to be a part of the giving as well as the receiving. I have learned about this kind of artistic giving from some fabulous professional artists—people who were willing to share their time and talent to teach those of us who were not born with their gifts—and to create art that allowed all of us to participate. I think especially of Nancy Chinn, Ellen Phillips, Lauren Wright Pittman, Catherine Kapikian, and Joel Schoon-Tanis, all of whom I have worked with to create projects that allowed for participation by congregation members who did not bring special skills but brought their hearts and hands.

Some of these projects involved an artist designing or creating the framework for a project and congregation members implementing the design. The most common example of this would be paper lace banners, which I have used for liturgical seasons such as Advent or Easter and for specific

rites, such as the Sacrament of Baptism, marriage, or even Blessing of the Animals. These banners can hang in the sanctuary for a season or be displayed on banner poles for a particular service. An artist creates the design and enlarges it to create a pattern, then many hands from the congregation can cut the banners.

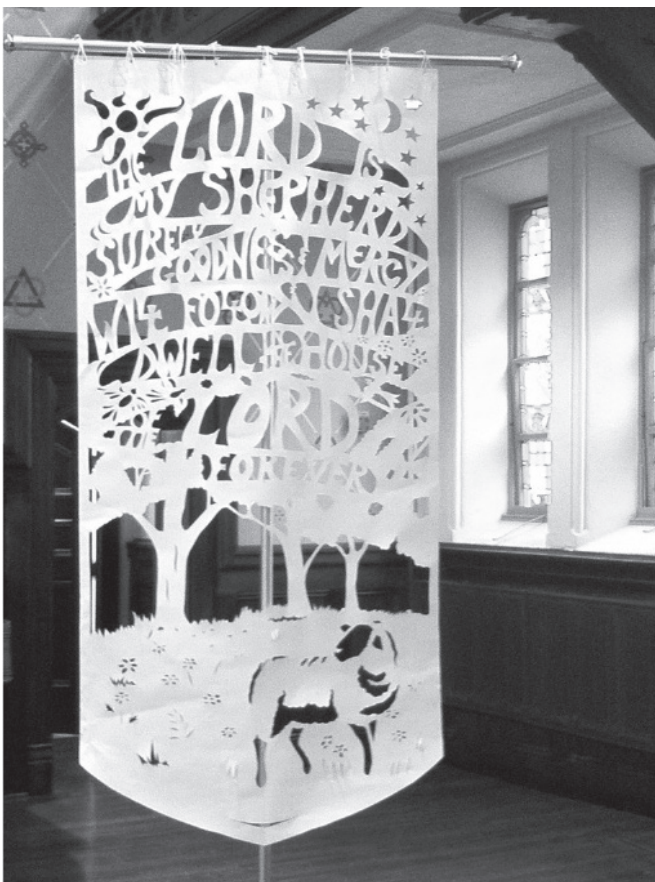


Members of First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan, making a paper lace banner

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Paper lace banners hanging in the sanctuary at First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan



Paper lace banner at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia

Another great material to use for group projects is repurposed plastic bottle caps. Again, an artist creates the overall design, and congregation members paint bottle caps of various shapes and sizes collaged into the pattern. A large-scale design

in a sanctuary setting requires a large number of bottle caps, so congregants who don't wish to take part in constructing the piece can contribute bottle caps and experience a part of the process.



Members of the Liturgical Arts Committee making a banner with donated bottle caps, choir room, Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia



Perhaps my favorite of all art projects that depend on congregational participation are origami installations. Origami originated in Japan as a practice of folding paper into intricate sculptures. The practice of folding paper cranes has been taken up in many contexts around the world as a way to call for peace. Referencing these traditions, I have engaged congregations in folding and hanging paper cranes in sanctuaries for International Day of Peace. In a church I served in Atlanta, one of the youth on the Liturgical Arts Committee suggested we fold origami stars. Rather than buying origami paper, paper, we recycled worship bulletins. To

hang the stars, artist Steve Bacon, a woodworker who also happened to serve on the pastoral staff, built a star-shaped frame that we suspended from the ceiling during Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. We encouraged members helping with the piece to use the folding process as a prayer discipline, inviting them to pray for someone or lift a concern as they folded each star.



Members of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, folding origami stars, fellowship hall



Detail, origami stars collaborative work, Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia



Installation of origami stars collaborative work, Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia; wooden frame by artist Steve Bacon

Fabric or fiber art can also become part of the liturgy, the work of the people. At First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I serve, quilters in the congregation have made paraments by asking the congregation to bring fabric scraps of a particular color family or, at times, randomly, depending on the project. These donated fabric scraps became the material used to make the works.



Pentecost paraments in process at First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan



Ordinary Time banner, Alberta Irwin, made from found fabric brought by congregation members



Quilted Pentecost paraments at First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan

The pictures above show paraments that involved several quilters creating squares made from many red fabric scraps, and then assembling those squares into the pulpit falls and table cover. For the Ordinary Time banner on the right, scraps of many different colors and textures brought by congregation members were put together by one quilter. One of the contributors told us that her fabric had come from her prom dress (making it more than a half-century old), and another said that the fabric she donated came from something belonging to her recently deceased husband, making it especially meaningful to her.

Perhaps the simplest art project I have orchestrated is the making of ribbon trees in the sanctuary. This project became a very meaningful way for the whole community to pray and make art together during worship. We installed two large branches in large pots at the front of the sanctuary, and at the time of the Prayers of the People, those who wished to (almost everyone) came forward and tied a ribbon on one of the ribbon trees. The ribbons were pre-cut and sorted into baskets by color, with each color representing one of

eight potential prayer categories—healing, peace, wisdom, strength, and so forth. We expected the children to be particularly interested in participating, but it turned out to be meaningful for all ages. The project is influenced by others like it that have been made in other contexts, including Yoko Ono’s Wish Trees that have been made around the world since 1981. This is a project that invites participants to tie wishes to trees in a similar way, an interpretation of the Japanese practice of tying wishes to trees in temple courtyards.



Ribbon prayer tree, made by members of the congregation during worship at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia

There is great power in making art that requires congregational participation. Catherine Kapikian calls it “participatory aesthetics,”<sup>1</sup> suggesting in her book, *Art in Service of the Sacred*, that art is both a

product and a process, and that when we engage in art making “we become co-creators, continuing the ongoing act of creation.”<sup>2</sup> Nancy Chinn also talks about collaboration in the creation of art, recognizing that most of her work could not be done by one person, so she works with assistants and volunteers. “What ends up happening is that we have a very good time together and we make art,”<sup>3</sup> she writes in her book *Spaces for the Spirit: Adorning the Church*. She suggests that the task for liturgical art was not visual illustration, but to reach beyond the text to find the miracle in the story. She says, “Our work is not so much to make the Holy visible as it is to proclaim that the Holy is present.”<sup>4</sup>

There is no question that the work of the great artists of our era, and dating back to ancient times, has the power to transform our worship and our worshipers. But there is also a place for the work of our hands, our ordinary hands, and our ordinary eyes and ears and hearts. There is a place for all of us to be co-creators, to engage in the process of art, to bring what we have, just as we sing God’s praises, and feed and clothe God’s children, and minister to those in need. And the ministry of participating in the creation of art may meet a need that is not yet spoken or recognized, but truly opens someone to the presence of God.

#### Notes

1. Catherine Kapikian, *Art in Service of the Sacred* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 107.
2. Kapikian, *Art in Service of the Sacred*, 110.
3. Nancy Chinn, *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989), 35.
4. Chinn, *Spaces for Spirit*, 35.





# What Is Love?

Mac Barnett

(San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2021)

# Love

Matt de la Peña

(New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2018)

*Reviewed by Sarah Helwig*

## What Is Ministry But Love in Action?

**W**hat is ministry but love in action? Two children's picture books—*What Is Love?* by Mac Barnett and *Love* by Matt de la Peña—describe the various ways love shows up in different people's lives. Both of these books would serve as an excellent starting point for discussing the meaning of love with children and exploring how we can show love to others.

Before putting love into action, we must first know what love is. Mac Barnett seeks to answer this question in his book *What Is Love?* The story opens with a young boy asking his grandmother the title question. Instead of answering, she sends him out into the world to find his own answer. He asks everyone he meets, including a fisherman, a cat, a carpenter, two soldiers, and a poet, "What is love?" And while everyone gives him a different answer, none of the answers make sense to the boy. Each time he asks for clarification, he is told, "You do not understand." Much like Jesus' parables, this story provides examples, but no concrete answers. While each answer the boy receives makes sense to the person who gives it, it is only when the boy returns home to his grandmother that he finds the answer he was looking for.

The illustrations by Carson Ellis give the book a timeless, classic feel that complements the tone of the text. The text itself is punctuated by hand-drawn lettering to emphasize the various answers to the titular question. The final illustration brings the story full circle by recreating the scene from the beginning of the book where the grandmother is holding the boy in the garden, only this time their roles are reversed, and it is night instead of day, showing that sometimes love cannot be put into words. It can only be felt.

Reading this book with preschoolers and elementary-aged children will provide a great opportunity for discussion about their own answers to the question "What is love?" Starting by focusing on what makes them feel loved will naturally lead to conversations about how they can show love to others. This book also provides an excellent opportunity to invite kids to illustrate their answers. Just like in the book, each answer will be specific to each child. Recognizing that everyone defines love differently could encourage awareness of and respect for diversity.

Matt de la Peña takes a more philosophical approach in his book simply titled *Love*. Instead of searching for a definition for love, he and illustrator Loren Long present a series of diverse

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scenes showing the different ways love appears in our lives. Long's illustrations are truly stunning. The pictures not only feel like they are brimming with life, they also reflect a diverse and inclusive world. Each scene includes people of different races, ages, abilities, and living situations. The scenes are roughly divided into three sections. First are bright scenes that seem to shine with joy and love, from parents standing over a crib, to a father and daughter dancing on the roof of their trailer at sunset. Then come scenes that appear to be frozen in time, when love feels lost because of an ending, a death, or a tragedy. And finally, we see more subtle signs of "love overlooked," like a parent who works long hours, and made-up family stories told during a game of horseshoes. The common thread through all of these scenes is that love is about connection with the people and the world around us. Even when love is hard to find, all is not lost, and we are never alone.

Much like Barnett's book, this book could serve as an excellent conversation starter for older elementary kids about all the different ways we might experience love throughout our lives.

Acknowledging that sometimes life is hard, and we might struggle to find love, normalizes this experience for kids and provides an opportunity to talk about how to handle life's ups and downs by looking for those loving connections. Again, starting by asking kids where they see love in their own lives could serve as a natural segue for discussing how they could be there for and show love to others. This book would also work as a goodbye or graduation gift to remind children or youth that even when they leave, love will go with them, and they will never be alone.

Both books would be excellent choices for reading during children's worship or a Sunday school class. Reflecting on the different metaphors and definitions of love presented in these two books could even serve as a starting point for helping kids of multiple ages plan a service for children's sabbath. Maybe love really is a fish, the sound of laughter, applause, and a slice of burned toast. And maybe, when we are finished searching for it, we will see that love, in its many forms, is right in front of us.

# *And We Shall Learn through the Dance: Liturgical Dance as Religious Education*

Kathleen Turner

(Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021)

*Reviewed by Kathryn Sparks Carpenter*

It is an honor and a privilege to be asked to review Dr. Kathleen Turner's book, *And We Shall Learn through the Dance: Liturgical Dance as Religious Education*. Dancer to dancer, she speaks to my heart. This is a book to savor. In fact, I am not aware of any book on liturgical dance that specifically explores the role of liturgical dance as a primary tool for education within church communities. This overarching purpose of the book—to illuminate liturgical dance as religious education—is needed, timely, and creatively ambitious.

Dr. Turner's life's work is *dance* and, specifically, sacred and liturgical dance. She was the founder and first director of the large, anointed and vibrant Allen Liturgical Dance Ministry (ALDM) at The Greater Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica, New York. She built and explored ministry in this context over a span of forty years and now serves as director of Christian education/discipleship at the church. She writes, "ALDM presented a platform to determine how liturgical dance can be discovered, experienced, and shared while presenting opportunities for congregations and communities of worship to experience liturgical dance on a personal basis" (p. xiv). It could be said that Dr. Turner's writing in *And We Shall Learn* is the culmination of her love for the dance and her heart for education. She has married the two and shows that they are inseparable in a book which would be well suited for seminary classrooms as well as dancer laypersons wishing to understand the historical and theoretical aspects of liturgical dance.

The author starts her exposition thus: "The driving question of this book is: *What are the characteristics embedded in liturgical dance which identify it as*

*religious education within the church as a community place of learning?*" (p. xvii). She then names some of those characteristics: liturgical dance as communicator, translator, teaching tool—articulated through gesture, movement, improvisational discovery, and partially or fully choreographed dances—and experienced through themes of faith, prayer, love, devotion, sanctification, healing, compassion, missions, and social justice both inside and outside the walls of the church (p. xvii). Dr. Turner methodically ties her ideas together over many pages as she answers her driving question.

Turner highlights the strong bond religious education and liturgical dance have shared over the course of history. To elucidate her point, she chooses two periods of American history in which dance was used to witness to the living God, to nourish despair or ignite hope and freedom, to let go of that which seeks to limit us, and to propel us toward a more perfect communion with God. In chapter 1, Dr. Turner highlights the strong bond religious education and liturgical dance have shared over the course of history. She describes and analyzes the way two historical faith contexts have used the arts in the life of the church (p. 1). The first context is invisible church communities created by enslaved African Americans that gathered during the antebellum period in the American South. In these invisible churches, song, word, and dance were part of formation in the unique Christian theologies they developed in conversation with African spirituality and apart from white religion. The second community Dr. Turner considers is the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, also known as the Shakers. In this

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tradition, too, there is evidence that religious education and faith formation happened through song, word, and dance in beautiful ways (p. 2). By placing her driving question in a historical context, Dr. Turner shows the validity and longevity of her thesis. Liturgical dance and religious education have been moving hand in hand, step by step, for generations.

Chapters 2 and 3 are more specifically about education. Chapter 2 explores the significance of arts education, and chapter 3 dives into experiential learning and church communities. “Although there are a variety of dance forms, it is dance as a way of knowing, its aid to the field of education, and how dance affects the development of sound and imaginative curriculum that is to be investigated” (p. 35). Dr. Turner passionately expresses her sustained belief that the gift of dance for religious education is its power in teaching and learning. She cites a number of important voices on the significance of arts education, including Howard Gardner, Maxine Greene, Elliot Eisner, Jennifer Donohue Zakkai, Maria Harris, Carla De Sola, and Arthur Easton; her reader is eager to explore dance as a pedagogical approach.

In chapter 4, Dr. Turner discusses the meaning and application of liturgical dance as she unpacks four classifications of dance styles found in the Hebrew Scriptures: the processional dance, the ritual dance round a sacred object, the ecstatic dance, and the victory dance. She also examines the ways in which dance was both condemned and accepted in the early Christian church and amongst the church fathers (p. 121). Then she deftly propels the reader into the twenty-first century, spending a good bit of the chapter investigating and building a new working definition for liturgical dance. The first part of Dr. Turner’s definition reads: “Thus liturgical dance ‘is expressive and imaginative movement that is used both inside and outside of worship that creatively educates and instructs Christians to comprehend the Bible and their faith in the Trinity through the elements of space, time, and design’” (p. 169). With this definition established, Turner proceeds to the next and final chapter of her book.

“And We Shall Learn through the Dance,” the title of chapter 5 and the book itself, starts by highlighting the importance of listening on the part of the Christian educator. Dr. Turner lifts up the work of Christian educator and scholar Margaret Crain, whose research is based on the

role of listening in Christian faith and development. “What Crain stresses is the need for the Christian educator to know how to listen in order to ask the pertinent questions in matters pertaining to religious education for the life of the congregation” (p. 171). Ultimately, as in education, dancing reveals and inspires a posture of listening. Thus, Turner invites us to think of liturgical dance and religious education as two listening partners in a dance, as she writes, “. . . the two partners learn how to exist one with the other, while also learning how to support one another unselfishly. The work of both learning modalities exposes the uniqueness found within each, while revealing just how effective they can be once paired together to relay messages of hope and restoration” (p. 203). Turner gives several examples of how dance and religious education work together through the four formats described in this fifth chapter. One of her examples is in the context of a chapel service on a campus or military base in which a community is worshiping together daily or weekly (p. 182). This ecumenical chapel service is titled “You Have Turned My Mourning Into . . .” based on Jeremiah 31:13 (p. 182). Turner describes the way the community can be invited to enter more fully into the Jeremiah passage through song and communal gesture as part of this service.

After delving into the nuances of both dance and education, Dr. Turner merges the two and answers her driving question: “*What are the characteristics embedded in liturgical dance which identify it as religious education within the church as a community place of learning?*” (p. xvii). “From the smallest gesture to the largest of movements, liturgical dance grounded in partnership with religious education can help exemplify a way of knowing that transcends the ordinary in church worship, but more important in life itself” (p. 204). And so, we come to the heart. Liturgical dance, seen through the light of knowing that transcends the ordinary, has far-reaching and transformative implications for religious education. I have experienced this palpably in my life as one who dances with and for God and with and for God’s people. I recommend this book as a wise and innovative investigation of liturgical dance as a vessel for teaching and learning. It will uplift, instruct, and empower readers toward new ways to be, to breathe, to be born through engagement with liturgical dance. Dr. Turner’s seminal work is a necessary contribution to the field.

# Sing No Empty Alleluias: 50 Hymn Texts

Chris Shelton

(Chicago: GIA Publications, 2021)

168 pages, ISBN 976-1-62277-583-5, \$20

Reviewed by Mary Louise Bringle

Many of Christianity's notable hymn text writers have been ministers, from Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley in the eighteenth century to Ruth Duck and Carolyn Winfrey Gillette in the twenty-first. The pulpit/poet connection makes sense. In their ministerial training, clergy are steeped in Scripture and theology. In their subsequent labors, they discover pastoral and prophetic words their congregations need to sing. Thus, they are especially well-placed to discern and fill gaps in the available repertoire.

Chris Shelton is no exception to this model. His hymns give special attention to tradition's lesser-known persons and passages: Jacob and his stony bed ("Broken World, Broken Dreams"); Jonah in the belly of the great fish ("Out of the Deep"); Ruth declaring fealty to Naomi ("I Shall Not Leave from By Your Side"); David as a small boy, almost overlooked in the review of Jesse's sons to select a king ("I Am Not Forgotten"); Daniel resisting a tyrannical ruler ("We Will Stand"); Job questioned by God out of the whirlwind ("Were We There When Earth Was Made?"); Joseph, Mary's "sidekick" ("O Joseph, Awake").

In total, *Sing No Empty Alleluias* contains fifty texts, with ample supplementary materials. The back matter includes an extensive scriptural index (referencing passages from thirty-one different books of the Bible, almost equally divided between the two Testaments: sixteen from one, fifteen from the other); a thematic index (ranging from "Advent" to "Word of God," passing distinctively by way of "Darkness and Light," "Descent into Hell," "Humility," and "Parables"); a metrical index (cataloguing thirty-five different meters, with a marked preference for unusual patterns, and relatively few examples of the often overworked short meter, common meter,

and long meter forms); a tune index (containing roughly two dozen familiar melodies, supplemented by new compositions from the likes of Ben Brody, Chris de Silva, Bex Gaunt, Marty Haugen, Mark Miller, Sally Ann Morris, and Paul Vasile, along with a baker's dozen by Shelton himself); and the standard alphabetical listing of texts by title and first line. A handful of texts appear in two settings: one set to a well-known tune, and a second to a more contemporary offering. The front matter offers a foreword by Troy Messenger, director of worship emeritus from Union Theological Seminary, a biographical sketch of the author, and a beautifully crafted preface in which Shelton chronicles the deep roots of his affinity for hymns, his pastoral process of writing for needs born of his work as preacher and liturgist, and a moving story about his witness to the aftermath of 9/11 in New York City and the power of music to heal.

Shelton is currently the pastor of Broadway Presbyterian Church in New York City, a location that suits him well. His bachelor of arts degree in drama and music from Texas Woman's University richly supplements his master of divinity from Union Theological Seminary. Indeed, he notes in the preface an important "fusion between the liturgical and the theatrical" in his vocation, adding that "the performance of worship ought to have the same thoughtful, artful development as any performance in the theatre or recital hall" (p. 8).

Several examples testify to this artistry. He suggests, for example, a lamp lit context for a pre-Advent homage to the parable of the Bridesmaids ("O Come, Great God of Darkness and of Light"). He describes hand gestures to embody a prayer for illumination and response to the Word ("Through Ageless Words of Scripture"). He deftly bookends a

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service begun with Fred Pratt Green's in-gathering "God Is Here!" by offering a sending text, "God Is There" (with numerous well-constructed textual parallels). He provides an a cappella, paperless chorus, inviting congregations into multi-voiced harmony ("Sing unto God a New Song"). His rendering of the parable of the Persistent Widow is configured by Paul Vasile as a rhythmic protest song with percussive accompaniment ("Never Give Up").

The fact that this collection appeared mid-pandemic is evidenced in two particular hymns: "I Will Sing for You" speaks of how we sing for one another even when circumstances may prevent us from singing together. "Through the Walls" imaginatively applies Jesus' resurrection appearance in John 20 to contexts in which we may be "sheltering in place," yearning for God to break through the walls of our fear, anxiety, and forced separations.

Shelton's texts are relevant in other ways as well. He is especially fond of Hannah's cry for justice, anticipating Mary's better-known Magnificat. In one of the more delightful hymns in the collection, he sets Hannah's prayer ("My Heart Rejoices in

Our God") to the tune of GOD REST YE MERRY GENTLEMEN. In so doing, he cleverly enables a text about reversing power dynamics to upend and re-gender an originally male-focused carol. In a culture still plagued by imbalances of power and prideful pursuits of "more," he deftly focuses on the humility of smaller things: "Sun, Soil, and Seeds"; "flour, oil, and yeast." Simplicity invites originality: he has written the only hymn poem I know of that likens the dissemination of grace to God's casting "dandelions on the wind" ("O God, You Scatter Grace Like Seeds").

The title hymn of this collection is "Sing No Empty Alleluias." Like Carl Daw ("Sing to the Lord No Threadbare Song") or Brian Wren ("We Cannot Be Beguiled by Pleasant Sounds")—two more hymn writers who are also ministers—Shelton cautions against mouthing syllables we do not actively embody. Far from empty, his Alleluias—and his laments—are rich and resonant: ripe for use by composers, worship planners, and other clergy looking for fresh ideas and words that will preach as well as sing.

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**March 2nd** Prayer Garden  
1:00-2:00 ET Lionel Derenoncourt and Marissa Galván-Valle

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# Call to Worship

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