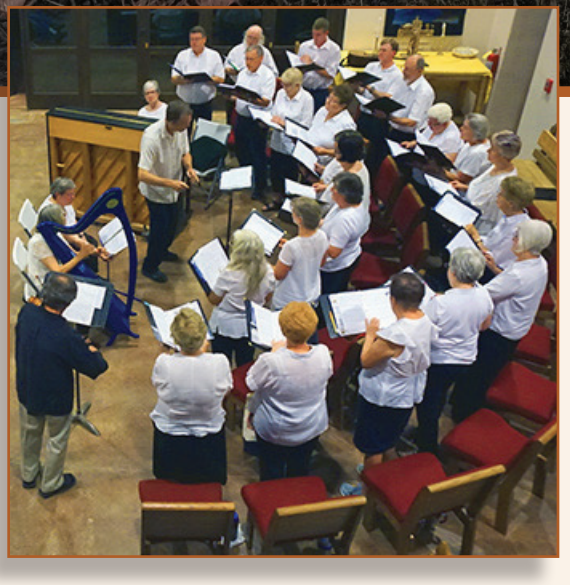
Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Worship in the Time of COVID

Volume 54.4



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Continuing the tradition of *Reformed Liturgy & Music*

Volume 54.4

Worship During the Time of COVID

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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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Call to Worship

Worship During the Time of COVID

Volume 54.4

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Introduction

Kimberly Bracken Long

It has been a year since we first started hearing about a strange virus that was affecting the other side of the world, and only a little less than a year since people in this country began to realize that we were vulnerable, too. In early March I was enjoying a family gathering on the gulf coast of Florida and anticipating taking in several spring training games at the new Braves stadium in North Port. We saw one game, and the season was cancelled. Pretty soon, there was talk of beaches closing. We cut our trip short and flew home, as afraid of what we didn't know as we were of what we did know.

A year later, we grieve the loss of friends who have succumbed to the virus and continue to pray for those who are suffering or recovering. News of a vaccine sparks hope, but this won't be over for a while. Through it all, we worship.

You, beloved readers, have done remarkable things. You have shown tremendous resilience, learned new skills, and reordered priorities. Old assumptions no longer hold, yet our faith—and the tradition in which it is rooted—still sustains us. We have experienced the faithfulness of God and encouraged the same in one another.

This issue of *Call to Worship* is devoted to reflecting on what we have learned by worshiping in and through a pandemic. Homiletician Kim Wagner's article on preaching looks back but also leads us forward, giving us fresh insights into homiletical and liturgical ministry. David Batchelder and Scott Miller, both wise and seasoned pastors, share how they have journeyed with their congregations, particularly with regard to sacraments and the practice of daily prayer. Scholar and chaplain Allie Utley urges us to consider other practices that we might not try were it not for the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Brooklyn resident and church member Jenny Gage describes what it has been like to live and pray in New York City, enduring widespread closures and finding surprising spiritual gifts in this challenging season. Other creative reflections come from Heidi Thompson, who shares insights about fear and peacemaking in troubling times, and So Jung Kim, who gives a candid account of the losses she has experienced as well as the signs of hope. Bill McConnell describes what it is like to reorder our imaginations as we move into a new future, and Ron Byars reminds us to hold on to our long-held convictions about the presence of Christ, even when we gather in different ways.

First Presbyterian Church of Hightstown, New Jersey, received a good deal of attention when they moved their sanctuary art for Pentecost outside the building. You may have already seen the images presented here, but now you can know the story behind this breathtaking project. If you haven't yet seen it, you are in for a treat.

This final issue in Volume 54 gives me an opportunity to thank our four extraordinary columnists—Kendra Buckwalter Smith, Phillip Morgan, Buz Wilcoxon, and Lauren Wright Pittman—for their compelling and moving insights on sacraments, poverty, and the pandemic. I thank Buz, too, for sharing the hymn text he wrote for his church's seventy-fifth anniversary, one that will help us all forge ahead in faith. Laura Blank and T. J. Shirley offer reviews of two books that will edify you and your ministry.

I am grateful, too, to Amy E. Gray, who has served as artist for this volume. The images in this issue were completed as she was healing from an injury to her drawing arm, which adds a layer of pathos to her fine work.

I pray that this issue will be a source of inspiration and encouragement to you as we continue to face difficult times—and as we continue to affirm that God is good, all the time.

Kimberly Bracken Long, Editor

Amy E. Gray

Feature Articles

Dead Ends, Opening Doors, and Wilderness Words: Preaching in and through a Pandemic

Kimberly Wagner

On a chilly Chicago autumn day, I decided I had been cooped up in my apartment staring at a screen for long enough, so I took my grateful dog on a long walk through the neighborhood. Soon, we were walking past the beautiful but darkened chapel at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, the seminary where I have the privilege to teach and serve. I paused and looked between the stained-glass panels into the empty space, remembering the last time I was in that chapel gathered with my community. I happened to be the preacher for chapel service that day. It was March 11, 2020, and, grounded in the daily lectionary passages from Ezekiel and John, I invited the congregation to consider how God continually transforms dead ends into new passageways, even in the midst of difficult and overwhelming realities. I closed the sermon declaring:

> Death is still real. Pain is still real. Sin is still real. Evil and powers and principalities and yes, even the patriarchy are still real. But we worship a God and follow the Christ who continues again and again to break open the seemingly unmovable gridlock of the present moment to open a future we cannot imagine. And God does this work not because of us, but, if need be, in spite of us. . . . God takes what is broken and summons blessing. God gifts us future possibilities even in the midst of present realities.[1]

I mentioned the pandemic in the sermon, but as a removed reality for most of our seminary congregation. Yet within the week, Chicago shut down and the United States, along with the rest of the world, was gripped by the uncertainty, fear, and new reality brought on by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of the printing of this issue of *Call to Worship*, we are almost a year into the COVID-19 pandemic—a disease that has killed hundreds of thousands of Americans, infected tens of millions of people around the world, and fundamentally changed our daily patterns of life. The coronavirus has upended the way we learn, conduct business, communicate, and connect. We can no longer safely gather for concerts or shows, we are asked to stay at least six feet apart, and masks have become a life-saving staple of our wardrobes. Almost overnight, the coronavirus changed—and continues to impact—the way we worship, preach, and gather as people of faith.

Beyond the impact to patterns of daily life, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated injustices and inequities already present in our society as we see the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on communities of color and those without adequate access to food, financial resources, or healthcare. In the midst of the anxiety and fear brought on by the pandemic itself, civil unrest, political division, a hurting economy, and urgent calls for racial justice and equity, preachers have found themselves often overwhelmed and at a loss as they scramble to seek to offer a word to their congregations while learning new preaching technologies.

And yet, in the midst of all this, I am still as convinced as I was in March that God continually opens new ways out of apparent dead ends. Where we discover a wall, God creates doorways and invites us to venture through in faith. Though we may feel uncertain and overwhelmed by the reality before us, even and especially those of us

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Traumatic events throw into question our understanding of ourselves, the world, and even God. Considered narratively, the stories we tell about ourselves, others, the world, and the Divine can't accommodate the new traumatic reality.

called to preach in and through this pandemic, I believe that the Spirit is inviting us to recognize the present challenges, that we may discover invitation and possibility for our preaching in, through, and beyond this pandemic time.

Hitting the Wall: The Challenges of Pandemic as Traumatic Event

Like the necessity of confession before assurance of pardon or the cross of Good Friday before encounter with resurrection, we need to be honest about the experience of the pandemic and how it impacts our communities before we may fully be present to the invitation and possibilities for preachers.

Though the term *trauma* is often thrown around too easily and often, we need to begin by naming and understanding the COVID-19 pandemic as a traumatic event. What makes traumatic events extraordinary is not only their unexpected nature but also, in the words of Serene Jones, the ways they "outstrip our capacity to respond to and cope with them."[2] The experience of trauma pushes the edges of our understanding and emotional capacities. It is this unknowability and experience of overwhelm that separates trauma from grief, suffering, or struggle (though all three may be endured in the experience of trauma). When traumatized persons are overwhelmed in this profound way, they cannot understand what has happened; moreover, one of the first things to go—unfortunately for preachers and pastors—is the capacity to use language.

Traumatic events throw into question our understanding of ourselves, the world, and even God. Considered narratively, the stories we tell about ourselves, others, the world, and the Divine can't accommodate the new traumatic reality. Therefore, these stories become both unhelpful and undependable as they can no longer help us reliably navigate the world. The traumatic experience not only leads to a sense of disorientation, where we cannot make sense of or even begin to find meaning in the traumatic experience, but also leads to a sense of disintegration as the stories we have told and structures we have relied upon no longer hold up under the strain of the traumatic experience. As Irene Smith Landsman articulates, "[T]rauma and loss are experiences that push us to our limits . . . calling into question the basic assumptions that organize our experience of ourselves, relationships, the world, and the human condition itself."[3] As a result, traumatized individuals and communities often feel uncertain about how to navigate the new traumatic landscape without trustworthy narratives and structures. In the end, traumatized persons often struggle with their own sense of identity and place in the world.

This disintegration and deterioration happen at both the individual and communal level. At the communal level, this experience of narrative duress and overwhelm can wound the tissues that connect communities. As sociologist Kai Erikson articulates, in collective trauma, the trauma inflicted on individual persons "can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up."[4] And this strain on the communal narrative identity can have both a dividing and binding force. Most notably, collective trauma leads to communities fracturing apart at fault lines already present in the community or along new fault lines that arise due to people's varied proximities to and experiences of the traumatic event. However, at the same time, small subgroups of the community or even the community itself may seek to reconstitute itself around the narrative of the trauma—allowing the shared traumatic experience to define a community of the equally-wounded.

We can certainly see all of this at work when looking at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ourselves, neighbors, and communities. Commercials constantly label this period an "unprecedented time." I would argue this is not simply a historical signification but an indication that we are at a loss and don't know exactly how to navigate this new reality. Indeed, a lot of the ways we know how to be community or care for ourselves or one another has been thrown into chaos and become unsafe or impossible. Our sense of time has become disoriented, the feeling captured by a meme shared around social media: "2020 is a unique Leap Year.

It has 29 days in February, 300 days in March, and five years in April."[5] And even with the gift of technology, we struggle to connect, work, and build community. We are constantly navigating and renegotiating how we learn, work, shop, teach, and preach. We wonder how we got here, if this could have been avoided, and when science might save us (a narrative that has guided us fairly well up to this point). We begin to question who we are as church if we can't gather or come together. Who are we if we can't be together to bury our dead, care for the sick, or accompany the dying? What is our identity without communal prayer or song or service?

COVID-19 is undoubtedly a traumatic event and we, as preachers and ministerial leaders, must recognize that our communities are experiencing trauma and will continue to do so even after the coronavirus has subsided.

COVID-19 is undoubtedly a traumatic event and we, as preachers and ministerial leaders, must recognize that our communities are experiencing trauma and will continue to do so even after the coronavirus has subsided. For even after a traumatic event ends, the experience of trauma lingers. But, the COVID-19 pandemic is a uniquely traumatic event for two distinct reasons. First, individuals and communities are experiencing trauma in multiple layers simultaneously. The first layer of trauma is the virus itself with the threat of illness, loss, and death. With a rising death toll and estimates that well over a million Americans will be infected with the virus, the threat of illness and death is imminent and disorienting. Second, there is the trauma of the disruption of daily personal, communal, and economic life. Church, school, and work (should one be lucky enough to be able to work remotely) have moved into online or hybrid formats. And many in the United States and around the world have felt the direct economic impact of this virus through closures, lay-offs, and reduced work hours. In August 2020, NPR reported that over thirty million Americans were at risk of losing housing in a "homeless pandemic" due to economic insecurity and an inability to pay rent.[6] Finally, there is the trauma of the indefinite timeline and unknown nature of the virus. Even eight months in (as of the writing of this article), there is still so much we do not know about the virus or its impact on bodies, institutions, and communities. There is no neat medical narrative of how we navigate or treat this virus or its long-term impact on peoples' health. We are unable to construct any kind of certain timelines for when we will be able to safely gather again, pack into theaters or restaurants, or engage in full-throated liturgy in shared space. The uncertainty and indefinite nature of this pandemic reality offers another layer of traumatic impact for individuals and communities.

The second feature that makes the COVID-19 pandemic a uniquely traumatic event is its all-encompassing nature. It is sometimes helpful to imagine the impact of trauma as concentric circles, like the rings formed when you throw a stone into the middle of a lake. After most traumatic events there are those persons and communities in the inner circles (or rings) who are most acutely impacted by the event either through direct experience or loss. But as you move out from the center into the more distanced circles, you have people and communities who are less and less impacted. In most traumatic events, those in the inner circles call to and rely upon those in the outer circles to come in and offer support, assistance, and care. For example, when a community is hit by a natural disaster, helping agencies, counselors, and even utility companies send trucks, people, and supplies from those places less impacted into the spaces of highest impact. While there are certainly those who have been more directly impacted through death, illness, loss, and acute economic struggle (especially, as mentioned before, already disenfranchised communities and communities of color in the United States), due to the global nature of this pandemic all of us live amongst the inner circles. Put another way, there is nobody (globally!) existing in the outside circles who might come in and help. So we must serve with, preach among, and care for those in the inner circles of impact from the inner circles. Given all of this, it is unsurprising that many of us preachers find it challenging to find a word for our congregations in these pandemic-scarred days.

Discovering a Threshold: An Invitation to Truth-Telling and Attentiveness

Understanding the pandemic as a global, ongoing, traumatic event may turn out not to be a dead end or wall but an invitation. Through more deeply

So, in hitting the wall, we discover a threshold—an invitation to preachers to take this traumatic reality seriously, offering faithful truth-telling and ongoing grace extended not only to our congregations but also towards ourselves as we grapple with ever-changing and challenging reality.

understanding what is going on in the world and in our congregations, we may discover a threshold of new possibility, an invitation to be attentive to and honor the experience of trauma happening in our own preaching bodies and in the bodies of our congregations. First, by recognizing the impact of this pandemic on our members, ourselves, and our congregational communities, preachers are invited to tell the truth about what is happening. This truth-telling is more than reciting facts and figures. This truth-telling summons us to name and even bless the emotional and spiritual weight of the trauma of the pandemic. We preachers are invited to attend to the multiple levels of traumatic impact and to name in holy spaces the emotional, spiritual, and physical toll this pandemic has taken. Perhaps children best model this honesty for us. In May 2020 a dear preacher friend of mine shared on Facebook that while she was struggling with what to say in her sermon while squeezing in work during the children's naptime, she began to hear crying coming from her five-year-old daughter's room. When she went to check on her, she found her sitting up in bed, tears streaming down her face.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" my friend inquired.

"Nothing, I guess," her daughter sputtered through tears. "It's just . . . I miss my people . . . and I am scared I won't get to hug them again like I used to."

Now, as they say, that will preach. We preachers have the opportunity, in a priestly role, to acknowledge and name before God and the community the hurt we are carrying as we forge our way through this pandemic-scarred reality.

Second, understanding and honoring this pandemic as a traumatic event offers invitation to us preachers ourselves. While ministerial leaders seek to care for our congregations, the recognition that we are all living in the "inner circles" of the trauma invites us to be intentional about reflection and self-care. It is important to recognize the way the trauma is impacting preachers as we navigate not only the Sunday sermon and online or hybrid worship but also the anxiety of the congregation and the difficult decisions about finances, building use, pastoral care, and safe options for worship and gathering. As much as preachers may default to the helping position, it is important for us to identify that we, too, are journeying through and impacted by this pandemic reality.

Third, recognizing the pandemic as traumatic event invites us to take seriously the lingering impact. We all pray for a swift and decisive end to the pandemic. However, even if COVID-19 were to disappear overnight, the experience of trauma from the pandemic would linger—in the congregation, in our communities, and in preaching bodies. Indeed, it may be that when the immediate threat passes, people will only then begin to process the experience and the trauma. We preachers, then, are invited to recognize the ongoing need for honesty and care in our preaching.

So, in hitting the wall, we discover a threshold—an invitation to preachers to take this traumatic reality seriously, offering faithful truth-telling and ongoing grace extended not only to our congregations but also towards ourselves as we grapple with ever-changing and challenging reality.

Encountering the Open Door: An Invitation to Preach a Wilderness Word

Along with an invitation to truth-telling attentiveness, a fuller view of the COVID-19 pandemic as traumatic event reveals an open door, inviting the preacher to attend in new ways to communal bonds and collective identity. As mentioned above, collective trauma impacts communal bonds, often creating rifts along fault lines already existing in the community and leading to further communal divisions as segments of the community experience the traumatic event differently. This reality is exacerbated by the nature of the COVID-19 virus that requires us to resist the urge to gather or even be in physical proximity to one another. Worship and preaching now take place online, in parking lots, outdoors, or in hybrid fashion with some

people physically distanced in the worship space and others online. This physical distancing of the community may only contribute to the communal breakdowns and relational distancing taking place due to collective trauma. With collective trauma, the narratives that used to help make sense of our communal life together no longer function as they once did. And as happens in many trauma-impacted communities, the temptation may be to connect as a community through the traumatic narrative—form a communal identity grounded solely in the shared experience of the pandemic. However, ultimately, this community is not sustainable and the community might struggle in post-pandemic times to grow or imagine itself moving forward in any constructive way that is not trauma-related. So, preachers are invited to tend to communal bonds and identity.

However, as we encounter this open door, preachers are not left alone but will find conversation partners and biblical resources for this important work of communal formation. As we journey through this traumatic event and into an unknown post-pandemic reality, we, as a church, might understand ourselves to be in a time of wilderness wandering. We have been pushed outside of "life as we know it"; we are in unexplored and even uninhabited terrain; and we don't know how long we might be here or what life looks like on the other side. Wilderness wandering is challenging, and it is uncomfortable. But there are biblical precedence and guidance for this wilderness reality. We might look to narratives of the Israelites' wandering in the desert, waylaid on their way to the Promised Land after liberation from Egypt. Or we can consider the Israelites' wilderness experience of exile after the destruction of the temple. Or we can turn our collective gaze to the New Testament and Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness. Preachers have guides for this moment and for this experience.

Looking to these models of wilderness wanderings, we perceive, first, the importance of naming and honoring the grief of what was lost or left behind. Honoring grief and acknowledging what has been and will be lost is not only an act of truth-telling (as discussed above), but will also become critical as preachers imagine a post-pandemic way forward as community. We will never return and be in community the same way we once were. The nature of trauma is that it shapes not only the present but the future. So as we wander in the pandemic wilderness and imagine a post-pandemic worshiping community, we will be required to leave behind patterns and ways of being that many people may have found significant or precious. If we simply forge ahead without acknowledging what is lost, what is broken, or what we are leaving behind out of intention or necessity, people's grief and discomfort may cut them off from community. We see the power of lament in the voices of the prophets who cry out not only to the people to repent, but to God, naming what has been lost or broken. Habakkuk watches the city crumble around him and cries out,

> O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
> and you will not listen?
> Or cry to you "Violence!"
> and you will not save?
> Why do you make me see wrongdoing
> and look at trouble?
> Destruction and violence are before me;
> strife and contention arise.
> So the law becomes slack
> and justice never prevails.
> The wicked surround the righteous—
> therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
> (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

And it is not only the prophets who model this lament and grief. Communal psalms of lament composed during or in response to these wilderness periods, like Psalm 74, name before God and the community what is lost, both physically (in this case, the temple) as well as emotionally and spiritually:

> Your foes have roared within your holy place;
> they set up their emblems there.
> At the upper entrance they hacked
> the wooden trellis with axes. . . .
> They set your sanctuary on fire;
> they desecrated the dwelling place of
> your name,
> bringing it to the ground. . . .
> We do not see our emblems;
> there is no longer any prophet,
> and there is no one among us who
> knows how long.
> How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
> Is the enemy to revile your name forever?
> (Psalm 74:4–5, 7, 9–10)

Preachers offering a word through and on the other side of this wilderness time are invited to follow the model of psalmists and prophets, lamenting what is lost or broken and giving voice to God on behalf of the community, naming the hurt and struggle that comes with this global traumatic experience.

Second, these wilderness guides remind preachers about the importance of cultivating right (or, perhaps, truthful memory). Our wilderness guides warn us of the importance of right memory in Exodus as the newly liberated Israelites are led by Aaron and Moses along the circuitous and protracted trek to the Promised Land. In Exodus 16 the Israelites complain to Moses and Aaron that they are starving and remember (falsely!) when "we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread" (Ex. 16:3). Though God ultimately responds to their cries, there is no evidence that the Israelites, as enslaved and oppressed people in Egypt, were ever lounging by feasts and eating their fill.

There is a temptation, when a community's narratives and identity seem in flux, to imagine a glorious past that never was. As people continue to live in isolation and frustration as the pandemic drags on, I have heard the faithful wax poetic about full sanctuaries, glorious music rising to the rafters, communal prayers offered with gusto, sermons that could convert the staunchest atheist, and a church community that was able to live in perfect harmony, but only when they were able to physically gather together. While the music may have been lovely and the experience of communal prayer may have been powerful, I am skeptical that every Sunday or every moment of life together was glory filled and conflict free. There is a way that present crisis and trauma can lead to a romanticization (at best) or false memory (at worst) of the life that was lived prior to the traumatic event. There are important memories worth recalling (discussed below), but Exodus 16 reminds preachers to help cultivate truthful memory among our communities. If not, certain false memories or romanticized recollections of the past might obscure where God is leading on this wilderness road or inhibit the future imaginative work towards which God is calling the church.

The call to name grief and cultivate right memory sets the stage for the open door of invitation for preachers in and through this pandemic time. In all the wilderness narratives there is an impulse and practice of returning to those narratives that define, shape, and inform the identity of the faithful communities. In Exodus, when the Israelites complain or lose heart in their wilderness wanderings, they are reminded they don't just worship and follow any God, but the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," the God who "brought you out of the land of Egypt." In the midst of exile, the stories of faith are recited and retold as in Psalm 78, which recites the history of God's work among God's people. The psalm not only beckons right memory of God's actions and the people's response but also summons the listener to tell and retell these stories:

> Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
> incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
> I will open my mouth in a parable;
> I will utter dark sayings from of old,
> things that we have heard and known,
> that our ancestors have told us.
> We will not hide them from their children;
> we will tell to the coming generation
> the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
> and the wonders that he has done.
>
> (Psalm 78:1–4)

It is these foundational stories that will allow the exilic community not only to sustain themselves in the present experience of exile, but also to imagine a way forward—together—in a post-exilic reality. Whether in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land or in exile, the Israelites recite and retell the foundational narratives—how God is a God of liberation who led them out of the land of Egypt, provided bread for the journey, and remained with them in pillars of cloud and fire. Even Jesus, when he was in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, looked to the Scripture, reciting the formational texts that reminded him (and us) not only of the nature of God but of Jesus' identity as God's Son. Through these biblical wilderness narratives preachers are invited to re-center ourselves and our communities in the foundational, identity-forming narratives of our faith.

And so in this wilderness time, preachers are invited and instructed to return to those foundational stories that remind the scattered and gathered faithful about the nature of God, the work of God, and who we are as a community constituted as the body of Christ. In doing so, preachers might help communities remember who we are and resist the urge to claim

only the traumatic experience as our defining narrative and identity. Even as we feel unmoored by all that is happening, preachers are invited to re-center ourselves and our congregations in the central communal and identity-shaping narratives.

Such foundational narratives help hold the community together in times of distance and under the weight of collective trauma as well as serve as a foundation and guide as we imagine a way forward through and beyond the pandemic. It may seem counterintuitive at first to look back in order to lean forward. But, as we imagine preaching and worship in a pandemic-scarred world, the way we can be most faithful is to ground ourselves all the more deeply in our foundational convictions and the central stories of our faith. Then we will be prepared to interact with this new post-pandemic world with fresh vision while deeply grounded in who we are and the gifts we have to offer. When communities experiencing trauma are able to ground themselves in the stories that give them identity, they are able to then navigate new landscapes, not out of desperation for survival but out of a conviction that they know who they are and are able to live into their foundational identities even in the midst of this new landscape.

Stepping through the Door: Pandemic Preaching Possibilities

When preachers are willing to cross the threshold and venture through the doorway, opened by the Holy One even in this pandemic, preachers may discover more than just survival tactics; we may also discover the opportunity to encounter biblical texts—these foundational narratives—in new ways. When these identity-shaping narratives of creation, redemption, resurrection, suffering, sin, and salvation are freshly encountered under the weight of the pandemic, they have capacity to speak in new ways. Reading these texts in conversation with the traumatic realities of the present moment may not only enliven our understanding of the text but inspire new perceptions of the Holy present and at work in our current circumstances. What word might God have for us and our communities if we are willing to bring our pandemic-scarred world to the text? Perhaps we will hear a new resurrection word to remind us who we are as the body of Christ and the life-giving, dead-end-defying, door-opening nature of our God.

A Pandemic Word from John 20:1–8

While the Marys arrive with the dawn in the Gospel of Matthew, in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early in the morning "while it was still dark." While it was still dark, Mary finds the stone rolled away; while it was still dark, Mary summons Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple; while it is still dark, Jesus' body is missing but the funerary linens remain. While it is still dark, the resurrection happens.[7] *A new day has not yet dawned. The realities of death and grief and confusion and pain still linger. And yet, in the midst of all of this—uncertainty, doubt, even death itself—the resurrection happens. In the ultimate act of resistance, God's live-giving power looks death in the eye and refuses to be told what to do. When nobody was watching, before anyone but Mary Magdalene was even awake, God offered the ultimate "YES" in defiance of every "NO" Good Friday had to offer.*

But, God is not just defiant in this resurrection account; God is persistent. When Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb and is overcome by grief, her tears seem to inhibit her from perceiving the defiant news of the resurrection. It takes two angels and a verbal sparring with the resurrected Jesus before, upon hearing her name, she finally recognizes the power of resurrection in her midst. There is a resistant persistence to this story. Not only is the resurrection an act of defiance to the powers of death and evil; it persists even when unrecognized. The resurrected Christ tries again and again to reveal life-giving power to us, even if, in our lives, the new day has not yet dawned and we are struggling to emerge out of those hours of death, grief, and confusion.

And, perhaps, this is the kind of honest resurrection John invites us to encounter in the midst of a pandemic-scarred world. We discover a resurrection that does not in some way disregard the struggling world but is a word of defiance. While we are still confused and surrounded by death, while the world still seems shrouded in pain and hurt and fear, while the sun has not yet risen on a new post-pandemic day, the resurrection defies the power of death and insists on life. The resurrection takes seriously our struggle and grief and speaks a word of persistent and resistant hope. It does not erase the pain, but defies its consuming power. It does not disregard fear, but opens an opportunity for other possibilities. And the resurrection is not a one-time occurrence that you might miss if you are distracted or look away. Again and again the resurrected

Christ reasserts himself, willing to spar with our grief, fear, frustration, and uncertainty. In the face of all of it, the resurrection stands in persistent defiance to death's power, even if we need to be reminded every minute of every day.[8]

Notes

1. Kimberly Wagner, Sermon on Ezekiel 36 and John 8, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, IL, March 11, 2020.
2. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 29.
3. Irene Smith Landsman, "Crises of Meaning in Trauma and Loss," in *Loss of the Assumptive World: A Theory of Traumatic Loss*, ed. Jeffrey Kauffman (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 13.
4. Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 185.
5. https://ifunny.co/picture/2020-is-a-unique-leap-year-it-has-29-days-I3dcCb8b7.
6. Jim Zarroli, "'A Homeless Pandemic' Looms as 30 Million Are at Risk of Eviction," *NPR*, August 10, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/08/10/900766719/millions-of-americans-are-in-danger-of-being-evicted-during-pandemic.
7. *Darkness*, of course, is as symbolic as descriptive in the Gospel of John. Darkness, for the author of John, represents confusion, uncertainty, doubt, and an incapacity to recognize God at work. This, of course, can lead to problematic dualisms in connection to race and race relations, especially in the context of the United States. For too long, dualistic light and dark imagery (light=good/holy; dark=bad/evil) has reinforced racism and white supremacy. For more on this, I would recommend Lenny Duncan's book *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), specifically chapter 5, "Decolonizing the Liturgy and the Power of Symbols."
8. This is modified from a reflection originally published on my blog: Kimberly Wagner, "John's Resurrection: Defiant Persistence," *Preaching and Trauma*, April 7, 2020, https://www.preachingandtrauma.com/post/_john.

Amy E. Gray

The Lord's Supper in a Pandemic: A Participant's Journal from the Front Lines

David Batchelder

October 29, 2020

In the spring of 2020, I was asked to respond to three questions: What have we (at West Plano Presbyterian Church) learned through this pandemic? What has come to light? And what do I make of it all?

Who could have guessed this year would provide so much upheaval, socially, politically, theologically, and medically? So much remains "unfinished" at every level of our existence. As it pertains to the church's sacramental life, I do not have as much clarity as I would like. Nevertheless, my congregation has followed a course which I have set out, one that seeks to be as faithful as I know how to be.

This essay is constructed to share the witness of one faith community's experience with the sacraments. I will highlight the key theological and pastoral insights that have guided us in our sacramental practice. As a congregation for whom the norm has been weekly Eucharist at all services on the Lord's Day as well as festival days, this presented us with some serious soul-searching. Finally, I will conclude by offering some questions and concerns that remain unresolved, requiring further attention in the years ahead.

On March 15, the Ides of March no less, West Plano Presbyterian Church celebrated its last liturgy in its worship space. We left naively believing we would be exiled for only a period of months. How little did we know, and know still.

Into the Wild—March and April

The sudden onset of an unprecedented sheltering-in-place has plunged the church of Jesus Christ into making primary a means of sharing its worship and ministry that was previously (at best) an extension of being together physically. Worship is at the heart of all the church is and does. As part of that worship, churches have been challenged to quickly decide whether to celebrate the Lord's Supper and, if so, how to do it. Some congregations have made the decision to "fast" from the sacrament until being able to safely gather again around the Lord's table. West Plano made this decision. As the resident pastor-theologian for the congregation, this made me responsible to answer questions: What theological understanding and reflection informs this decision, and how does this extraordinary time offer an opportunity to more deeply understand the nature of the sacrament?

Among the decisions we made, three have had the most significance.

First, we decided that the worship we offered over the Internet would approximate, as closely as possible, the Service for the Lord's Day. However, it would be a Word-centered service with no sacrament. Wherever possible, worship leaders continued to take the roles (e.g., lectors) assigned to them.

Second, we opted to use the Zoom platform, as it best offered a sense of connectedness in real time not available in prerecorded formats. Those who have used Zoom know well its limitations, especially with music (though this has recently improved). Everyone has had to contend with tradeoffs. We have found connection to be worth the cost in quality and consistency.

Third, as previously stated, we have chosen not to celebrate online communion. Our decision was made at the time when denominational leadership in Louisville was sending confusing guidance. It is

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helpful to remember that the Office of Theology and Worship first advised *against* online or "virtual" communion. The Office provided a theological brief as its rationale. Very soon thereafter, the Office of the Stated Clerk released its own guidance in support of *not practicing* the sacrament online. This guidance, however, was quickly revised to *allow* such practice. In support, the Stated Clerk's Office provided an interpretation of the *Book of Order*. It is important to recognize that this conflicting guidance generated a diverse set of sacramental practice among churches and—for me—made it necessary to provide my congregation with theological and liturgical rationale for refraining from celebrating the Lord's Supper online.

On Saturday, April 25, I led a Zoom seminar titled "Sacramental Practice in a Digital Age, and during the Coronavirus Crisis: What Is the Theological Basis for a Church (Such as West Plano) Choosing a Eucharistic Fast?" This seminar was primarily meant for my congregants, but many participants from the presbytery and denomination as a whole also participated.[1] In summary, the following were the key points made in the presentation.

The Sacramental Nature of the Word

Since the norm for our liturgy is Word *and* Sacrament (Sacrament *and* Word), what is needed in this pandemic is for us to retrieve Reformed theology's rich understanding of the living Word. The risen Christ we meet as host in the Lord's Supper is no less present in his holy Word to feed our hunger and quench our thirst. Our Directory for Worship states that "where the Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the living Word is present by the power of the Holy Spirit" (W-3.0301). This means that we do not encounter *half* a Christ in the reading and preaching of Scripture (with the rest of him coming to us in Eucharist). We have *all* of Christ with us in the Word just as we do in the Holy Meal.

The centrality of the Word and its sacramental nature is affirmed by Reformed theology (and Calvin). The Prayer for Illumination, which is an epiclesis similar to that in the Great Thanksgiving, calls for the Spirit to quicken the Word (read and proclaimed) to life in us. Reformed theologian Howard Hageman notes that the Word is equal to the Eucharist in terms of presenting to us the fulness of Christ; they are no different except in kind.

> Any attempt to set up an antithesis between [Word and Sacrament] is completely false to the Biblical witness. They belong together not as successive or even complementary acts. *They are aspects of a single whole* [italics mine]. Word and Sacrament are only different media for the same reality, Christ's coming into the midst of his people.[2]

This truth is similarly affirmed by Joseph Small (former director of the PC(USA) Office of Theology and Worship):

> Word and sacrament are not contrasting aspects of church life; brain and heart, abstract and concrete. On the contrary, Calvin placed word and sacrament together at the core of the church's life because he took it as "a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace" [Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17]. Calvin's view is remarkable in two ways. First, the purpose of the sacraments is the same function as Scripture and preaching: to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, giving us true knowledge of God. Second, the purpose of both is to communicate the presence of the living Christ to us, uniting us to him in the power of the Holy Spirit. The word is not for imparting information and the sacraments are not for imparting feelings; both are occasions for the real presence of Christ in our midst.[3]

This insight has an even broader ecumenical resonance as witnessed by Roman Catholic theologian Anscar Chupungco, who writes:

> The reading of Scripture in the liturgy is a trustworthy sign that Christ is present and that he indeed speaks to the assembly. I would go so far as to say that he is as present in the word as he is in the consecrated host, as present in the proclamation of the word as he was when he preached to the people in the synagogues and the hillsides of Galilee.[4]

A close reading of the congregational responses to the Scriptures in the Sunday liturgy reveals how clearly affirmed is the sacramental nature of the Word. For example, in the *Book of Common Worship*, the Gospel reading is followed by the acclamation "The Gospel of the Lord," to which the assembly responds, "Praise to you, O Christ." The understanding of the liturgy is that it is Christ himself who is present speaking to us his Word now, in this very moment. As Martin Luther explains:

> When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel.[5]

The Three "Bodies" of the Lord's Supper

In every celebration of the Eucharist, there are three "bodies." There is the body of Christ in the sacramental bread. There is the body of "assembly," which is the hands, feet, eyes, and ears of Christ in his many members, the church. And there is the body of each participating believer (each one never *not* part of the many).

With the Lord's Supper, *matter* matters. In this regard, the sacrament is the best kind of materialism. In the Lord's Supper, *what* we know—and *how* we know it—is mediated more through the sensory capacity of our bodies (our very physicality) than through the realm of ideas apprehended cognitively. In a pastoral letter to his congregation in this pandemic, Rev. Dr. Trevor Hart of the Scottish Episcopal Church wrote:

> The "sensory overload" of eucharist as distinct from some other forms of worshipping is, in other words, a divinely mandated bodily practice; and our bodily presence, bodily proximity to one another, and bodily involvement with solid, flesh and blood elements (taking, breaking, giving, receiving, eating and drinking) are all essential rather than incidental to its meaning. To strip away these things, to take our bodies out of the equation, or even to reduce the multi-sensory experience to one of seeing and hearing alone, is, I believe, to end up with something that is no longer eucharistic worship at all. Worse still, it risks complicity in the wider cultural and religious myth that tells us that disembodied realities are the only ones that really matter at the end of the day.[6]

At the heart of the Lord's Supper is the exchange of giving and receiving. One does not take but receives what God graciously offers. Self-service has no place at the table of the Lord. Rather, reception comes in the actions of "taking, blessing, breaking, giving," which constitute an overflow of communal thanksgiving. Though spoken by a single presider, the Supper table grace is authorized by and assented to by the gathered community. In this and many other ways, the assembly "constitutes the most basic symbol of Christian worship."[7]

Voicing Lament in the Midst of Absence and Presence

As an outcome of this seminar, our congregation claimed this pandemic period as a time of eucharistic fasting calling forth a faithful lament and longing. We have lamented what we have not been able to celebrate. And we have felt an ever-deepening longing for the day when we shall again celebrate together the joyful feast of the people of God.

To give expression to this pandemic piety, I crafted a new ending to the non-eucharist Prayers of Thanksgiving in the *Book of Common Worship*.[8] As a complement to that prayer we pray over Zoom, I wrote a meal prayer for church members to pray at their tables at home. Here are those prayers.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

(*in Zoom worship*)
The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Eternal God,
creator of the world
and giver of all good,

we thank you for the earth, our home,
and for the gift of life.
We praise you for your love in Jesus Christ,
who came to heal this broken world,
who died rejected on the cross,
and rose triumphant from the dead.
Because he lives, we live to praise you,
our God forever.

Gracious God, who called us from death to life,
sustain us through this time of longing and lament
when, absent from Christ's Holy Table,
we may still know the comfort of his presence with us.
Until that day, keep us in holy fellowship as one body, with Christ our head,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and forever. Amen.

A Meal Prayer

(*for the baptized at home during a time of Eucharistic fasting*)

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God.
Your gifts abound,
even when creation is suffering.
In this time of trial,
we remember with longing
Christ's gathered body
at his Holy Table
for the breaking of the bread.
Come also to this table of sharing.
Though we are distanced from one another,
draw us in the Spirit's tether,
thankful for your presence,
mindful of the poor,
and grounded in hope;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Life in the Wilderness—May and June

As April turned to May and June, we began to manifest spiritual fatigue. The limitations of worshiping via Zoom began to reveal its shortcomings. For all its blessings, virtual technology marginalizes physical presence, leaving us to boxes on a screen with a near complete dependence on words read and spoken. Ritual and symbolic action is very difficult. Our children have been the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. Normally, they participate in the liturgy at a high level. On Zoom, we are left watching one another (and ourselves) and listening to a super abundance of words.

A second source of fatigue is a result from a society torn open with outrage and grief at the murder of George Floyd. The call for equal justice rippled through our congregation. We felt an acute need for every spiritual resource available to us. Community life in COVID exile was pushing us to new levels of exhaustion.

A third fatigue factor was a restlessness among some over our church's decision to refrain from online communion. People voiced their lament: "I'm missing the sense of community that comes with communion." "I never thought this crisis would go on so long." "If others are doing it, why can't we?" Through the Internet, people have seen how Presbyterian sacramental practice varied so greatly across the denomination. By the end of June, our session was asked if it would revisit its earlier decision to fast from sacramental practice.

Wilderness Trials—July and August

In early August, we undertook a reexamination of our decision to refrain from celebrating the Lord's Supper. This meant revisiting the theological, liturgical, and pastoral dimensions of this choice. A new element of our consideration was to consider more broadly the riches of the church's liturgical practice of daily prayer, which had not been as strong a focus in our congregation. Our conclusion was to reaffirm our decision from last spring. In addition, we committed ourselves to a more fulsome liturgical life that includes the practice of daily prayer. The recommendations we adopted were these:

1. That we continue to wait until we can safely assemble physically for in-person worship before celebrating the Lord's Supper, and that this time of waiting be received as a necessary discipline for the sake of love. The basis for this decision is that such assembly as the Lord's Supper requires is not now possible.
2. That we let go of the language of fasting from the Eucharist, and trust the full and real presence

of the risen Christ who has promised never to forsake us, to come whenever two or three are gathered in his name, and from whose love nothing—not even death—can separate us.

3. That we actively encourage church members to take up the discipline of home prayer and Scripture reading as a vital spiritual resource in such a time as this pandemic.

The key insights informing these decisions were as follows:

Real Presence Requires Full Presence

A critical element in sacramental practice has to do with presence. Physical proximity is essential for presence. A Christian anthropology affirms the nature of our creaturehood as possessing a physicality. To be human as God has gifted us is to possess a flesh and blood existence that occupies space and time.

Sacramental theologian Ronald Byars asks, "Can a person who consumes bread and wine all alone, without even one other person known to be engaged at the same time, really be said to be communing?" He comments, "Virtual Communion may evoke a sense of presence, but an important aspect of 'presence' is missing. . . . The visible or otherwise discernible 'presence' of others is a means by which Christ becomes really 'present' to the worshiping assembly."[9]

Anglican Christopher Craig Brittain challenges assertions that bodily absence from the sacrament is not definitive.

> What is problematic about claims [for online communion] is not the idea that virtual gatherings can be experienced as a "community," but the assertion that they are the same kind of community as a physical gathering of people. . . . Online networks may indeed be a form of "community," but they are a very different form of gathering. Theologians advocating for virtual communion generally fail to address the difference this has on the practice and meaning of the Eucharist.[10]

Real Presence and the Presence of "Assembly"

In sacramental theology, the understanding of "presence" is closely connected with "assembly/gathering" as a bodily coming together in physical proximity. Lovers, for example, might share one another's presence virtually, even attaining a level of sexual intimacy. Yet nothing can compare with a physically proximate experience where heart, mind, spirit, emotion, and body all meet in human encounter.

What is needed in this unprecedented time of displacement and disorientation is our best thinking grounded in our best theological understanding along with our willingness to trust God's faithfulness in this present suffering. Decisions about what the church does and refrains from doing in this pandemic are to be discerned from such a theology of church in "assembly." This discernment has been challenged in this time of pandemic forgetfulness. In a recent article liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop recalls readers to the central role of assembly in worship.

> So what is "the assembly," that thing that we are so much missing? I think that this time of absence gives us a stunning opportunity to learn once again what we mean by that word. For Lutheran Christians—and for most other catholic Christians, as well—the assembly is a public gathering of people around the reading of scripture, the singing of psalms and hymns, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the remembrance or lively practice of baptism, the intercession for the needs of church and world, the collection for mission and for the wretched and poor of the world, the thanksgiving over bread and wine that the community has set out, the mutual receiving of the body and blood of Christ in these gifts, the in-person sending of the bread and cup to those who cannot be with us, and the final sending of this whole company to be servants and witnesses in the world.
>
> More, and to add to my longing: in assembly, all of these things are done as much as possible musically, singing through the whole event. And all of these things are done together, all of us participating. They are not done for us by someone else whom we watch. There will be a presider who serves the gathering by leading us and there will be other ministers who assist us, but these are caregivers for our common action, not actors for our observation. The whole event is a bodily event, as if we all are one

> body. In fact, Paul called the assembly "the body of Christ." And, as Paul himself fiercely argued in 1 Corinthians 11, the whole event needs to be open to all who belong to Christ, not excluding some on economic grounds or, to say the matter in our terms, on the basis of class, gender, age, or race.
>
> This all is what we mean, in the first place, by "church." Indeed, our word "church" is an English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia* which means a gathering of people, an assembly.[11]

Sacramental Meaning Resides as Much in the "How" as in the "What"

We are well to notice that assembly/gathering is both a noun and a verb. The "being" of assembly is inseparably bound to what it does. And the "doing" of assembly constitutes its being. "Being and doing" are essential and indistinguishable to the church's identity as assembly. "Real presence . . . invites not spectators, but participants."[12] Participation in body, heart, and mind is what we crave in this pandemic, unable to achieve it through virtual technology.

One can easily peruse various celebrations of the Lord's Supper online through a church's video archive. Watching what takes place and comparing what is written in our Directory for Worship (W-3.0409–3.0415) reveals how marginalized the assembly has become in sacramental celebration. In the videos I have viewed, there is no assembly present except as spectator to a thanksgiving prayer offered as a solo recitation. There is no distribution of common food from a common table. Communion is self-administered on screen by individuals at home who have collected their own elements. What our Directory envisions and what takes place onscreen are two very different meals. Should we not ask about the meaning expressed of each and its relation to what our theology says about the sacrament?

What is most obvious is the missing-in-action assembly. Without the assembly's communal action in the meal, how can it be the sacrament? My reading of the Directory is that the "real" presence of the assembly is essential to the sacrament. A virtual presence that is not quite presence is insufficient. Thus, we must lament that we cannot yet celebrate together, and we long for the time when we shall be proximate in mind, spirit, and flesh as Christ's gathered body communing with its Head.

Gratitude for the Christ Who Is with Us at Every Meal

A gift of the sacraments is a new way of seeing God present and at work in the world. The church's celebration of the Lord's Supper intends to reveal how Christ comes at all our meals. Episcopalian liturgical theologian James Farwell says,

> For years I have tried to teach students that you do not understand the sacraments if you cannot think BOTH/AND. The Eucharistic table is a table like no other table. AND the Eucharistic table is like every other table. The Eucharistic elements are special and singular in that there, above all other places and times, we see what God is doing in ALL places and times. Here's the question, then: do you think if we do not gather at the Eucharistic table like no other table that God is no longer present at all other tables, i.e., at all other places and times?[13]

At West Plano, it became clear that we needed to give greater attention to the eucharistic nature of all meal sharing, especially in a time when we could not be celebrating the Eucharist together. In order to bring the truth of Christ's presence with us in our homes to greater light, I wrote two complementary prayers, one for our Zoom worship and the other to be prayed at our tables at home. In the Zoom thanksgiving we pray

> . . . sustain us through this time of longing
> and lament
> while absent from Christ's Holy Table.
> May we still know the comfort of his
> presence with us
> *at every meal* where you come as holy guest,
> our morning joy and evening rest [italics added].

And in our homes at mealtime, we pray as follows:

> May we know the comfort of Christ's
> presence with us
> *at this meal* where you come as holy guest,
> our morning joy and evening rest.
> Sustain us through this time of longing
> and lament
> while we eagerly await a return to Christ's Holy Table [italics added].

We were fortunate to have Matthew's account of meal sharing assigned to the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (August 2). Matthew stylizes the narrative to reflect the connection between this particular meal and the meal Jesus shared with his disciples just before his death. By carefully describing Jesus' actions of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving, Matthew makes clear its eucharistic nature. So also with our household meals. If not the Eucharist as sacrament, they are nonetheless eucharistic! Christ is no less present. This meal prayer above was given to each household in a small frame to help us live more deeply into a sacramental imagination and piety in our COVID confinement.

Finding New Resolve—September and October

With the arrival of autumn, we determined to undertake two new initiatives in response to the spiritual hardships of our COVID exile.

The first was to prepare for and enact a congregation-wide 21-Day Pilgrimage of Daily Prayer. This initiative was based on the conviction that we would be immeasurably helped in our faith by having spiritual resources to use each day of the week between our Sunday Zoom worship experiences. The practice of household daily prayer affords us an opportunity to live out the meaning of our baptism. Baptismal grace and the grace of the Eucharist are one and the same. There is no difference in kind. Sacramental grace is available to us through many means including the one our congregation had not yet given its full attention.

In our letter to the congregation, we said:

> This 21-Day Pilgrimage is a practical way we can live out our baptisms and the power of Christ's resurrection each day of our lives. For most of us, this will be a brand new experience. How exciting is that! We can be learners taking the baby steps needed together, helping one another along the way, encouraging each other and sharing what we're learning. . . . In this time of spiritual exile, when we are being called to wait, there are rich resources available to us that the Session is taking steps to help us all utilize. The principle resource is the discipline of Daily Prayer. . . . We believe this intentional practice will enliven faith, strengthen our courage, and help sustain us through this wilderness time with many dangers, toils, and snares to challenge us. We believe we are being called to offer our community the "witness of waiting" patiently for the sake of love. We are all being challenged to do more than just "get through" this pandemic. As people of faith, we have the good news of Jesus Christ to proclaim, even in our suffering.

Every participating household was given the Daily Prayer portion of the *Book of Common Worship*,[15] a candle, glass baptismal bowl, and cross. Our aim was to cultivate household prayer as a disciplined way of living out the grace of baptism, which is a daily dying and rising with the Christ whose very life we share.

The second initiative we have undertaken is to hold occasional, in-person, open-air services of Word and Sacrament. With many congregations, we have discovered that it is far easier (and much safer) to assemble together outside our buildings under the sky than inside. In preparation for this service, we established an essential criteria that had to be met. For health and safety, we utilized the document "Resuming Care-filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic."[16]

For our theological criteria, we adopted the following:

1. The "real" presence of the assembly in body, mind, and spirit is required.
2. The liturgy meets Directory for Worship (W-3.02–3.05) integrity; the Word is read and proclaimed, prayers are spoken, praise is offered, the Great Thanksgiving is prayed in fullness with the Lord's Prayer, bread and wine are shared, all are sent to serve with blessing.
3. The choice of readings is not bound by the Sunday lectionary (these readings have been read and proclaimed in the morning Zoom worship). There should be at least two, an Old Testament and a Gospel reading.
4. Members of the assembly serve the liturgy as fully as possible: lectors, crucifer, pouring water, eucharistic ministers.
5. There is a collection for the poor.
6. The peace will be shared with the ritual gesture of bowing.
7. Provision is made for extending the meal to those at home.
8. Music will be included insofar as it satisfies safety requirements.

Sunday, October 25 arrived with the promise of sun and seasonal temperatures. Several hours ahead of service time, however, we were enveloped in a light but persistent mist that had us all remembering our baptisms beneath a heavenly asperges. With rain gear in hand, we still had a substantial number of members forming an assembly. People arrived with food offerings for the local pantry and a hunger of their own for the Christ we meet in Word and at the Holy Table from which we had so long been absent. The liturgy was filled with a reverence intensified by a participation made full by virtue of our bodies. At this writing, we do not know when such a service will be repeated. We are grateful for having had this occasion for sharing the sacrament, and it provides me with a vantage point from which to close this essay with a few observations.

Regarding Bodies and Presence

The presence of "bodies" forming the body of an "assembly" for our in-person, open-air service was soul stirring for me. The witness of the assembly was powerful simply by its "presence." Its presence in motion, enacting the liturgy, speaking softly in unison, and processing to the table for the sacrament conveyed a theological fullness that no virtual presence can approach. Oddly, I have been helped in my theological reflection by the insights of the business world raising some alarm about what virtual technology has been doing to our personal and collective well-being. For example:

> In early April, at the height of the pandemic lockdown, Gianpiero Petriglieri, an Italian business professor, suggested on Twitter that being forced to conduct much of our lives online was making us sick. The constant video calls and Zoom meetings were draining us because they go against our brain's need for boundaries: here versus not here. "It's easier being in each other's presence, or in each other's absence," he wrote, "than in the constant presence of each other's absence."[17]

Kate Murphy of the *New York Times*[18] has written about the ways Zoom disables us to engage one another at an emotional level because we can't read one another's facial cues. An additional concern, she writes, is evidence that virtual technology can inhibit trust "because we can't look one another in the eye." As a result, some suggest that no facial cues are better than the faulty ones that are transmitted via virtual technology.

The point of these cautions is not to disparage virtual technologies and urge we abandon them in such a time as this. We can be grateful for what we can achieve through Zoom and other formats, but we must be discerning and discriminating when it comes to how we understand presence. Real presence includes bodily presence. Reflecting such an incarnational anthropology, Rowan Williams writes that our bodies have an essential role in the economy of God's salvation which is reflected in sacramental practice.

> Only the body saves the soul. It sounds rather shocking put like that, but the point is that the soul left to itself, the inner life or whatever you want to call it, is not capable of transforming itself. It needs the gifts that only the external life can deliver: the actual events of God's action in history, heard by physical ears; the actual material fact of the meeting of believers where bread and wine are shared; the actual wonderful, disagreeable, impossible, unpredictable human beings we encounter daily, in and out of the church. Only in this setting do we become holy; and holy in a way unique to each one of us.[20]

Historically, the church has long been tempted and enticed to lean into one form of gnosticism or another. As we live into a second year of this pandemic, the church must do its best theological work reflecting on these concerns and their implications for its sacramental practice.

Regarding Theology and Polity

I have wondered: What if the polity decision made last spring had gone the other way? How might our theological reflection and practice developed had we been advised to uphold the "not" to celebrate online communion? What we have been left to live with is a church with multiple sacramental theologies that cannot be reconciled.

Here is what I mean. Though a particular practice may be determined "permissible" according to polity, permissibility does not automatically determine theological clarity of witness. The Gospels narrate numerous times when Jesus is asked a theological question beginning with the words "Is it lawful?" In

those situations, Jesus redirects the questioner to a larger and more expansive vision of God's intention and purpose.

This pandemic has put church leadership under tremendous pressure to provide all available spiritual resources for congregations. Thus the question of permissibility was asked of our polity and answered. In the many months of widely diverse sacramental practice (including abstaining while in COVID exile), we can ask about sacramental meaning and witness in such practice. How clearly are we giving witness in our sacramental practice to God's gift of the Word made flesh and the hope we have for redemption of all creation? There is much at stake for the church in this regard, and it will impact generations to come.

I wish to close with a reading from Tertullian, who reminds us how central to our salvation are ritual practices that cannot be enacted virtually, but can only be carried out in the body. He writes:

> It would suffice to say, indeed, that there is not a soul that can at all procure salvation, except it believe while it is in the flesh, so true is it that the flesh is the very condition on which salvation hinges. And since the soul is, in consequence of its salvation, chosen to the service of God, it is the flesh which actually renders it capable of such service. The flesh, indeed, is washed, in order that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is signed (with the cross), that the soul too may be fortified; the flesh is shadowed with the imposition of hands, that the soul also may be illuminated by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on its God. They cannot then be separated in their recompense, when they are united in their service. Those sacrifices, moreover, which are acceptable to God—I mean conflicts of the soul, fastings, and abstinences, and the humiliations which are annexed to such duty—it is the flesh which performs again and again to its own special suffering.[20]

Notes

1. Access the recording of this seminar at http://westplanopresbyterian.org/wordPress/?page_id=4152/.
2. Howard G. Hageman, *Pulpit and Table* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1962), 112.
3. Joseph Small, "A Church of the Word and Sacrament," Theology & Worship Occasional Paper 16, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 6; reprinted in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 311–323, https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/op16.pdf/.
4. Anscar Chupungco, *What, Then, Is Liturgy? Musings and Memoir* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2010), 95.
5. "A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, 3rd ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 1,519.
6. Trevor Hart, "Eucharist, and the Stuff that Matters," Jason Goroncy website, https://jasongoroncy.com/2020/04/13/eucharist-and-the-stuff-that-matters/.
7. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 21.
8. Adapted from the Prayer of Thanksgiving #1 on page 149 in the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).
9. Ron Byars, email message to author, April 30, 2020. Used with permission.
10. Christopher Craig Brittain, "On Virtual Communion: A Tract for These COVID-19 Times (Part 2)," *Anglican Journal*, May 25, 2020, https://www.anglicanjournal.com/on-virtual-communion-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times-ii/.
11. Gordon Lathrop, "Thinking Again about Assembly in a Time of Pandemic," *CrossAccent: Journal of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2020).
12. Regis Duffy, *Real Presence* (NewYork: Harper & Row, 1982), 23.
13. James Farwell, "Eucharistic Theology in This Time Apart," Episcopal Diocese of Long Island emergency website, March 19, 2020, https://www.diolicovid19.info/blog-articles/eucharistic-theology-in-this-time-apart-by-the-rev-dr-jim-farwell/.
14. I discovered a very interesting prayer of John Calvin concluding his lecture on Zechariah 9:9–12. In this prayer, Calvin acknowledges the present "miseries" and the spiritual challenge resulting from them. Calvin prays that "we may patiently bear all evils and troubles." What comes next is both surprising and suggestive. Calvin recalls Christ's self-giving, and brings to present memory the "Holy Supper" as a spiritual resource for facing the trials. Though this lecture was not an occasion for the Lord's Supper, Calvin perceived that the memory of the sacrament could, no less, provide a benefit. The prayer uses the language of "confiding" and "sacred seal" to direct

one to find help in the meaning of the sacrament. It calls for trusting Christ's faithfulness, the same as testified to in the sacrament. It asks for the "fruit" of spiritual blessing that sees beyond the time and space of our temporal lives. The key point to observe is the availability of sacramental grace beyond the occasion of the meal itself. Indeed, being fed at Christ's holy table affords us with a sacramental imagination that allows us to realize the benefits of God's grace in all times and places.

> Grant, Almighty God, that as we do not at this day look for a Redeemer to deliver us from temporal miseries, but only carry on a warfare under the banner of the cross until he appear to us from heaven to gather us into his blessed kingdom. O grant that we may patiently bear all evils and troubles, and as Christ once for all poured forth the blood of the new and eternal covenant, and gave us also a symbol of it in the Holy Supper, may we, confiding in so sacred a seal, never doubt that he will always be propitious to us, and render manifest to us the fruit of this reconciliation, when, after having supported us for a season under the burden of those miseries by which we are now oppressed, thou gatherest us into that blessed and perfect glory which has been procured for us by the blood of Christ our Lord, and which is daily set before us in his gospel, and laid up for us in heaven, until we at length shall enjoy it through Christ, our only Lord. AMEN.

Devotions and Prayers of John Calvin, comp. Charles E. Edwards (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), 101.

15. These Daily Prayer books were made available by the Presbyterian Publishing House to churches in a limited number at no cost, thanks to a generous anonymous grant.
16. The Ecumenical Consultation on Protocols for Worship, Fellowship, and Sacraments, "Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life During a Pandemic," https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Resuming_Care-filled_Worship_and_Sacramental_Life.pdf/.
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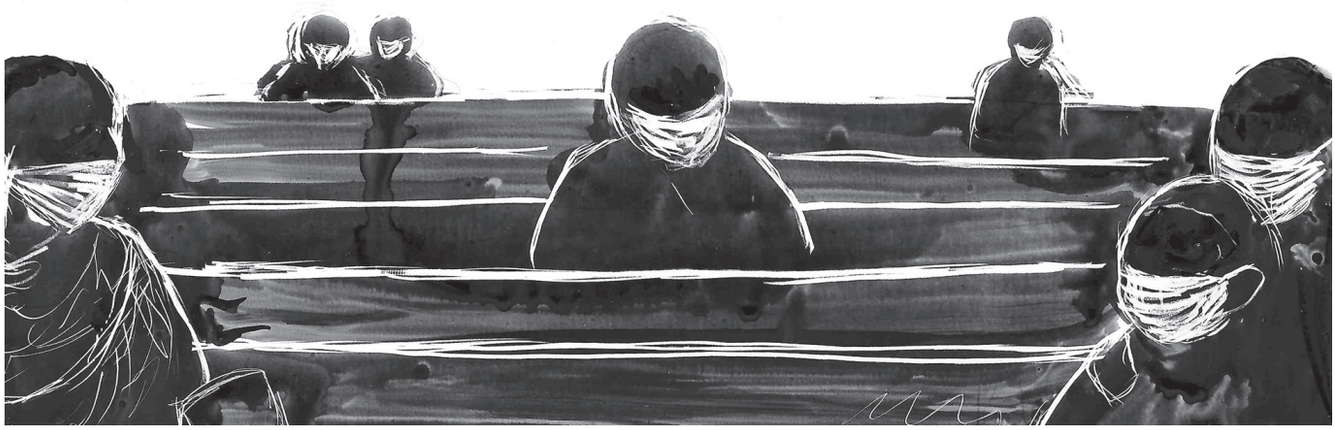
18. Kate Murphy, "Why Zoom Is Terrible," *New York Times*, April 29, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/sunday-review/zoom-video-conference.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article/.
19. Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2005), 115, 116.
20. Tertullian, "On the Resurrection of the Flesh," chapter 8, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0316.htm/.action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article/.



Amy E. Gray

Won't We Sing? Notes from Brooklyn on Worshiping God in the Pandemic

Jenny Gage

March 15, 2020

What I remember most vividly about the first remote service of my home congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn (FPC), is the panic I felt trying to connect and project the video from my laptop onto our television. I was beyond flustered; I'd moved straight to yelling at my husband and ten-year-old daughter, who were trying to help me, because catching every note of "Make Room"—the rendition of a Jonathan McReynolds song that our church had chosen to open every service with in the Lenten season this year—seemed suddenly like a matter of life and death. Sure, when storm clouds are gathering it is important to make room for worship, but for reasons that weren't fully clear to me, I was in a panic.

Everything was okay. Everything was okay, but Mayor De Blasio and Governor Cuomo were continuing to argue over whose decision it would be to close the schools—not that they needed to close the schools, because the schools were safe. The schools were mostly safe, or at least my child's school was mostly safe. The schools might not be all that safe, and maybe since we had jobs that would allow us to work from home, what would make everything okay would be to pull V. out of school for a little while. We had read something about flattening the curve. We could do that, flatten it. If we kept her home, that would lower the density and flatten the curve for the sake of kids and families who had fewer options, and everything would be okay. We kept her home on Friday out of an excess of caution. We went to the library out of an excess of caution, and we went to the grocery store out of an excess of caution and everything was okay.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? I have often wondered about how suddenly the world as we knew it shut down, and what different emotions may have been in play where the presence of disease was not immediately evident.

Within that same week, a young man from FPC was the first of my friends to fall seriously ill; soon after that, a third grade teacher from a school down the street from my daughter's died. One day in early April I posted my running tally on Facebook of the number of ambulances I'd heard screaming over the otherwise deserted streets during the course of that workday—thirty-eight. I noted that it was "a massive undercount," as sirens increasingly functioned as white noise. While messages of shock, love, and concern poured in from around the country, I began updating the count in real time, and watching as local friends checked in. "Ugh, same here. It's all we hear. Hope you are hanging in!" responded my friend Laura in Queens. "It's just nonstop night and day for the past three days or so," said Sarah in Manhattan. "It's been constant for the last ten days. I do live next to major avenues, though," agreed Saraivy from her apartment over by Brooklyn's county hospital.

If in Brooklyn refrigerator-truck morgues lined up outside the hospitals made decisions to close our churches, schools, and businesses relatively easy, what must it have felt like in places where people weren't sick? Was it panic, like I felt? Was it rage? What impact did these emotions have on our worship? And what impact did worship have on our emotions?

The recording of that service, which I could not bear to rewatch until October,[1] retains in hindsight the core emotional memory I have of that day: that

Jenny Gage is a former global nomad who put down roots in Brooklyn.

the whole scene was only barely reaching me from some place that was far away and retreating fast, someplace like the moon, maybe, or from deep underwater.

The singer, Richard Arriaga, approaches the microphone with the band in their customary places in a sanctuary that is newly empty save for this skeleton crew: Matt Podd on the piano, Chris Neuner on bass, Ken Thomson fitting the mouthpiece onto his saxophone, and Matt Crawford in the corner on the drums. Wearing a patterned dashiki in regal shades of Lenten purple and gold, a soft Afro haloing his sweet young face, he begins to sing.

Like so many in the gospel tradition, the song has a simple lyric and melody that Richard offers up like a shimmering declaration the first time through. With every repetition, his velvety tenor reveals tiny new embellishments that build the depth and intensity of this declaration but not its volume. Not yet. Amy Neuner, our choir director, who has known Richard since he and his brothers were her students in the high school where she teaches, locates the power of his voice in its arresting authenticity. Now she and Richard's brother Michael are joining him at the microphone, standing in for the rest of the choir, laying down the harmony while, with the whole of his spirit fully engaged, Richard lifts off and soars.

I will make room for you
I will prepare for two
So you don't feel that you
Can't live here
Please live in me

They are maskless, worshiping and singing together for the last time in the Before Time.

A Brief History of the Before Time

If the challenges to worship during the pandemic were purely technical ones, FPC would have had it made. We had been livestreaming our services for years, and even in the Before Time, our senior pastor, Reverend Adriene Thorne, always reminded the congregation to say good morning to those who were worshiping with us from other locations as we greeted each other at the start of the service.

This was largely thanks to Chris Neuner, the bass player in our band, who is married to Amy. His vision of the possible always went far beyond the needs and the reality of the maybe ten to fifteen viewers, mostly congregants away for the weekend, who up until that point had typically joined the livestream. A theater guy who always has a cool idea for a musical up his sleeve, a surprising number of which he actually pulls off, Chris has been known to spend whole weeks installing better boom mics over the choir or upgrading the lighting in our 150-year-old sanctuary that boasts eight Tiffany windows and a leaky roof. A decade or so back, some publication of the French Consulate in Manhattan listed FPC as one of the top places in the city to hear gospel music, and in 2019 we made it to WLIB's "Top 10 Best Gospel Choirs in NYC" list, which means that in the Before Time, there was typically a contingent or two of European tourists in the pews on any given Sunday. Chris has always seen the potential for a broader reach and had been steadily upping our production values. So we had that going for us.

We also had a tremendous archive of recorded worship material owing to our church's situation at the cultural crossroads of our nation. On top of plenty of talent in the congregation—homegrown, immigrant, and somewhere in between—every member of our current professional worship staff has an origin story involving a move to New York to pursue their art and having their art lead them to a servant love for God and the church.

Chris and Amy Neuner came to the city about twenty years ago from Wisconsin, where they'd met as performers in a wedding band; they wandered through the heavy oak doors at 124 Henry Street soon after to check out those stained-glass windows. Instead of walking back out, they joined FPC's then newly formed gospel choir and became immersed in those traditions, first at the feet of an old-school master, and eventually taking over the group's direction. They have been using music to build community and glorify God in that space ever since.

Our senior minister, Rev. Adriene Thorne, and our minister of formation, Rev. Dr. April Stace, both had decades-long careers as a dancer and as a musician, respectively, before each was called to ministry. We love to brag about how our graceful, statuesque Pastor Adriene performed as the center Rockette onstage at Radio City Music Hall, or how Pastor April's harp band had multiple top-10 albums on the World/New Age charts. In the Before Time, these gifts showed up in worship all the time, most exuberantly in the youth ministry.

Matt Podd, our instrumentalist and arranger, got his musical start splitting accompaniment duties with his identical twin (literally—as in one hymn each and a third together, with Adam playing the left-hand part and Matt playing the right) at Sunday church services in small-town Vermont where they grew up. In the Before Time, Matt and Adam continued to play all over the city with their jazz band, Mimi and the Podd Brothers.[2] Matt plays piano, organ—the Hammond as well as the pipe organ in the loft at the back of the sanctuary—and the accordion; he directs the band; and he exercises his gifts with reckless joy in service of a music program and choir that regularly pulls passersby in off the street and into the pews. Watching from my usual perch in the top row of that choir as the doors at the back of the sanctuary open and the room fills with people; the soloist, band, and choir conspiring to raise the roof; and expressions of joy unfailingly crossing Matt's face and animating his whole body—these are some of the things I miss most from the Before Time. But I have been just as deeply moved standing across from him in our pre-service prayer circle by the quiet faith and vulnerability evident in him there.

And then there's the choir. I've been a member for fifteen years. Like Richard, his brothers, and so many others, I was first drawn to FPC by this choir, and the gift of being welcomed into it. I will never forget my first Sunday in September 2005, when as a newcomer to Brooklyn, I got turned around coming out of the subway and walked into the sanctuary a few minutes late during the passing of the peace. The choir was singing a setting of Psalm 27, and a petite white woman with strawberry blond hair and one of the biggest, most acrobatic gospel voices I've ever heard was singing the lead. That was Bertilla Baker[3]; by the next week and for years to come I was blessed to sing alongside her with my own homespun alto.

Whom shall I fear? Whom shall I fear? Bertilla sang, and the choir answered, *The Lord is the strength of my life, whom shall I fear?* while the rest of us milled around saying, "The peace of the Lord be with you." "I love you," a gravelly voice near my elbow announced. The voice had such warmth and commanding authority that when I looked down, startled, into a wizened, shining face, I knew better than to doubt it. That was Dorothy Gill, who despite being a Black woman from Georgia, never failed to evoke my own Dutch American grandmother with her fondness for neat little hats and her instantly available, 100 percent authentic love.

Whom shall I fear? Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the strength of my life,
whom shall I fear?

"Is it always like this?" I asked the guy next to me in the pew as everyone sat back down for the Scripture reading. He nodded. That was Kenny Komala, an Indonesian immigrant whose love and encyclopedic knowledge of American Roots Music would turn him into my favorite friend to go hear live music with in the Before Time. He joined the choir shortly after I did. A glorious tenor who stood literally and figuratively in the middle of a robust section of glorious tenors, Kenny-in-the-middle was who Amy typically directed us to turn to and sing with when she wanted the choir to listen to each other and rebalance. Or when a big anthem posed a particular challenge or just wasn't coming together during rehearsal, she'd stop everything and ask us to reflect with each other on the text, reminding us of our true identities as instruments of worship and praise. God always showed up and did the rest.

April. May. June.

But how would we be the church now, when the daily number of reported new COVID-19 cases in New York City climbed from 122 on that first Sunday to 4,817 the next, on its way to a high of 12,274 on April 4? Bringing even a small worship team together in the sanctuary would not be possible or safe.

The second week, the participants worked out all the logistics of passing the controls from screen to screen so that they could deliver the morning worship service from their homes via Zoom. Chris and his tech crew were already very familiar with that platform, which they had been using to stream our services both to the church website and our Facebook page. Ever the planner and worried about the strains at the start of lockdown on streaming services, though, Chris asked everyone to submit a recorded version of their portion in advance, so that he could edit them all together into a single video as backup. That morning, as hundreds of people began to log on for the start of the service, Chris made a critical decision: he streamed the recording.

Like every week since, morning worship opened with what I instantly related to as the opening title sequence of my new favorite television show. It

For Pastor Adriene and many in our diverse community, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd of that other virus, racism, cratered our remaining emotional reserves.

might seem trivializing to say that, and it certainly points to some longer-term risks (i.e., that we will become passive consumers of worship that functions for us as entertainment), but in those early days of extreme crisis, we longed to be in that place where everyone knows your name. We were figuring out on the fly new ways for two or three to gather. We needed comfort food; we needed a miracle.

The theme song is a jazz version of "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love," recorded by our band during a service in the Before Time. The video sequence, filmed with a steady cam mounted to the handlebars of a bike, features familiar street corners and sidewalks and sweeping views of Lower Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge from the Brooklyn Heights Promenade nearby as its rider makes his way through the neighborhood and to the doors of FPC. Beside the door the letter board says, "Worship with us online at 'FPC.Church.'"

So for one week, two weeks, three weeks, we did. For Easter, we did. Five weeks, six. Ten. Over and over, the services were those miracles we needed; they were oxygen. They were the anchor holding me as I bobbed along through week after dreary, drifty week, and they often moved me to tears.

My choir friends reported the same from their couches in Cobble Hill, Astoria, Crown Heights, Harlem. We'd taken to meeting for a Thursday night hymn sing too, in the hole in our lives where our weekly rehearsal used to be. These were live from the Neuner household at first, with Amy seated at her baby grand playing and singing all the parts and Chris monitoring the chat thread for requests. The fifteen years I'd spent singing a highly improvisational, communal kind of music built on call and response had inscribed not just a huge volume of Scripture and praise songs on my heart, but their harmonies in my own register. I didn't need the numbers from the *African American Heritage Hymnal* that Chris was calling out. When I closed my eyes and sang, it was like Amy was beside me on my front porch. It was like praying.

On Sundays, Rev. Adriene had started to acknowledge and even underscore the recorded nature of the worship services. Not doing so initially had confused viewers from around the city and across the country who were tuning in when they saw a full church in service elements like the Gloria Patri that had been recorded in the Before Time: "In NYC?! Wasn't that church supposed to be shut down?"

"No," the weekly bulletin, our Facebook page, and even the letterboard beside the door at the end of the title sequence explained. "We never closed. We just moved online."

But there were other reasons, too. Each week brought new blows to the Beloved Community on Henry Street in Brooklyn. Bill was very sick. Bernice lost two family members. Pastor Adriene alone lost five friends to COVID-19 in April—former dance teachers, professors, clergy colleagues. Our pastors did their best to acknowledge these losses and say all the names as they would have done in an in-person worship service. What was clear by this point was that virtual worship complicated even simple acts of pastoral care: what if someone else died, something else bad happened, somebody else had woken up to a new grief on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday when the service was recorded on Thursday? Both as individuals and as a church, we had to stop imagining that there was a one-to-one equivalence to be made between in-person and online worship. If we were aiming for "worship as usual" — if we thought that it was a matter of leaning on our own strength and sense of control instead of trusting God to do a new thing—we were going to fail.

We also had to reckon with our grief and fatigue. The breaking point arrived at different times for different people. For Chris, it was the Thursday night in May when the livestream crashed during the broadcast of the weekly hymn sing despite all of his best efforts to test and troubleshoot the connection. "He lost it," Amy confided later. "Like I've never seen in all our years of marriage. Like running outside, screaming and lying down on the pavement lost it." Chris nodded. "Yeah. It was bad. I just felt like we were going to lose this whole church."

For Pastor Adriene and many in our diverse community, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd of that other virus, racism, cratered our remaining emotional reserves. On June 7,

in a brilliant sermon at the start of a three-week series on the Lord's Prayer, standing in front of her mantel in the manse that she'd decorated with old family photos, a painting of African dancers, and a cracked sign reading COLORED SEATED IN REAR, Adriene addressed BIPOC and white-identifying members of our community separately.

Asking each in turn to embrace the full meaning of the words "Our Father,"—the reality that the doors of heaven that we strain against in prayer are already open, and that we're already on the inside and the apple of God's eye—Adriene asked each person to confront the presence of white supremacy in our lives, and all the ways our answer to the question of "How are you?" is "Not good." She wept. We all wept. We understood that we would never be the same.

July. August. September.

So, our pastors broke the fourth wall, articulating the concern that a new grief might arise after the recording but before Sunday and instituting a new service element before the passing of the peace: a few minutes where we hold space for people to share that news and those new names in the chat box before we pray. Almost immediately, I saw God's new thing begin to take shape.

For starters, I noticed that the chat stream was quickly taking on something of the interactive, call-and-response texture associated with the Black church. Adriene's previous attempts to introduce it by posing questions from the pulpit and waiting for actual answers in the Before Time had always felt pretty stilted. Now the conversation was happening spontaneously, with our pastors simultaneously preaching in the pulpit of their living rooms and guiding a lively discussion in the chat stream.

Next, the old lines around this clique and that committee began to dissolve as we each engaged in active worship with people who were new to us or new to the community. A man named Chuck joined the conversation on the Facebook stream every week from Shreveport, Louisiana; he was drawn by a vision of God's radical love and welcome. My friend Laura from grad school came too, along with my aunt, Meghan's mom, Jen's dad. Sometimes a visitor took offense if the pastor used a female pronoun to refer to God; sometimes somebody sought to challenge by proclaiming, "All lives matter," or to needle, "You all *still* can't even reopen up there in New York?" A pastor was right there to firmly but lovingly respond. They kept coming back.

A lot of people did. According to Chris, we began to average about two hundred real time views, exceeding the typical number of people attending during the Before Time before considering that each of those screens might be watched by multiple people. Even more exciting was that after-the-fact views might be double or triple that on any given week. "If the job of the church is to engage people, then we're more successful than any point since the 1800s," Chris told me.

Amy and I were less sure. Seven months into the pandemic when this conversation occurred, we longed for the Before Time. Of course we did. But was it possible that there were aspects of our worship together now that we'd want to preserve Afterwards?

I thought about a recent phone call with Jaheed. Jaheed is a new friend I got to know via his thoughtful participation in the Facebook chat feed. He first visited FPC at the invitation of his friend Zayn in late 2019, just a few months before lockdown, and is young enough to be my son. I wondered what it was like to get to know a church almost exclusively online; and despite our many differences, Jaheed was willing to open up. He appreciates what a good teacher Adriene is. Although he went to church some when he was a child, it was only when he was in the early stages of gender transition that he felt called back to a life of worship in community. He thinks that he has a lot to learn and likes that he can ask a question and get an immediate response. He finds the community to be accepting and accessible. Jaheed is an essential worker and has been on the night shift for quite some time; a couple of times he's been so tired after working overnight that he's missed the service. "But at least you can go back and watch it later, right?" I asked. It turns out that like me, he generally does not like to. Thinking about this more, I realized that virtual worship is not just a recording, far from it. It is the site of highly engaged and engaging worship. We agreed that as much as we are looking forward to a return to in-person worship, the challenge will be to retain the active, participatory quality that remote services offer us now.

This is the kind of conversation I had a lot over the summer, in all kinds of contexts. There has been a collective awakening to the ways that the world is broken, and a gradual realization that we don't want to go back to the way we were. As painful as this moment is, it is also an opportunity and an invitation.

At FPC, as we leaned ever more into God's grace and reframed the virtual nature of our worship as a feature, not a bug,[4] we saw God using it and using us to care for and expand this beloved community.

Perhaps your church is in a part of the country that only began to feel the impact of COVID-19 in the fall. Here, then, is an incomplete list of the means and ways by which worship flourished at FPC admidst the pandemic, together with relevant service dates so that you can access them online if you wish. May they inspire you to take a new look at the unique gifts and resources within your congregation, and may these combine to be a blessing to your worship.

- Following the hymn sing debacle, Chris went before the session to detail what was needed in terms of technology and a team to support this expanded ministry, and God raised up givers to meet those needs.
- At Rev. Adriene's insistence, all members of the core worship team took vacation this summer, each pastor spelling the other for a month between July and August.
- Amy standardized certain elements of the service that worked as throughlines of worship through the summer and reduced the number of new segments needed each week. For instance, one instrumental track and a call to the choir for submissions yielded enough versions of "Till We Gather Again" for that hymn to serve as the benediction all season.
- She also began tasking worship volunteers to record and submit all the segments of their assigned service element for a whole month at one time. These moves made it possible for their family to carve out a little downtime, since Chris could do more of the editing in advance. They also served to introduce and develop new leaders as young families called us to worship, teenagers and septuagenarians read Scripture, brand-new members led us in prayer, and people we didn't know could sing sang us out.
- Our worship was infused with new intimacy as we took each other into our living rooms, our neighborhoods, our parks and gardens, and into the natural world, which we were starving for. A congregant's walk in the woods provided a moment of reflection after one sermon.[5] In July, waves moved and tracks mysteriously appeared in the photographic backdrop of a beach behind a young composer named Ben Boeker as he sang his new version of the familiar "Footprints" meditation.[6] Following Adriene's August vacation, she took us back to the beach with her, via a video of a restorative moment building a sandcastle with her daughter, the child humming and the waves lapping in the background as Adriene concluded her sermon about the holiness of everyday activities and spaces.[7]
- Recorded segments also offered a view that is much more up close and personal than the one from the pews. The single moment that is carved on my heart in this respect came at the close of Adriene's sermon from her living room during a very dark time.[8] It ended with her prayer that was both poem and lament, and was followed immediately by "As a Deer" sung at home on her couch by a beautiful singer named Ewura Esi Arthur. It's all recorded and accessible online, where the power of the expressions of pain, love, and praise radiating from the faces of these women continues to point to a balm in Gilead.
- Week after week, our ministry reached a broader audience. As protests following the death of George Floyd continued across the country, a faith-based financial services company contacted Amy for permission to use the FPC choir's recording of "Guide My Feet" in a video they were making to message their corporate response. That video served as the offertory one week in June.[9]
- The medium opened new avenues of meditation and worship through the visual arts. One week a video played in reverse during the offertory transformed a chaotic scene of strewn petals, broken stems, and dropped flowers into a beautiful bouquet.[10] On another, a time lapse video showed two hands skillfully painting a vision of Eden in watercolor.[11]
- My daughter declared the annual Youth Service as "by far my favorite service. Because it's about kids. All of us are a part of it! Everyone is included and is a part of this one!" It was on Pentecost, and she'd contributed abstract images of rushing wind and tongues of fire she'd drawn on her iPad; these provided a visual backdrop to the offertory.[12]
- And our music ministry? It's hard to know where to begin. Since anyone could sing from anywhere, lots of members who had moved away "came back": Bertilla sang an Easter

anthem from her home in Costa Rica, while Larry in Massachusetts and Jill and Mark in Wisconsin appeared regularly again as well.

- Then there were the musicians and singers for whom not being able to play with others drove them to play and sing all of the parts themselves. Accompanying himself on the guitar, Kenny recorded so many multitracked hymns that he published an album called *Quaranhymns* as a fundraiser for our virtual ministry.[13] I never knew what complex music he heard in his head!
- And then there were the dazzling contributions of our band, who often combined these strategies to keep on making the kind of music that is so central to our identity as a church. Matt understood the individual styles of our gospel soloists so intimately that he was able to create instrumental tracks—typically recording both piano and Hammond organ parts—that opened the right space at the right time for them to improvise. There are too many examples of this to name, but another favorite moment came in July, when the band played a totally instrumental version of "Oh Happy Day."[14] The video brought together all four of them in five different panels on the screen: Ken playing saxophone in Germany, where his family had moved at the start of the pandemic; Chris playing his bass on Long Island; Matt C. on the drums Upstate; and two different views of Matt P. in Brooklyn, one with him on the piano wearing a white Henley and stubble, and one with him on the organ clean shaven and wearing a blue button-down. They're totally grooving, making a joyful noise—and then at the end, both of these Matts on the keyboards direct the cutoff with a nod of their chins and a wink to all of us going nuts watching the livestream chat.

October. November. Onward.

Sunday mornings are more spacious now. Without a pre-service rehearsal or church to drive to, I've taken to going for a run. It is one of the only times in the week that I will be fully alone; on a recent Sunday, this pleasure and the fresh air combined to make me aware of the ways that the pandemic has freed up more space in my spirit too. I have been making room, I notice suddenly, and true to Richard's song, Jesus has moved in.

How exactly did this happen? Musing, I look up a podcast my friend Liesl had recommended and selected play.[15] It was a conversation between two female pastors about Ruth, that slim book in which the title character has hit rock bottom. In this story there is no supernatural miracle, yet God, who is not present as a character, shows up in the lives of ordinary, often desperate people when they stick together and make sacrifices for each other. "In acts of *chesed* love," God, the podcaster repeats. I look this word up later. It is the same one that is translated in the Beatitudes as "mercy."

Suddenly I remember my own rock-bottom moment, back in April, the point when God's chesed love showed up, and some long-held resistance in me began to fall away.

I still had my job, my health, and a roof over my family back then when my city was in crisis, so the only grief I allowed myself was for my daughter. An only child who is very social and loved school, V. was also grieving my mother, who had died after a long illness on V.'s tenth birthday back in November. She was missing her terribly and missing her life and wondering if she'd ever get to hug a friend again; some days it was hard to tell which grief was which. All I could see was the light going out of her eyes.

The rest of the story comes from an email I wrote to the choir during one of our weekly check-ins:

> *There was one day about a month in to all of this when finally, finally we got out of the house and up to the park. V. and a friend did gymnastics together for masked but joyous hours, then we continued on for a walk with some friends over in Green-Wood Cemetery, and it was as close to a perfect day as you could hope for—until the next night, when V. made a little strangled sound and then started sobbing, her hands at her neck, where the necklace my mother had given her as they were saying goodbye for the last time—the one she never took off—was missing. After turning the house upside down for a while, we realized that it must have broken or fallen off at some point during or after all the gymnastics. And it was only a necklace, but it was what she had picked out and was the last thing that she had from her grandmother. And I didn't think I could bear it, any of it, anymore.*

You know how I always get really bogged down in the impossibility of a God who creates billions of galaxies and trillions of stars, and somehow still claims to know the hairs on our heads, right? Well, picture me the next morning, right at dawn and in the rain (of course), walking up and down the hillside in the park where the girls had played, begging that huge and distant God, muttering and begging and sobbing and scanning the ground for a dark oval on a chain that had surely snapped.

Picture me when, near the edge of the hill after which there really would be nowhere left to search, I dropped to my knees in the wet grass that offered up not the sparkly chain—which can be replaced—but the dark, rain-slicked pendant and the gift that was Her gift and could not be, and said thank you, thank you, God.

Dear God, his eye really is on the sparrow. And on little old me, and on each and every dear one of you. I do not understand it, but I'm trying to hold on to that story, and to the weekly services that never fail to deliver exactly the Word that I need, a rousing call to worship from Ashley and Robert, Steve with some transcendently sweet prayer, Patty's hands putting beauty back together again, the petals jumping into her fingers like she's Mary Poppins, some glorious offering from Nathania or Kenny or half a dozen Kens and two Matts, the assurance that we have what we need and that we'll all get through this somehow, together, and that though we and everything will be changed by then, we'll sing, won't we?

No really, won't we sing?

Notes

1. This and all/most services remain available for viewing at https://www.firstchurchbrooklyn.org/past-services/.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tw_ouYnQ_g4.
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV-VXsnRUAA.
4. A concept I first heard articulated by Matt Podd.
5. June 14.
6. July 26.
7. September 6.
8. May 17.
9. June 21, https://everence.wistia.com/medias/qjogz3wkl9?fbclid=IwAR1M-FbnMDszP0GsGgalAF8PGIAyp1jYwUfm_1tfL2-Yr6gEa-HkXHwoXoQ.
10. You can watch this at https://www.firstchurchbrooklyn.org/past-services/. Click on the service for June 7, 2020; the video is visible at 0:59:30.
11. September 13.
12. May 31.
13. https://kennykomala.bandcamp.com/album/quaranhymns.
14. July 26.
15. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/finding-god-in-the-margins/id1507436907?i=1000494764473.

Amy E. Gray

Joined in Prayer: How Daily Prayer Kept Our Community Together While Apart

J. Scott Miller

When I was asked to contribute an article to this issue of *Call to Worship*, I was told the theme would have to do with what we are learning about worship during the COVID-19 pandemic. The operative word here is *learning* rather than *learned*, it seems to me, since many congregations are still trying to figure out how to worship faithfully and yet safely—including the one I serve. We are seven months into this pandemic as I write, and still we have not returned to in-person worship because of the risks involved. So, one of the things we are learning here at Drayton Presbyterian is the importance of corporate prayer in keeping us connected as a faith community. According to an old adage, "The family that prays together stays together." Trite though the adage may be, it has rung true for our household of faith. Praying together *has* helped us stay together during this time we have had to remain physically apart, and the Daily Prayer portion of the *Book of Common Worship* has proven to be an invaluable resource. In this article I will explore why and how this came to be.

Some Background

Let me begin by offering two helpful bits of background that I believe shed light on Drayton's particular context for ministry. The first concerns their deep familiarity with Daily Prayer. When I came to Drayton as pastor in December of 2002, I discovered that this was a congregation that had been well schooled in praying these services—especially the service of Evening Prayer. I credit one of my predecessors, Peter Bower, with not only introducing this resource to them but also training them how to use it. I vividly recall showing up for our monthly committee meeting night my first week on the job. As soon as I arrived, the clerk of session informed me that we would all gather in the chancel for Evening Prayer before dispersing to our various meeting locations. I immediately panicked, assuming that I was the one expected to lead the service. She reassured me, however, that I was off the hook, since a different elder took responsibility for the service each month. They followed a brief order for Evening Prayer, which had been pasted inside the front cover of each hymnal. They did the same for their session meetings. I was struck by how perfectly natural it was for this congregation to begin their meetings with Evening Prayer. They intuitively grasped the importance of praying together before tackling the work of ministry. I soon learned that this practice carried over to their ministry with youth. On youth retreats and mission trips, the advisors would routinely gather everyone together each night after dinner for what they called Evening Praise and Prayer. Much to my surprise and delight, the youth fully embraced the practice and affectionately referred to it as "Evening P-Squared"!

Throughout my tenure as pastor, I have attempted to build on this solid foundation of Daily Prayer laid by my predecessor. So, for example, we at times have gathered midweek for Evening Prayer following choir rehearsal and during liturgical seasons of the year such as Advent. We have gathered for Morning Prayer at the beginning of session retreats and on feast days such as Christmas morning. Before the pandemic, I had begun offering Midday Prayer once a month at various nursing facilities. Finally, I have introduced members to the Daily Prayer app and encouraged its use on several different occasions. As a result, our congregation has come to appreciate both the simplicity and the

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It was painful but obvious to us that we needed to put the safety of our congregation first and take the drastic step of suspending any in-person worship for the foreseeable future.

adaptability of Daily Prayer. Moreover, its pattern of reading and reflecting on Scripture, praying the Psalms, and offering thanksgiving and intercession (with ample silence built in!) has deepened and enriched our life of common prayer.

The second bit of background concerns Drayton's identity as a *community* of faith. *Community* has always been at the core of their identity—a worshiping, nurturing, caring, serving, missional faith community. Yet never has that proven to be any truer than when we as a church *community* left our church *building* in November of 2017, after holding our final worship service there on Christ the King Sunday. Like many churches in the Detroit metro area, our membership of just under one hundred members found itself strapped with a building that at one time housed over two thousand members. The demands of maintaining such a huge facility were not only draining our financial resources; they were also draining our leadership resources. Drayton's story is by no means unique. What is unique—at least in our area—is that we decided to do something proactive about it. Instead of hanging in there until our money ran out and we had no choice but to close our doors and disband, we decided to leave our beloved building of ninety-three years and join a partnership with two neighboring churches, one Presbyterian and one Lutheran. This partnership would entail pooling our resources to share mission, ministry, fellowship, and worship together. It would also entail one thing more—sharing space with the Lutheran congregation, who graciously opened their church home to make it ours as well. Furthermore, because our presbytery became convinced that we had a viable plan for our church community to continue, they assured us that we could keep the proceeds from the sale of our church property and reinvest it for future ministry.

We began worshiping in our new home on the First Sunday of Advent in 2017. Not long after we had settled in, I asked our elders at a subsequent session meeting to reflect on what it meant now for us to be a church without our own building. One elder replied, "Throughout this whole difficult and painful journey, we have learned that we are much more than a building. We are a community whose identity is defined not by bricks and mortar, but by ministry and mission." I must admit that we are still trying to figure out what that means. One thing is clear, however. What matters most to this congregation is that we have stayed together as a community of faith.

I offer these two bits of background, because I believe they help explain why our congregation has so readily embraced Daily Prayer as the basic pattern for our online worship during this pandemic. First of all, it is a pattern with which members were already familiar and that would bring them a certain measure of comfort. Second, it is a pattern that would reinforce their identity and strengthen the communal ties that bind them to one another. While many churches have been sorely missing their buildings and longing to return to them for in-person worship, that has not been the case for Drayton. As much as we love our new space and feel at home there, we do not need this space to be the church. What we miss is not the space itself but the people who gather there to worship. And until we can all do so safely, we have found that praying together online has allowed us to stay connected as a faith community more so than we could ever have imagined. Having addressed why I think this all came about, let me turn now to *how* it came about.

One Quick Pivot and Then Another

Our final in-person service took place on March 8, 2020. By then the coronavirus was already surging here in southeast Michigan and the death toll had begun to mount. We would soon become the epicenter for COVID-19 in our state. Thankfully, our governor heeded the advice of our public health officials and took this virus seriously. She immediately began issuing executive orders to shut down all but essential businesses and urge residents to shelter in place as much as possible. Prompted by this growing alarm, we called a special meeting of our session on Thursday of that week. It was painful but obvious to us that we needed to put the safety of our congregation first and take the drastic

step of suspending any in-person worship for the foreseeable future. We sent an email blast out to our members the next day informing them of our decision. It was now Friday, which left little time for me to prepare any kind of alternative service for that Sunday. I knew we had to make a quick pivot, but to what? Many pastors pivoted to livestreaming their service with just themselves in the sanctuary. At the time, however, we were not equipped to livestream, nor was I technologically savvy enough to work something up using my iPhone. All I could think to do was put together a brief service of Morning Prayer and email it out to the congregation. In my message I suggested they pray this service from home at our usual worship time and indicated that I would be doing the same. That way, we would at least be joined together in spirit.

The following week, I received a phone call from one of our elders who asked me what I had in mind for that upcoming Sunday. "I guess the same thing," I replied. "I honestly don't know what else to do."

"Well, I have an idea," he said. "How about you come to my office next Sunday and we have you broadcast the service live as a webinar from our conference room. When you send out the service, we'll add the invitation from RingCentral for members to join the meeting. RingCentral is the video conference service my business uses. They'll have the option of either logging in from their computer or portable device or dialing in from their phone."

"I don't know," I said. "This all sounds rather complicated."

"Relax," he replied. "I've got you covered. I'll handle all the technical details. All you have to do is stand there, look at the camera, and talk. Besides," he added, "now more than ever I think the congregation needs to see you as their pastor and hear your trusted voice leading them in prayer."

As it turned out, this elder was right. He was able to keep track of who joined our prayer meeting, and we had almost perfect attendance. Even our older members who have no Internet connection in their homes dialed in and listened to the service on their phones. One of them, I distinctly remember, gave audible thanks during the prayers "for this marvelous technology that has allowed us to gather in this way."

When we had concluded the service, this same elder turned to me and said, "You know, at the rate this virus is spreading, I can't guarantee my office will be open next Sunday. I think we should set up RingCentral on your laptop. I can still host the meeting and manage it remotely, but you'll be able to lead the service from home."

"Imagine that," I thought to myself. "Another pivot—presiding in prayer from my kitchen table!" But that is exactly what I have been doing ever since. It helps to have our elder managing the mechanics of muting and unmuting participants, screen sharing, and so on. That frees me up to focus on leading the service and not have to worry about dealing with the technical difficulties that sometimes crop up. It admittedly felt a bit awkward at first—looking at faces on a screen and then talking to them through the screen. Gradually, though, I came to appreciate the intimacy of this online experience and its equalizing effect. My image is the same size as theirs on the screen, and we are all joining in prayer from our own respective homes. Not long into the pandemic, I heard a colleague reflect on what she has been learning so far. She commented, "I'm learning to reclaim the priesthood of all believers." I believe we are reclaiming that priesthood as well through our Morning Prayer service. We are becoming priests one to another, as we pray with and for each other.

Why Daily Prayer?

After conferring with our worship committee and session, I received their endorsement to use Morning Prayer as the primary means by which we would worship online on Sunday mornings. Until we could ramp up to livestreaming our Lord's Day service from the sanctuary, it made more sense for us to worship using this format. Before proceeding, however, I felt we needed to explain our rationale for this change to the congregation. So, on that first Sunday when I presided from my kitchen table, I gave a brief overview of Daily Prayer before starting our service and explained why we would be worshiping together in this way. While many in our congregation were familiar with Daily Prayer, not all were. And even if they were, they probably were not aware of its historical roots.

I therefore began by stating that from the early days of the church two patterns for worship gradually emerged. The first was the Service for the Lord's Day, which centered on the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The early Christians would follow this pattern whenever they would gather for worship on the Lord's Day—the first day of the week, the day of Jesus'

resurrection. I indicated that this is the pattern that we normally follow when we gather for worship on Sunday mornings. The second pattern was the Service of Daily Prayer, which centered on reading and reflecting on Scripture, praying the Psalms, and offering thanksgiving and intercession for others. The early Christians would follow this pattern whenever they wanted to worship during the week. In keeping with Jewish custom, they would often pray at set times during the day: morning, midday, evening, and night before going to bed. Moreover, they could adapt Daily Prayer for use in a variety of settings—at home, for example, either alone or with other family members; or outside the home in small gatherings with other believers. Whether they prayed alone or with others, here is the point I wanted our congregation to remember: our ancestors in the faith firmly believed that when they engaged in Daily Prayer, they were joining in prayer with the whole church.

Whether they prayed alone or with others, here is the point I wanted our congregation to remember: our ancestors in the faith firmly believed that when they engaged in Daily Prayer, they were joining in prayer with the whole church.

I then went on to suggest that the Service of Daily Prayer lends itself well to the challenging situation in which we find ourselves as a faith community. For it provides a simple and yet meaningful way for us to pray with and for each other from our homes during this time when it is unsafe for us all to gather for public worship on the Lord's Day. Finally, I mentioned what I consider to be another benefit of Daily Prayer—namely, that it does not require an ordained minister like myself to lead it, although our session has asked me to do so on Sunday mornings. Anyone can pray these services either alone or with others. They can be found in the Daily Prayer section of the *Book of Common Worship* or in the Daily Prayer app, which can be downloaded to a smart phone or tablet.

Following this brief overview and explanation, we launched into Morning Prayer for that day. We have been praying this service together on Sunday mornings ever since. Each week I draft the service on Tuesdays and see that it is sent out to our members by postal mail or email, so that they will have it by that Sunday. Most of our members like to have the service in front of them as we pray it together online. A few of them, however, like to have it so that they can pray the service on their own. Either way, they know they are joining in prayer with the whole church. Let me turn now to the actual order of service for Morning Prayer and show how we have adapted it for our online use.

Our Order for Morning Prayer

Normally when we meet for Daily Prayer, we gather in silence. That has proven to be a challenge in these days, however. When members join our online service, they naturally greet one another and want to check in with each other. My pastoral instincts tell me that it is wise to make allowance for that and give them the opportunity to connect socially at the outset. After a few minutes, I will indicate that it is time to start our service. I make whatever announcements need to be made and then speak words to this effect: "Let us now prepare to worship God as we listen to the prelude." Our organist plays a short prelude (usually on her piano from home), while a child or youth acolyte will light a candle from home. Following the prelude, our worship assistant for that day leads us in the Opening Sentences of Scripture. We then sing our Opening Hymn together, which I normally lead a cappella. I invite members to sing along from home with their microphones muted (a copy of the hymn is attached to their order of service). We have found that singing with microphones unmuted creates a distorted sound and becomes more of a distraction. With microphones muted, everyone can "make a joyful noise to the Lord" right where they are and not worry about how their voices will sound. In fact, most everyone does, because I can see their mouths moving on the screen. After the hymn, our worship assistant leads us in the Prayer of Thanksgiving for Baptism. Early on, I encouraged members to have a bowl of water handy, then at the proper time to dip their fingers into the bowl and sign the cross either on their own forehead or on the forehead of others in their household. I invite them to do this with me before the prayer is offered, reminding them that in baptism we are joined not only to Christ but also to one another as members of Christ's body.

Next, we come to the reading of Scripture. Since the Lord's Day Lectionary is more familiar

to our congregation than the Daily Lectionary, I normally choose two of the readings appointed for that Sunday—a reading from the Hebrew Scriptures and a Gospel reading. I usually have the worship assistant read the first lesson. We then read the Psalm together responsively. After a moment of silence, I lead the Psalm Prayer and then read the second lesson. Following each of the Scripture readings, I offer a brief interpretation of the text or "reflection," as I prefer to call it. I have modeled these reflections somewhat after those found in *Daily Feast: Meditations from Feasting on the Word*. Here is an example of one that I wrote for John 11:1–45, the Gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year A):

> The cry of Martha and Mary in this passage is what theologian Martin Marty has called "the cry of absence." "Lord, if only you had been here . . . but you weren't and you aren't." It's the same cry voiced by the psalmist in this morning's psalm, when he cries to God "out of the depths" of his loneliness and despair. "Lord, where are you? Are you even listening?"
>
> And isn't that our cry as well in the midst of this terrifying pandemic? We have every reason to be afraid and to wonder where God is. Another great theologian by the name of Fred Rogers had this to say to his friends in the neighborhood: "Whenever you feel afraid or lonely or anxious, look around you for the helpers. For there you will see the hand of God."
>
> It turns out Christ was not absent after all. He was very much present to Martha and Mary. Look again. Look for the helpers. Christ was present in and through the friends and neighbors who came to console them concerning the death of their brother.
>
> So this week, whenever you're feeling afraid or lonely or anxious, look for the helpers. For there you will see the hand of God reaching out to heal, to comfort, and to sustain.

Another way I have chosen to interpret Scripture is a visual one. We often display an image drawn from Vanderbilt University's digital library of Art in the Christian Tradition (https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-search.pl). We do this as a screen share for one or both lessons as they are being read. Sometimes I incorporate the artistic interpretation into my reflection on that reading. My purpose in these reflections is not to preach mini-sermons but to invite members to ponder these readings with me as we listen for God's voice speaking through them and addressing us where we are today.

My purpose in these reflections is not to preach mini-sermons but to invite members to ponder these readings with me as we listen for God's voice speaking through them and addressing us where we are today.

Next, we offer our Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession. For this we unmute microphones so that worshipers can be free to join in. I use the bidding prayers provided in the *Book of Common Worship* as the basis for our prayers. I allow silence after each petition and then conclude by saying, "For what else shall we give thanks this day?" or "For what else shall we pray this day?" It is not uncommon to hear people at this point offering their own prayers of thanksgiving or intercession. I also maintain an updated list of prayer joys and concerns, which is distributed each week along with the order of service. I incorporate these joys and concerns into our prayers before leading the closing collect. We then conclude by praying the Lord's Prayer together. Yes, it does sound like a cacophony of voices that are completely out of sync, but many have told me how reassuring it is to hear one another's voices praying this prayer "with confidence as the beloved children of God." Following the Lord's Prayer, we sing our Closing Hymn, and then I lead us in our Closing Sentences of Scripture. That concludes our typical Sunday Morning Prayer service.

Beyond Morning Prayer, we have also gathered on special occasions for Evening Prayer. We did so, for example, during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We are planning to do that, as well, on Christmas Eve. Still, the basic order remains mostly the same. As one can tell, these services are not elaborate productions. They are marked by *simplicity*. They are also marked by *participation*. Worshipers are not passive observers or listeners. Instead, I encourage them to be active

participants and give them ample opportunity to join me in prayer. Finally, these services are marked by *collaboration*. They are a joint effort each week that involves pastor, organist, acolyte, worship assistant, an elder who faithfully hosts our meeting online, and another elder who locates appropriate images from the Vanderbilt library for us to display. Simplicity, participation, and collaboration: these are three of the four watchwords offered by Kim Long in a webinar she led for PAM back in April to provide guidance for leading worship during this pandemic. We have taken these watchwords to heart and have tried to put them into practice during our Morning Prayer services.

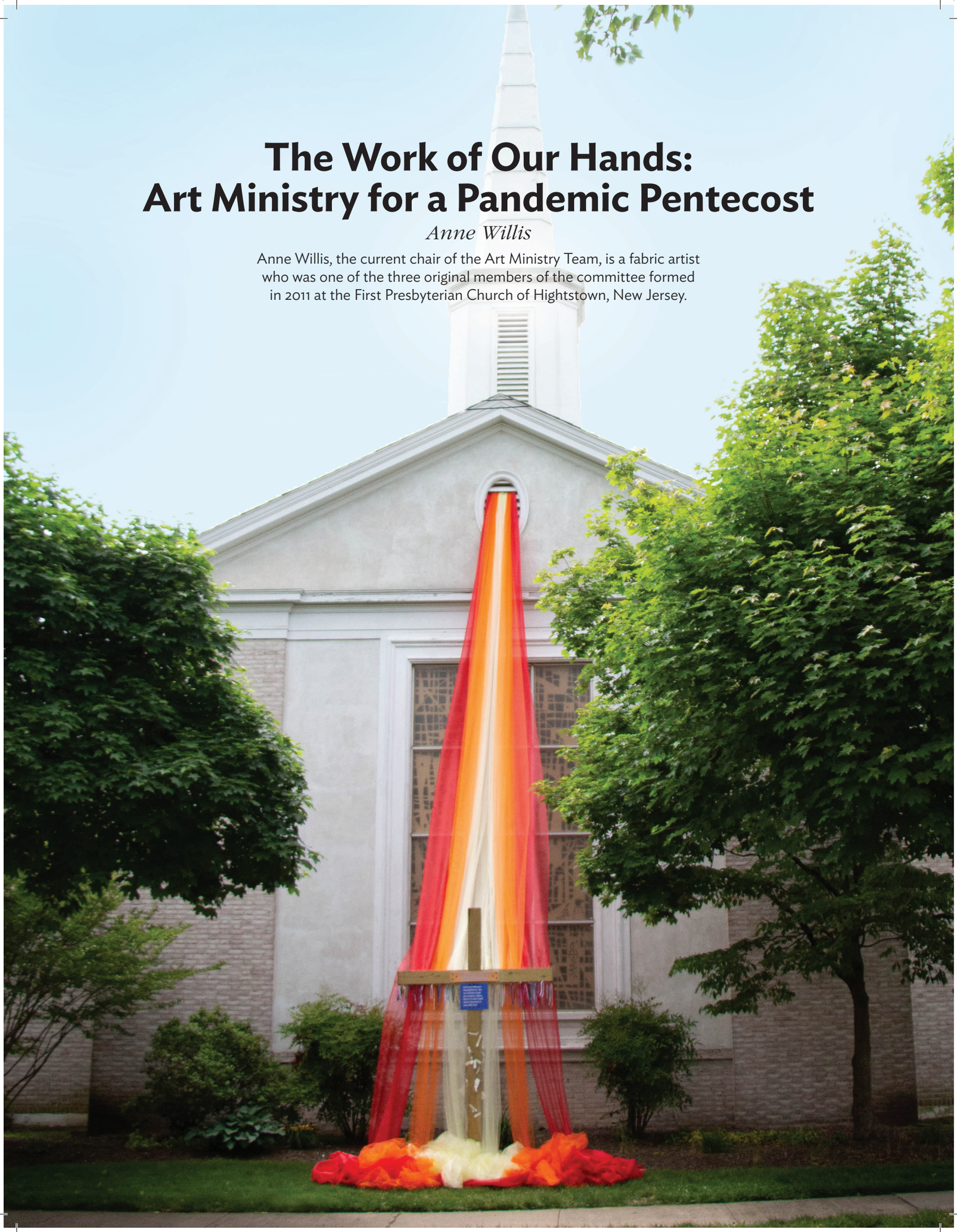
Conclusion

In a recent phone visit with one of our members, she mentioned how much she appreciated receiving Morning Prayer in the mail each week and how much it meant to her as she worked through the service on her own. She then thanked me for all that I have been doing to keep our church together. After we hung up, I thought to myself, "How is it that this member feels so connected when she doesn't join us on Sunday mornings?" Then it occurred to me. I may have a part to play, but I am not the primary one keeping her and other members connected. It is the Holy Spirit working in, among, and through us as we engage in Morning Prayer however we choose to participate: online, by phone, or on our own. I honestly do not know how long we will have to stay apart to minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19; but as long as we remain joined in prayer, I trust that the Spirit will continue to keep our faith community together.

The Work of Our Hands: Art Ministry for a Pandemic Pentecost

Anne Willis

Anne Willis, the current chair of the Art Ministry Team, is a fabric artist who was one of the three original members of the committee formed in 2011 at the First Presbyterian Church of Hightstown, New Jersey.



Pentecost 2020 was unlike any other. While devastating in so many ways, the pandemic has encouraged creativity as well. It has challenged the church to find creative ways to continue to function as a church in all its essential ministries. So too, the Art Ministry Team of the First Presbyterian Church of Hightstown, New Jersey, was forced to move outside with all the inherent issues or abandon our ministry, something none of us was prepared to do. We had not had a presence outdoors in the past. Although we had considered such installations, we never did anything substantive until the pandemic closed the church building. We looked for ways to bring the magic of the sanctuary out to the people where they could feel a continuity with sanctuary life.

For Lent, at the very beginning of the pandemic, we erected a nine-foot wooden prayer cross covered in chicken wire on which anyone could leave mementoes, prayers, worries, and fears where only God would see them. The ribbons on the cross were an art minister's response to the pandemic. She has added a ribbon each day since it began and will continue to do so until it ends. This cross was the beginning point for the Pentecost installation.

We started with an initial concept session, asking what Pentecost means to us. Our previous indoor Pentecost installations celebrated the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The streams of fabric reminded us of the tongues of fire from the Pentecost story in Acts 2:1–21. Their sway, as air currents from the heating and air conditioning system moved through them, suggested to us the presence of the Spirit of the Lord and reminded us that the word for spirit in both Hebrew and Greek also meant "breath" or "wind."

The challenge was to take those ideas and adapt them to an outdoor setting. We started with the idea of cascading organza of flame-like colors—yellow, orange, and red—to suggest the flames of Pentecost and the Spirit moving them. Then we adapted that concept to form one cascade that would move in the breeze outdoors, placing it over the stained-glass Christ window and echoing the treatment that had framed the same window on the inside in previous years.

We knew we wanted to have the fabric cascade from the building to the ground in the vicinity of the wooden cross. We considered several possible choices for places to anchor it to the building: from the top of the steeple, from the louvers at the steeple's base (accessible from the inside with some difficulty), from various places along the cornice of the building outside the sanctuary, and from the oval louvered window directly above the stained-glass window (accessible from the catwalk above the sanctuary).

Once we determined that the only place we could actually reach safely was the oval window, the next challenge was to determine how much fabric to buy. Realizing it would be impossible to measure the distance from the ground to the window, we estimated it, added extra for billow and error, and decided to purchase online fifty yards each of orange and red and seventy-five yards of yellow.

Accessing the oval window from the catwalk above the ceiling of the sanctuary, we lowered a rope from that window, attached it to the fabric, and pulled it back up, bringing all the fabric with it. At this point we had to decide where to anchor the

fabric at ground level. We had had several elaborate schemes but no clear idea where the fabric should go once it left the oval window. Immediately, we abandoned the most involved plans and tried draping the fabric over the wooden cross. Liking the idea of the organza connected to the cross but not covering it, we decided to staple the fabric to the back of the cross so that it was connected to the cross but did not obstruct it.

The fabric became a symbol of the Spirit flowing from God down into Christ. We now had a huge excess of fabric. What to do with it? We had seen the effectiveness of pooling fabric inside on the floor of the chancel to suggest flames, so we decided

to leave all the excess to symbolize God's Spirit flowing out onto the land and into the people and enhancing the depiction of Pentecost fire. To keep all this cloth from blowing away and becoming a tripping hazard, the material was looped around a board that was then secured to the ground with long spikes. In this way the organza could billow in a controlled, if unpredictable, way.

When we stood across the street, we realized that the whole installation could be viewed from only one spot. However, the billows of fabric on the ground could be seen from a distance in either direction by people driving by in cars or walking down the street from either direction. The hope became that the unexpected presence of the mounds of brightly colored yellow, orange, and red fabric, only partially visible, would entice people to stop and look at the whole.

Locally, it was difficult to determine the impact of the installation on the community. We did not monitor it on a regular basis; but, randomly, we saw people kneeling to pray near the cross and a mother with a young child visiting for an extended time. It was easier to quantify Internet responses after we posted a photo of it on Facebook: in less than 48 hours after posting there were 66 comments just on the church's page, 396 shares, 9,918 engagements, and 44,289 people reached. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. By the third week in October there were 116 comments on the church page, 965 shares, 24,403 engagements, and 128,836 people reached.

Many people in our own congregation expressed how powerful this installation was for them. The fabric coming from the window symbolized the spirit of the church flowing out of the building and spilling out into the world. It was a sign to many that God and the church were still with us during this tumultuous time.

In the end, the concept of Pentecost evident in past installations inside the sanctuary was distilled, almost without conscious thought, into a single image, made more powerful by its simplicity. Perhaps it was that simplicity that appealed to so many people all over the world.

Worship in a Pandemic

Allie Utley

Day who-knows-how-many into this global pandemic and what I miss more than anything is worship: gathering at the church, singing together, hearing the choir, listening for a Word, receiving communion. For a while I tuned in to a friend's Facebook live worship services. It was Lent. The liturgical mood and the cultural moment were in sync. I needed a pastor to show me how to hold together all the fear and sadness and grief and hope and love. I needed to hear a word or a song that would call out the tears from the depths of my soul and allow them to be released.

Then came Easter. The liturgical mood and the cultural moment went together like orange juice and toothpaste. We had quite the opportunity to practice being an Easter people in a Good Friday world. We made it to Pentecost, celebrating the gift of the Spirit bestowed upon the gathered people. I suspect the Pentecost story did not resonate this year, at least not in the same way as the story about a dark and empty tomb.

The pandemic drags on through Ordinary Time. Some churches have gone back to in-person worship, though their gatherings look nothing like they did before. Many communities still worship online. At the time of this writing, Advent and Christmas are coming, and we still do not know what we are going to do. To be honest, I probably will not be "in" worship. I have not been for a while now. I am over it. I do not find online platforms conducive to worship. And I am afraid that the end of this pandemic and the limitations it places on worship is not in sight. I suspect we could see another pandemic like this in our lifetime.

In this article, I want to reflect on some of my concerns and frustrations regarding pandemic worship and dream about alternatives to the online celebration of the Lord's Day. First, I want to say I am grateful and inspired by the work pastors are doing during this unprecedented time. Pastors are working faithfully to make appropriate decisions for their own worshiping communities. I worry about them, too. The demand for creativity, production, and perfection in the midst of a global pandemic is exhausting. I write this for those who are tired of producing online worship, for those who are trying to figure out why it is not working for their congregations, and for those who might want to try something different. I hope that conversations about how we practice worship during unprecedented times will lead us all to a deeper understanding of how and why we worship.

Some Concerns

These days my mind swirls with thoughts of pandemic worship. Like many others, I am desperate to figure out best practices during this time. Some days I am consumed by worry for the church and what this pandemic means for worship. I used to work at a summer camp, and we began our meetings by "clearing the decks." Everyone had the opportunity to name the things troubling their minds and bodies so that we might be able to let that go, or at least set it aside, and engage in a constructive meeting. So, I want to start by "clearing the decks," naming some of my concerns about worship during a pandemic.

Our Presbyterian worship has a rhythm; the assembly gathers to sing, confess and pardon, pray and offer, bless and send. We gather to celebrate Word and Sacrament. We gather. But now what constitutes gathering? Does it have to be in person? Or can we gather online? If we are in person but only a limited number of people can come, the young(ish) and healthy, are we gathering? How

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do new people access our online communities or limited-seating, in-person services? The questions about how we gather during a pandemic could fill pages. My concern is that limitations to the way we gather create an insurmountable challenge to practicing corporate worship.

Worship begins with bodies coming together, and the embodied, material experience makes a difference. In my experience, online worship, a common approach to pandemic worship, takes a multisensory, "3D" experience and makes it flat. We can sing, but we are not sharing breath. We can confess and pray, but the corporate nature of these elements is lost because the limits of technology leave us muted and invisible to one another. I admit, online platforms seem to work well for sharing words and the Word. Sacraments are tricky. There is support for practicing online communion, but baptisms are on hold. Why will we do one but not the other?

Some people report that they enjoy online worship because it helps them connect to people. I suspect that a lot of this feeling of connection comes from our increased display of vulnerability. As one pastor commented, "There is a vulnerability in having people sing and pray and share prayers from their own homes." I am also seeing a new level of intentionality in worship planning as pastors shift to new mediums. I am glad the church is learning to be more vulnerable and intentional and that people feel connected. I am not convinced that online worship is the generator of these good things. When people feel more connected via the Internet than they did in person, I think that says more about the sorry state of hospitality in the church than it says about the effectiveness of Zoom. It may say something about our misunderstanding of the value of being vulnerable to each other in the faith community. Or it may indict us for a refusal to be open outside of our "own" space.

The church does seem to be expanding in some interesting ways. We can worship online with churches across the country. We can tune in live or watch later.

The church does seem to be expanding in some interesting ways. We can worship online with churches across the country. We can tune in live or watch later. Everybody seems to be an evangelist these days. Invitations and links flood social media feeds on Sundays. Some people report that they like this Sunday morning worship mall. They can Zoom with one church and listen to the music of another and a sermon at another. I have sampled bits and pieces of various communities in the last months. This access is great! But I worry about this approach because it feels a bit like consumption of worship rather than full, active, and conscious participation in worship. We can browse services, multitask during worship, and turn off the liturgy when ready to move on to the next thing; and I suspect a lot of people are watching worship without speaking, standing, singing, confessing, and affirming.

Despite my criticism, despite our struggles, I am sure God is in the midst of us, even now.

Despite my criticism, despite our struggles, I am sure God is in the midst of us, even now. I believe the Spirit is on the move, though I am not sure how she travels via Zoom or Facebook or YouTube. The Spirit infuses our selves and our worship, even at home. But there is something special and mysterious that happens when the community gathers in person. The Spirit moves amongst us, transforms us and the worship elements in a tangible and real way when we share the peace, lay hands on, pray over the gifts of wine and bread, and bless the gathered assembly. We are an embodied people who worship an incarnate God who maintains connection to creation through the Holy Spirit. We know God is ever present, and still we invoke the Spirit in different ways throughout worship. As we adapt these elements of invocation for pandemic protocol, we have an opportunity to consider what we believe about how and why the Spirit is manifest in our worship.

We can do a lot with and for each other even while social distancing. Online gatherings hold a significant place as we shelter in place. I am just not sure these online spaces can hold the fullness and depth of the Service of the Lord's Day. We can gather in person, opening on a limited basis, practicing a limited liturgy, but doing so poses a risk both to the health and safety of the congregation and the integrity of the liturgy.

Some Ideas

What if we did something else instead? What if we stopped spending inordinate amounts of time producing online content in the form of services of Word and Sacrament? What if we stopped trying to manage hybrid worship, catering to both in-person and online audiences at the same time? How could we nurture faith more effectively with the time and energy we spend on production?

I imagine church becoming something like Anji preschool. This is a curriculum and approach to early childhood education developed in Anji County, Zhejiang Province, China. Kids are given materials like ropes, ladders, barrels, and bricks with which to play. Kids engage in self-directed play followed by a time of reflection on what they did and how they learned. The kids engage in true play: "deep and uninterrupted engagement in the activity of one's own choice. True Play is most frequently characterized by observable experiences of risk, joy and deep engagement."[1]

When it comes to worship, the church can no longer gather the way it always has. COVID has forced us to make changes. No one knows how to do this the "right" way. So, let us engage in a time of "true play," unafraid to take risks, seeking joy and deep engagement. Let us try new things, reflect, change, learn, and grow.

Looking for alternatives to online worship, I opened my PC(USA) Directory for Worship. In addition to the service of the Lord's Day, Presbyterians engage God through prayer, practices of discipleship, and worship in the home:

> We respond to God's grace through the gift of prayer. The Christian life is one of constant prayer, as the challenge of everyday discipleship requires daily disciplines of faith. Prayer is a way of opening ourselves to God, who desires communication and communion with us. Prayer may take a variety of forms, such as: conscious conversation with God; attentive and expectant silence; meditation on Scripture; the use of service books, devotional aids, and visual arts; and singing, dancing, labor, or physical exercise.[2]

In the time of COVID, how might the church help congregants develop and sustain the daily discipline of prayer? For example, each Sunday the church could suggest a prayer form to engage and provide materials to facilitate that form of prayer. One week we could do a pre-recorded or live hymn sing, sharing quotes or education materials about the value of song in our lives. Another week we might invite people to set aside some time for silence or conversation with God. We could provide guided meditations or information about the great mystics who communed with God in this way.

Meditation on Scripture is another form of prayer. We can facilitate this in several ways. We can provide Sunday Scripture readings and questions to guide those readings. We can do Sunday *lectio divina*, gathering on Zoom or in small groups to read the Scriptures together, focusing on how the Word speaks to us today, and listening for the voice of God. Pastors might provide a short meditation on Scripture to be read or viewed throughout the week.

For churches wanting more structure and community gathering, the daily offices are a great resource. We could lean into the insular life, cultivate a more contemplative life by praying these short liturgies. Pastors could resource congregants for this, teaching them about the symbols of faith and how they might set up a sacred space in their own homes, highlighting the history and ecumenical nature of daily prayer. Imagine a whole world of people, stuck at home, praying together the ancient texts. What an opportunity to cultivate the practice of daily prayer—an opportunity for spiritual and personal growth.

Other Practices of Discipleship

> We respond to God's grace through other practices of discipleship: keeping sabbath, studying Scripture, contemplation and action, fasting and feasting, stewardship and self-offering. All of these practices are meant to help us attend to the presence and action of God in our lives.[3]

Instead of online worship, the church could facilitate other practices of discipleship. In the days we cannot gather for corporate worship, Sunday might be set aside as a day to be intentional in practicing and learning about Christian discipleship.

In my experience, the more people on a Zoom call, the easier it is to disengage, to hide amongst the grid of faces and names. Smaller Zoom gatherings create an intimate environment where we can more easily connect and participate. Small group Bible study is more suited for online platforms than

large, congregational worship. Small groups can more easily transition to socially distanced, masked, outdoor meetings when circumstances allow. To this end, some churches have set up neighborhood groups. In this time of social distancing, we can commit to reading our Bibles and getting to know our neighbors.

In this time of social unrest, Sunday could also be a day for contemplation and action. As we wait for a time when it is safe to worship together, Sunday mornings could be an opportunity for book study and conversation about racism, sexism, global warming, or other issues facing our country. We can learn about the crises at hand, pray about them, and discern how the church is called to act. This can be a time of intense advocacy and action, a time to be the hands and feet of Christ in our broken and hurting world.

Now might also be a good time to foster the practice of keeping Sabbath—time set aside in the week for feasting or fasting, for creating, for resting, and for being with family and friends in physically distanced ways. Sensing some Zoom fatigue and perhaps addressing some clergy fatigue, a local church I attended is soon having a "screen-free Sunday." Families will be encouraged to unplug and connect. What might it be like for us to do this every Sunday as we wait out this pandemic?

As we learn to keep Sabbath, we might also learn to worship at home, to practice being a priesthood of all believers.

At Home Worship

> We respond to God's grace in the context of personal relationships, particularly when Christians who live together worship together. Opportunities for household or family worship include: sabbath-keeping and rhythms of daily prayer; Bible reading, study, or memorization; prayers before meals; singing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs; and expressions of giving, sharing, and service to others. Congregations are encouraged to nurture and equip households and families for these practices.[4]

The Directory for Worship's description of at-home worship includes a lot of the practices of prayer and discipleship I have already mentioned. These acts of worship can be infused into our daily lives. We can also set aside a particular time and space for a more structured, intentional time of worship. Church leaders can nurture and equip households in various ways: sending home weekly liturgies and offering a recorded or written sermon to accompany it, creating kids' worship packets, providing a sacred object or symbol for people's at-home worship space to remind them of the church and the community, putting together song sheets and accompaniment tracks, teaching about the priesthood of all believers. There are a lot of possibilities!

Daily Prayer, Christian Education, and Pastoral Care

> God calls the Church in the name of Jesus Christ to mutual love and service. Jesus' ministry and the church's worship are deeply connected; indeed, worship is ministry. The church's ministry springs from its worship, where God builds up the body of Christ through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The church's ministry flows back into worship as we bring to God the celebrations and concerns of the community of faith.[5]

Lastly, the Directory for Worship connects the worship of the church to the church's ministry. Even if we do not gather for a service of Word and Sacrament, we remain deeply shaped and informed by worship. This pandemic may be an opportunity to focus on ministries like Christian education and pastoral care. These ministries can and will support and grow the body of Christ as we make our way through this difficult time. We will be transformed, and this will flow back into our worship when we can gather again.

In Conclusion

No matter what we decide to do regarding worship during the pandemic—this one or the next—we will have to continue to reflect and evaluate our practices. The pandemic situation is ever changing and our response to it must be as well. No one learned how to pastor through a pandemic in seminary. But seminary did teach us how to think critically and theologically about worship and how to lead the assembly in faith, love, and humility. You are equipped. When the pandemic hit, you changed the way your church worshiped in a matter of weeks. You adapted. If worship is not what you want it to be, you can change again. May we not get stuck. May we be creative. May we be playful.

May we wait for and eagerly anticipate the day when we can once again gather. Waiting is hard. Who better than a clergy person to shepherd a people through this hard thing? But we will need to let go of our expectations for programs and online productions so that we might have the capacity to care for the flock through this time of collective trauma.

If we stopped online services of Word and Sacrament, hybrid worship, and limited in-person gatherings, we might be confronted with feelings of loss and grief and longing for what was and what could be. I suspect we are feeling these things already. Are we trying to create a sense of normalcy when life is definitively not normal? Is this helpful? What kinds of resources and practices might be used instead to help people cope with these feelings and circumstances?

If we emphasize the priesthood of all believers, calling on and resourcing congregants to take some responsibility for their own spiritual development, what kind of pushback will we get? I can imagine a lot of grumbling and concern because change is always hard, and people, rightly so, want familiarity and comfort. Maybe you try something new for a season, a series, or even once a month. Maybe this will be enough time to allow clergy to take a breath. Maybe this will plant a seed within congregations that will one day grow into something stunning and life-giving.

We will be able to gather again. All of us. We will be able to sing together and hug each other. After so much waiting and anticipation, the moment will be so precious. Imagine us gathering—having spent months cultivating our own worship practices, learning to pray, studying the Bible, fellowshiping with one another—imagine this people coming together as the body of Christ. You might start to think about how you will mark this momentous occasion.

How sweet it will be. We will be stronger. Our faith will be deeper. Our love will be fiercer. How meaningful our worship will be. We will sing louder. We will listen harder. We will pray more fervently. I miss worship. And I am hopeful and eager to see how the Spirit is working in the midst of this chaos to bring new life.

Notes

1. "True Play Statement," *Anji Play* website, 2019, www.anjiplay.com/true-play-statement.
2. Directory for Worship, *Book of Order,* Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), W-5.0102, https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/directory-for-worship/.
3. Ibid., W-5.0103.
4. Ibid., W-5.0104.
5. Ibid., W-5.0201.

Amy E. Gray

Real Presence

Ronald P. Byars

During the pandemic lockdown, in which responsible congregations have abstained from assembling in person, there is more than one show in town. We can watch the virtual service from the church where we normally worship and hear familiar voices and glimpse loved and hallowed places. But we can also watch a service from Scotland in a beautiful, ancient setting, excellently presented by skilled masters of online technology, and we can appreciate the preaching. And then there may be a service from the church we belonged to when we lived in another town, or the church of a relative who lives a thousand miles away, or the one with the preacher who has achieved a five-star reputation. Yes, we can; and sometimes we do.

We hear it said that having gone virtual, churches are changed forever. Someone who never attended worship in person reports appreciation for the virtual service. This may be a person for whom it is difficult to navigate the steps at our church, who is more or less homebound, or who simply doesn't feel confident about the protocols that would make attending in person comfortable. Or, it may be someone who finds it less complicated not to have to dress and make his or her way across town on Sunday morning. Watching anonymously with a cup of coffee in hand and access to the bathroom is more appealing. Or, maybe it is someone who is curious but feels no need to know or be known in person. So, then, we encounter the prognostications of those who see the online service as the bellwether of a different sort of church, composed of those who choose to be physically present and those who don't. But that is not entirely new, is it?

It has always been the case, of course, that congregations have had constituencies that include active members, nonmember participants, and what one might call "ghost members." The latter maintain an attachment of some kind for a variety of reasons but are seldom seen. Their circumstances vary. It may be a disability, chronic illness, advanced age, or Sunday morning competition (youth sports, social responsibilities), or a basic indifference apart from the grand occasions. Of course, these categories can overlap, and one can easily migrate from one to another.

The best likelihood is that churches that have learned how to stream a virtual service will continue to do so even after congregations begin to assemble again in person, just as some congregations have for years televised or recorded their services for the convenience of those who cannot be physically present. It serves a purpose.

The virtual service indeed demonstrates some virtues. During the prelude, the screen radiates with blooming flowers, landscapes, a stained-glass image usually unnoticed. The service opens with water being poured into the baptismal font. During the sermon, the biblical story of Jesus with the children is accompanied by a visual image that engages our imaginations. As intercessions are offered, we see pictures of cities ravaged by storms, fire trucks, clinics, voting places, people of different races and ethnicities, food distribution centers, shelters for those struggling with homelessness. A thoughtful and carefully crafted sermon is welcome whether offered online or from a pulpit in the same room. Our Bible is overflowing with images. A screened service nudges us, encourages us to make use of such images, both verbal and nonverbal.

The virtual service can supplement—add to—but cannot replace physical presence. Oh, but those who see no deficit in the virtual service are likely

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to remind us that Christ is present everywhere, and that, whether we are in the sanctuary or sitting on our deck, the Spirit makes us all present to one another. Who can deny that Christ is present everywhere? Or that the Spirit may unite us even at a distance? And yet, we have more than two thousand years of experience that tell us that the divine "presence" has been typically mediated by physical presence.

Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, and Reformed have all affirmed "real" presence in one way or another, always linked to the use of actual bread and wine, even though how Christ's presence becomes manifest in relation to them has been argued differently.

The closest "presence" has come to being systematically addressed by the church has been in reflecting on the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, and Reformed have all affirmed "real" presence in one way or another, always linked to the use of actual bread and wine, even though how Christ's presence becomes manifest in relation to them has been argued differently. Rather than revisit those debates, and without denying their importance, I would like to add another factor to address the question of presence, whether specifically sacramental or in the Word read and preached, or in prayers and acts of devotion sung, said, or represented in physical movements. Presence in each of these instances is mediated in and through the bodily presence of other persons.

The Eucharist, properly understood, is multidimensional. Three dimensions at a minimum—past, present, and future. Past: the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Present: Christ in our midst, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Future: the kingdom, by several names—reign of God, *basilea*, second coming—represented in the New Testament by Christ hosting a banquet to which folks shall come "from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). That pilgrimage, our procession toward God's kingdom, can be rehearsed by real people moving toward the Holy Table where Christ gives himself. He is our "manna in the wilderness," our "bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51), the wine "to gladden the human heart" (Ps. 104:15a), the cup that represents the time that "is surely coming" when "the mountains shall drip sweet wine" (Amos 9:13), the "good wine" that has been kept "until now" (John 2:10). The procession and the bread and cup that come to us as a gift from an "endless" supply on a shared table represent the ultimate reconciliation of the whole human race in all our varied identities.

> I will bring your offspring from the east,
> and from the west I will gather you;
> I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
> and to the south, "Do not withhold;
> bring my sons from far away
> and my daughters from the end of the earth—
> everyone who is called by my name,
> whom I created for my glory,
> whom I formed and made" (Isa. 43:5–7).

There is a reason that the Apostles' Creed says, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Bodies matter, whether the one we are born with or the "spiritual body" as transformed in the resurrection but otherwise undefined (1 Cor. 15:44). The most vivid expression of the Christian hope is the image of real people rehearsing for the great banquet, marked by all the similarities and differences represented by our embodied selves.

The virtual service, however effective, lacks bodies. If it is in a Zoom format, and participants' video is on, we may see either a default photo or a live image for each person; but what we see is just that part of ourselves that we want others to see. (Catalogs are advertising tops that one can wear for a Zoom meeting. Below the waist, wear anything you want!) With or without Zoom, we are less likely to see children, adolescents, and those technologically challenged. Whatever diversity is present in a congregation will be muted, flattened out, so that we will be less likely to experience exposure to anything like a preview of the fulfillment of the biblical promise that at God's table we shall meet the diversity characteristic of embodied human beings.

In the virtual service, we may see no one except those featured in some position of leadership, great or small. And watching the recorded service from

Scotland or from a distant American time zone, we have no idea whether any other live person is watching. We may be all alone. At communion every Sunday in our PC(USA) congregation, I loved to watch the parade of communicants and prayed that the Spirit would manifest the body of Christ in what is, in every random assembly, a curious assortment of people. Some of them I knew or could call by name; others at least looked familiar—or maybe we once shared the Peace. When I can't see them, it's as though I can almost *feel* their presence anyway, sense it almost physically as well as spiritually. Online, even though their audio is muted, I try to recall the sound of their combined voices. But only in the live assembly does a visible sample of those invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb, representative of the body of Christ and the communion of saints, become a realistic snapshot of the anticipated kingdom.

We may be all alone. At communion every Sunday in our PC(USA) congregation, I loved to watch the parade of communicants and prayed that the Spirit would manifest the body of Christ in what is, in every random assembly, a curious assortment of people.

Is Christ not present in the recorded service? The live-streamed service? I can't deny that Christ may reveal his presence even under the most daunting of circumstances. But something is missing, nevertheless. Just as something is missing when Eucharist is attempted without the staple food and the celebratory drink. Though Christ may be in some way present, the sacramental moment is blurred, discerned with difficulty lacking bodily presence.

The Society of Friends has no sacraments. Quakers reason that every meal is, or can be, a kind of sacramental meal. Who can deny it? But the case can be made that sacramental presence is unlikely to be perceived or even conceivable were there not somewhere a sacramental meal being celebrated by a congregation during which the name of Jesus Christ is specifically invoked in relation to the meal given to those assembled in expectation of his presence. The church's explicitly christological celebration of the sacrament is the necessary drama that alerts us to look for Christ's presence even in ordinary meals.

Similarly, a virtual service may suggest and even simulate the "presence" of other worshipers sufficient to suggest the church assembled—useful enough, but even vivid memories fade given enough time. Should even the muscle memory of experienced bodily presence grow dim (or if one has never experienced it), a sense of Christ's presence may have to be "explained" more than sensed. When bodily presence is lost, we also lose an intuitively apprehended sense of the kingdom, the ultimate Christian hope represented in our rehearsal of the heavenly banquet, when Christ will return to claim what is his.

To the extent that worship is understood primarily as a verbal and visual event it can be mimicked in a virtual service, which is one of sound and sight alone, yet may serve as a manifestation of the Spirit. The Spirit can do amazing things under daunting circumstances, but perhaps it is prudent not to put the Spirit to the test once the crisis is past. Sooner or later, we must assemble again. As much as we welcome and have welcomed "ghost members," assembling is itself a part of the gospel. Cyprian of Carthage, a third-century bishop, testified, "There is no salvation outside the church." That is too crude, too easily misunderstood; it says too much and too little. But the point of it was this: We are not headed to heaven all by ourselves. From the point of view of the Christian gospel, an essential element of "salvation" involves being in communion with others, including introverts as well as extroverts. Separations are tolerable, as necessary, as long as the delights and trials of relating to actual embodied persons in all their glory and their cussedness remains at the heart and core of the Christian life—even if, circumstantially, remaining only in memory for a time.

Spreading Peace in a World of Fear

Heidi Thompson

I believe that peace is the opposite of fear. From this simple realization came a notion that if we could teach each individual in the world how to make peace with their own fears, we would have a world at peace. Harriet Tubman once said, "Every dream begins with a dreamer." For me, a world at peace is a dream worth holding; even if we only get halfway there, think of how far we will have come.

Living through challenging times—a pandemic, economic instability, political and social unrest—changes us. The fears that arise in tumultuous times change how we see the world, how we think and act, and how we move forward in living our lives for years to come. As much as we might not want it to be true, life as we have known it has changed. And yet within all of the fear and all of the change, might God be providing us with the opportunity for peace to flow into this world in ways beyond which we can imagine? Is there a way that we in our worshiping communities could bring peace to the world in a greater way?

If fear is the opposite of peace, then what is fear? What is peace? Why are they opposites?

Fear is our body's response to what is seen as a threat to our physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual survival. As humans we are meant to experience fear; we come preprogrammed to feel fear and to respond in ways that protect ourselves. In today's world much that creates fear is not an actual threat but rather something we have been taught to fear. At the root of fear is a sense that either we will *not be okay* (i.e., something harmful will happen to us) or we *are not okay* (i.e., there is something wrong with us). Peace can be defined as the sense that we *are okay* and that although life may be difficult, no matter what happens we *will be okay*. Even in the midst of swirling chaos and difficult challenges, it is possible to experience this peace.

For over thirty-five years I have taught and worked in the computer technology industry as a desktop software trainer and consultant. When I began teaching in 1985, desktop software was brand new; there were no classes for me to take. I had to learn what to teach and then teach it. Because desktop software was new and unknown, students came to my classes filled with anxiety and fear about all that was changing and how they would be able to navigate it, fear similar to what I sense in the world today.

Computer technology has changed our lives forever, much like all that is happening today has. And just as fear of the pandemic and its effects on our lives is affecting everyone in our nation, fear of technology was one of the greatest cultural fears of the twentieth century. Students feared computers would take their jobs and were terrified they could not learn the new technology and would look stupid. There was both fear that "I will not be okay" and fear that "I am not okay."

Although I did not know it at the time, I found a way to transform the fear that showed up in my classes to enthusiasm and a sense that participants could deal with technology, navigate the challenges, and be well. Of the thousands I taught I can only think of one who did not leave my class feeling enthusiastic about technology and their ability to use it. As I look around at a nation and a world teeming with fear and anxiety, I see a rich opportunity for creating peace. Here is some of what I have discovered.

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Change Means Life

Life as we know it disappears every day. Every day our hair and nails grow, we shed old cells and grow new ones, we gain new knowledge, and so on. However, it's not every day that the hair we have so lovingly grown and maintained is, without our permission, suddenly chopped off. The changes we are living today have been fast and dramatic, making life seem uncertain and out of control, two things we naturally fear. If there is anything we humans desire it's certainty and control! And yet, life is neither certain nor capable of being controlled. Life will always change. For when change stops, death occurs.

Difficult and challenging times, today often labeled as trauma or traumatic, are a part of life. Without acknowledging and consciously making meaning of them, these experiences teach us to limit ourselves and our experience of life by building internal walls to keep ourselves safe—walls that may also keep us from freely living the lives we are called and meant to live. Fear, meant to keep us safe, then becomes a way to keep us hidden and locked up. And although we may stay safe, we may not fully live, may not experience the full extent of love, joy, peace, and deep satisfaction from living who we are fully.

What Did Jesus Teach?

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (John 14:27).

When Jesus says, "Do not be afraid," I do not hear him saying not to experience fear. As human beings we are programmed to experience fear as a warning to pay attention to something that may threaten our survival. Rather, I hear Jesus saying, "Do not allow yourself to be *controlled by* fear so that you become afraid and do not live a full life."

We live at a time, and in a culture, in which we are not taught about fear. Without knowledge of how fear works, it is easy to end up controlled by fear in unexpected ways. We hear things like "Be fearless," "Fear is the enemy," and "Don't be such a scaredy cat." In other words, we are told that fear is a sign of weakness, and we must either overpower it through our will or sweep it under the carpet and pretend it doesn't exist. I don't find either of these approaches especially healthy or helpful.

I know fear to be a messenger, much like the message boxes we get when we use our computers. If I am trying to print and the message box says "Turn on the printer if you want to print" and I pretend the message box isn't there or just keep telling the computer to print without paying attention to the message, then I will never print. This is what is happening when we turn away from our fear or try to power over the fear without understanding the message it carries.

Acknowledging and turning toward fear provides a chance to discover the message and make use of its wisdom. I know fear to be the sacred voice of God, speaking to me to keep me safe, and to reveal something about how I am to live a fuller, more meaningful, sacred life. When Jesus speaks of both peace and fear, I hear him saying that if we are not afraid—that is, if we understand our fear and do not let it control us—we will know his peace. In today's world, filled with fear and anxiety and uncertainty, I believe understanding how to find this peace through the fear is a valuable skill.

How to Transform Fear to Peace

Fear, like peace, is contagious. Fear will always be a part of life; we are designed to experience fear so that we survive. We also live in a world in which fear is used to sell and promote everything from political viewpoints to the things we buy to the things we believe. Add to this the number of hours each day we spend engaged with media and social media; where disasters and conflicts and untruths abound, there is little escape. How we respond, or not, is key. Left on its own, fear will grow and will continue to divide us.

I don't know how to negotiate international peace treaties. I don't know how to bridge the great divides in our nation right now. I do know how to create peace within myself by turning toward my fears. And for thirty-five years I have led thousands in my workshops to be with their fear of computer technology and other limiting fears, and to transform those fears to a sense of enthusiasm, freedom, and peace.

What I discovered in teaching computer technology is that there are four tools that diminish fear's ability to take hold and to grow, four strategies that allow fear to be transformed to peace. The first is to acknowledge and accept the fear. When we accept and name the fear and seek to understand it, the fear immediately loses some, if not all, of its power over us. In teaching, I always ask each person why they are in my workshop. As students

speak of their fear of being able to learn and their fear of losing their job to technology, I can sense everyone in the room breathing a sigh of relief. By speaking the fear aloud everyone realizes it is normal; they are not alone.

The second strategy for diminishing fear is to get information about what we fear. As humans when we don't know something or are faced with uncertainty, we are hardwired to respond with fear and anxiety. Getting information about what we fear removes the uncertainty, which automatically diminishes the fear. When teaching computer technology, in addition to teaching specific functions I give background terminology and philosophy and encourage students to ask any and all questions. Providing all of the information needed to remove the unknowing is key. Also vital is making sure students know there are no dumb questions, and seeking and responding to every question with respect.

Action is the third tool for lessening fear because much of what we fear stems from the sense that we don't have control. As humans it's not just uncertainty we don't like; we don't like not having control. When we take action in the face of the fear, we are taking control, and we can experience a positive emotional spiral that decreases the fear. All of my computer classes are hands on; the doing is an integral part of learning. I lead students through exercises together; we do and practice what we learn. And this is done in an environment in which no one is made to feel stupid if they take longer or do not get it the first time. These actions give students control of their learning. Again, questions are encouraged and welcomed, another action that gives participants a sense of control.

The fourth, and I believe most important, strategy I have found to counter fear is to be a part of a supportive community. In a supportive community we feel safe because we feel we belong. All humans require air, water, food, sleep, and human connection to survive. Belonging is a basic human need. In today's fear-filled world the need to connect and belong has never been more important. Being part of a supportive community, a place where we feel seen, acknowledged, known, and supported is essential to keep fear from growing. In my classes I do my best to make sure everyone feels they belong and are important to the class, because we all are.

At the core of creating supportive community is fully accepting students as they are, without any judgment. This is my definition of love. In my workshops there are no dumb questions and no one is ever wrong or bad; my students know that no matter what, I have their backs. Everything is about enjoying our time together and learning things to enhance our lives. When we are fully accepted for who we are, our inner fear that we are not okay immediately diminishes. Fully accepting and welcoming everyone sets an environment in which learning can happen, and fear has a harder time growing. There is no right/wrong or good/bad. Everything simply is.

Transforming Fear to Peace in Practice

When the pandemic arrived last spring, I used these four tools to understand and transform my fear. I recognized, accepted, and named my fear of contracting COVID and perhaps dying, as I am over sixty. I turned to multiple sources and gathered information about COVID and my chance of dying. I cross-checked the information I found to identify sources I could trust. I heard from my daughter's colleague in China that masks make a big difference; I did my research and decided I agreed with her. Before it became recommended practice in the United States, I began wearing a mask in public to keep myself safe. I took many other actions, including washing my hands, physical distancing, stocking up on groceries, and staying home.

Most importantly, I found ways to stay connected with supportive communities. I have not only stayed in touch with existing communities, I have become a part of new communities. I purchased a Zoom account and began sponsoring gatherings with family and friends. I began attending churches online, began teaching online, and joined an informal group for musical concerts six days a week online. And it has worked. Although I miss physical contact with my children, especially hugs with my granddaughter, I feel a peace around the pandemic and I am able to find much I am grateful for. I don't like the difficulties that so many in the world are experiencing: the loss of life and livelihood, the disruptions and tragedies, and the political and social unrest. I can feel the pain of the loss and tragedies at the same time that I live with a sense of peace.

Can We Make a Difference?

There is a saying, often attributed to Gandhi but never spoken by him, "Be the change you want to see." I would like to amend that to "Change the

world by how you *be*." The world is not outside of us. We are the world, each and every one of us. We are creating the world with everything we think, feel, and do. This is not a rehearsal. We are changing the world, every moment of every day. With every thought, every action, every emotion, every prayer, every cry of pain, every moment of speechless awe. And peace, like fear, is contagious.

Why is it important to focus on fear, to turn toward fear? It really is a path to inner peace, the peace that Jesus spoke of. And I believe that fear is the sacred voice of God showing us how to stay safe and reminding us to turn towards God and deepen our trust and commitment to live the life we are called to live.

I see divides and conflicts in the world that no amount of conversation or effort seems to be able to change. To me fear is a candle lighting the path, and I see the growing fear at the root of these divides showing us the path forward. By turning toward our fears, and seeking to transform the fear to peace, might the peace that ripples out be what leads to healing and change?

The environment in which fear takes root and grows is pretty much the world in which we find ourselves living today. Uncertainty, lack of trust, not knowing what is true and can be believed, mixed messages, confusion, a sense of powerlessness and not knowing what to do, a sense of isolation and feeling alone, lack of meaningful contact with others where we feel cared for, believing danger is all around—all of these contribute to fear taking hold and spreading. Writing this in the fall of 2020, I see the current national response and conversation around COVID and the other challenges facing us, creating and growing a lot of fear.

As fear grows, our ability to address all we are facing shrinks; too much fear literally shuts down our thinking brains. It is not the fact we are physically distancing to stay safe that is the issue; it is the social isolation caused by the divides in our country and of not feeling we truly "belong" anywhere. In this time, I believe churches and worship communities have an important role to fill. Churches are about community, meaningful community. The question for me is, how do we find new and expanded ways to counter the fear? This is where I believe church communities can make a big difference.

Sharing the Peace of Christ

Seeing the act of passing the peace with new eyes, and practicing it with expanded intention, might lead us closer to a world at peace. We share the peace of Christ every time we accept someone as they are, without labels, without trying to change them, with simply allowing them to be and including them in our community. Are there ways we can become better at welcoming and creating an experience and environment in which people feel a sense of belonging? Knowing that we are decreasing the fear in the world with these efforts, we may spend more time doing and speaking these things. People are less likely to be afraid when they feel safe in a supportive community.

The message of Jesus is one of transforming fear to peace. Knowing our sins are forgiven frees us from the fear we are not okay. When Jesus teaches us to ask, seek, and knock, when we are assured that we will be able to "move mountains," we are released from the fear that we will not be okay. We are taught to love, and not to judge. The full acceptance in Jesus' teaching to love and not judge dispels the fear that we are not okay. Jesus' teaching to forgive seventy times seven allows us to accept the wrongs that have been done, not to condone them but to allow ourselves not to carry the harm, to allow the fear we are not okay or will not be okay to fall away, so we might feel God's grace. All of these transform fear to peace, that sense we are okay and will be okay. Paul's letters include wishes for peace and instructions to be guided by peace. Might we choose to make this connection as we teach within our own worship communities, that we may gain a deeper understanding of how we can and do bring peace into the world?

Sharing the peace of Christ is something we can practice each day, not just in worship. Worship reminds us of who we are, and enables us to grow in our capacity to embody peace and therefore change the world a little bit every day. When we pass the peace in worship, it is not just something we do once a week but a reminder and an opportunity to grow and deepen the practice of living it every day.

Peace, like fear, is contagious. The peace we create ripples out in ways we cannot imagine. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God," Jesus said (Matt. 5:9). May we all be known as the children of God.

An Invitation to a Virtual Taizé Pilgrimage

So Jung Kim

Spirituality as Action

We have all heard someone say, "Actions speak louder than words," or "You've got to walk the talk." These familiar sayings express what we know in our hearts: we must act, not just talk about something. Yet there are times when we find ourselves resonating with other words, these attributed to Brother Roger of Taizé, who stated: "Sometimes you say to yourself: the fire in me is going out. But you were not the one who lit that fire. Your faith does not create God, and your doubts cannot banish him to nothingness."

We are surrounded by too many words nowadays. I am writing during the 2020 presidential election season, when social media and conspiracy theories online are making noise and creating danger, both mentally and physically. Additionally, our everyday venting, ranting, and fuming also take place online, unintentionally conspiring with the same level of anger and anxiety through the tips of our fingers. As much as we may find ourselves lonely at times in this season of physically distancing, ironically, we may also want to shout "Silence!" Indeed, silent prayers and meditations are a much needed spiritual tool for us to stay grounded these days. And yet, the ground of spiritual life is not silence. The ground of spiritual life is action, silent action that *conspires, respires, inspires, and aspires* the cloud of "true" witnesses through the Holy Spirit.[1]

The Taizé community has witnessed to that "silent action" for the last several months since the pandemic took off, broadcasting their prayers and worship on Facebook Live. Without this witness, I would not have kept my sanity during this truly unprecedented time.

Words Matter

The pandemic drastically changed my living condition into part hermit and part monastic in downtown Louisville, Kentucky. Louisville may seem like a small town, but this highly urbanized city has been one of much passion and compassion for the last several months. I lift up and give a shout out to our beautiful sister Breonna Taylor. Often, we witness that Breonna blesses the Black lives and those entwined with Black lives in this city. Her soul encourages this city to move with the Spirit. The Spirit empowers us Presbyterians in Louisville to act and walk on the street, instead of sitting quietly in a room and typing words.

We Presbyterians cherish the value of the *Logos* and *sermo*—the Word and words—simply put, the talk of both God and humans. We are, however, doing things beyond the *Logos* and *sermo*—words and speeches that are confined to the texts, canons, policies, the *Book of Order*, and the *Book of Confessions*. We are theological descendents of Martin Luther and John Calvin, both of whom were often theoretical, analytical, and deeply affected by the Word and words; yet at the same time, the Word and their words prompted them to act courageously, bravely, and passionately.

Cherishing the spirit of "reformed and always being reformed," we may find an almost perfect balance of words and deeds at the Taizé community established by a Swiss Presbyterian, Roger Schütz. The community is located in French territory near Geneva, where the great legal mind Calvin sheltered and mobilized a reformation in Switzerland. The brothers of Taizé are not silent. Every day they pray, softly but clearly, for specific communities in specific words. They act, loudly and clearly, by welcoming

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Most of us speak up in one way or another, although we are neither activists nor monastics as are Taizé brothers. Most of us prefer observing more than speaking out, spectating more than participating. And yet, every one of us is an active spectator.

refugees, young adults, and even the woman who murdered Brother Roger.[2] Their monastic life is dedicated to prayer, community, and pilgrims, all of which manifest a spirituality of concrete actions instead of suppressed silence.

The brothers rarely act upon aggression or anger. And yet their community life manifests the spirituality of both resistance and resilience with loud and clear deeds and actions through both their passionate being and compassionate living. Nowadays, numerous global churches and organizations also pray and call for peace. As much as I appreciate them, I also often find them prone to using ironically simplistic statements, logos, and memes. No such simplistic and romanticized peace has a place in the spirituality of Taizé, however. They pray for peace with the flame of resistance and resilience. Here the fire of the Holy Spirit conspires, respires, inspires, and aspires the cloud of unknowing witnesses—one of whom is me.

Words Matter When Deeds Follow

A good friend of mine told me that even an elementary school student is a scholar. In that sense, I have been a scholar for almost all of my life. I have been a dedicated scholar of theology for a good two decades so far. It has been a very slow and complex process and continues today. By now, I am about to fully acknowledge that this is my lifelong *palja* (八字). *Palja* means "fate" or "destiny" in East Asian philosophy and is similar to Calvin's doctrine of predestination in a more earthly and personal way.

In this *palja* of a theologian and a "God-talker," the more I study how God and humans talk, the more I observe the space between people's words and their actions. On a small scale, I observe the actions the speakers take and how the interlocutors make gestures such as eye-rolling. These illocutionary gestures are one of the speech acts that contain messages.[3] On a larger scale, I observe the impact of such speech acts made by politicians in our everyday real life, such as the increasing number of COVID-19 patients due to some politicians' speech acts of discouraging the wearing of masks. This impact is a perlocutionary act generated by such speech acts as attitudes, behaviors, and actions respectively yet in an interrelated way.[4]

In the venues of activism, these speech acts are playing out in a complex way. However, there is a fine line between actions and activism. In numerous venues of activism and protests, we tend to speak, write posts, post signs, and click pictures. These are illocutionary *logos*, if not the Logos. However, when there is not a perlocutionary impact the logos producers intended, one can end up performing activism without meaningful action.

I dare to say the brothers of Taizé are activists whose illocutionary intention and the perlocutionary impact often match. They perform what they intend, and the impact is echoing through the audience. In other words, they say what they mean, and they do what they say.

In our everyday realities, however, many of us are spectators, talkers, and writers. We see, talk, and write through our smartphones. That is not a bad thing. Most of us speak up in one way or another, although we are neither activists nor monastics as are Taizé brothers. Most of us prefer observing more than speaking out, spectating more than participating. And yet, every one of us is an active spectator.

We actively ask: What is their attitude? How do they behave? Why? And more often than we know, we change our ways of thinking, saying, and doing things even in our small-scale everyday lives. And that matters. Just as each of our vote matters, each of our small actions matters.

The Spirituality of Being, Doing, Living, and Loving

A longing for change in actions and deeds has been growing exponentially in me ever since I paid a short visit to the Taizé community a couple of years ago. I am not an expert in Taizé, and the knowledge I share here is not scholarly. Instead, as a Christian, I humbly yet confidently bear witness to the Holy Spirit in that ephemeral time-space of Taizé. The Spirit I encountered at Taizé was neither strong nor intense. No words can precisely articulate it. However, if I may, the spirituality as a texture of the Holy Spirit I sensed at Taizé was *real* and *true*. It

was the real Thing—*das Ding*![5] These are the words of the Facebook post I composed several days after I felt that Thing and returned from Taizé.

> This past weekend, for the first time in my life I think I have felt utter equanimity during the meditative prayers at Taizé. However, the utmost peace I felt at Taizé was such an ephemeral experience that I couldn't grasp it. Perhaps, that's the whole point of the unfathomable mystic or divine experience: that I cannot grasp it. I keep coming back to the reality (which is also elusive by the way) that reminds me of what a fragile, vulnerable, and even miserable human being I am in front of the daily, minor challenges. I should admit and reveal here that for the last three and a half months, I kept failing in acting as a caring, kind, and mature person. It is a good thing if I haven't offended anyone yet, as I have been a selfish and uncaring person. Today was not exceptional—and here I am after a day filled with my helplessness from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M.—December 2018

I began to have a drastically different knowledge of God as both a theologian and a Christian pilgrim—God is, God does, God lives, and God loves.

As stated above, the Spirit I sensed at Taizé was such a tangible feeling of the Thing. I began to have a drastically different knowledge of God as both a theologian and a Christian pilgrim—God is, God does, God lives, and God loves. As one can see, there are no adjectives, objectives, or adverbs in these sentences. God just is, does, lives, and loves unconditionally. But then this is just knowledge or confession in my words, feeling that God is different. Most of all, the feeling of such full and pure presence, which made me feel utterly safe and at home, is elusive. I could not own it.

Just a day after my trip to Taizé, I recall that I had a mental breakdown. I was devastated, seeing my life full of sheer uncertainty. I was overwhelmed by the hardest and lowest days and months of my life. I sustained myself and got out of it gradually, however, thanks to my memory of that experience at Taizé, although I could never own and feel that again. In my pilgrimage after Taizé, however, I kept reminding myself: God is, God does, God lives, and God loves, unconditionally. I know it because I experienced it, probably because a particle of that God was walking by me briefly, but I could not experience it anymore. I also knew somehow that I should not seek such experience again, because it is not for me to will when God approaches.

The Activism of Everyday Monastic Life

Now, a couple of years later, we are in the midst of a pandemic.

The "utter equanimity" and the Thing so real and true I felt at Taizé never came back. I have not necessarily sought after it, because I somehow know that it is not a thing that I can obtain, attain, or contain. Instead, I need to wait for it to happen, approach, and visit me again. Just as the words of Brother Roger quoted above express, my faith could never create that Thing, nor could I stop the Thing from coming. It was like a scent in the air, but not an artificial perfume manipulated by Chanel.

Last March, at the beginning of the pandemic, I learned that the Taizé community offered online prayers every night on Facebook Live; now it is a weekly Saturday service. I could not feel that God I experienced a couple of years ago through online worship. And yet, I observed different aspects of the Taizé brothers and their prayers. They kept praying instead of worrying and criticizing. They kept praying for China and those affected by COVID-19, instead of naming the COVID-19 as a "Chinese virus" or judging anybody for any behaviors. They kept showing how to physically distance themselves and later, wear masks instead of telling people to do so. They were doing this through rituals, prayers, and worship. Our theology, our worship, and even our activism sound like noisy gongs if we don't do actions and deeds.

I still cannot feel the Spirit's presence through virtual prayers and online worship. But I see the Taizé brothers and their doings. And that keeps me grounded in faith in God. That keeps me grounded to the experience I had at Taizé a couple of years ago. No matter what, unconditionally God is, God does, God lives, and God loves—everywhere, everyone, and everything. And you cannot stop that fire—the flame of the Holy Spirit when she visits.

Notes

1. I give Rev. Dr. Heather Murray Elkins of Drew Theological School the credit for the phrase "conspires, respires, inspires, and aspires."
2. Jason Brian Santos, *A Community Called Taizé: A Story of Prayer, Worship and Reconciliation*, illustrated ed. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2008).
3. For those who are interested in knowing more, one may try the dense and complex text of J. L. Austine. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
4. Ibid.
5. "Das ding an sich," meaning "the thing in itself," seems to come from this controversial passage of Kant's *Prolegomena*, where Kant states, "And we indeed, rightly considering objects of sense as mere appearances, confess thereby that they are based upon a thing in itself, though we know not this thing as it is in itself, but only know its appearances, viz., the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something."
   Immanuel Kant, Paul Carus, and James W. Ellington, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science: The Paul Carus Translation* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1977), http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/cat/bib/163112.

Amy E. Gray

That Imagination Thing . . .

William McConnell

As I travel on the Internet to presbytery meetings in my Mission Engagement region (twelve states, thirty-five presbyteries), I often hear conversations about the concepts of energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. I will admit instigating more than a few of those exchanges. That set of aspirations is central to the last ordination vow to which teaching elders (pastors), ruling elders, and deacons agree as they begin service to God's people.

> "Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?"[1]

Energy, intelligence, and love seem fairly straightforward concepts. Even in the midst of COVID-19, the skills needed to accomplish these haven't changed much. But that imagination thing. Now that's another story.

I propose that there are three phases of imagination and that we are fast approaching the end of the middle phase. Much like Emanuel Kant's progression of thesis, antithesis, synthesis,[2] and ritual theorist Arnold van Gennep's progression of separation, liminal period, and incorporation,[3] I propose that the three stages of imagination are *comfortable imagination, crisis imagination*, and *reordered imagination*.

Prior to March 13, 2020—the day when governmental authorities and ecclesiastical governing bodies around the country brought public gatherings to a screeching halt—church leaders were operating in a time of comfortable—or dare I say, complacent—imagination. Worship planners served within comfortable parameters of congregational expectations, crafting worship services that were spiritually inspiring, innovative, and challenging within a one-hour time frame usually occurring from 11:00 A.M. through noon on Sunday morning. If mistakes happened, they happened. Worship occurred in a physical space and at a particular time. It had a beginning point and an ending point. When it was over, it was over. Governing bodies and activity planners at all levels of the church were being comfortably imaginative in the planning and execution of programs, gatherings, and activities similar to what had been done before (or at least not too far afield).

But with the realization that a virus previously unknown in this country—in a population having no immunity to it and with a medical profession having no knowledge of how to treat it—had arrived, everything changed. Never again, or at least not for a very long while, would comfortable imagination be the order of the day.

To put this in the context of Kant's thought, the thesis was destroyed, and the antithesis, the opposite of comfortable imagination, was about to begin. To use van Gennep's thoughts, we went from a time before separation immediately into the liminal period—the in-between time—with no opportunity to prepare for or experience orderly separation.

We all know what happened in congregations immediately after March 13. Close the buildings. Cancel all in-person worship services, meetings, outings, and activities. Sanitize everything. And the questions. What do we do? How do we do it? What can we do? Who knows how to do what we want to do? These became the questions of the day. We grasped for the familiar when familiar was

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How are we going to rethink worship when the future probably holds some combination of in-person and online experiences? What portions of the worship we had before March 13, 2020, are going to remain? Why will they remain? What parts have become, or were already, superfluous?

disintegrating around us. We strove to maintain a sense of normalcy in the church when there was nothing normal about what we were experiencing. It is as if we went to sleep on March 12 in comfortable imagination and awoke March 13 submerged in life-altering crisis imagination. With no warning, we had gone from a familiar place into an in-between space where none of us knew where we, the church, or the world were going.

Through lots of grief, tears, missteps, mistakes, copyright law violations (yes, they happened), prayer, and more than a few behind-the-scenes, technology-induced expletives (we know those happened also), we are now nearly one year down the road. Production values of live-streamed or prerecorded worship services have improved dramatically, congregations are learning how to give online, multiple Zoom meetings have replaced our all-too-frequent in-person meetings. Pastors are becoming accustomed to preaching from their offices or from a pulpit into an emotionless camera or an empty nave, choir directors have learned how to create virtual choirs, and other worship planners and leaders have adapted to the moment. We have all come to some response to the question "How are we going to do what our congregations have come to expect, but deliver it in a different way?"

It is amazing that all of that happened in just under one short, but seemingly interminable, year. In that year—in that liminal space—we have somehow gotten glimpses of the holy. There have been happy surprises in worship. The Spirit has been present. For many congregations, attendance has increased. People who had not been able to attend in-person worship at the "normal" hour have been able to access worship at other, more convenient times. In this period of liminality, this time somewhere between what used to be and what has not yet been realized, God has met us in new and unexpected ways. Liminal space has become a thin place—in Celtic thought, a place when heaven and earth come so close together that we can nearly touch the face of God.

But as if what happened in the last year was not hard enough, we are now entering the phase of reordered imagination. This is the phase Kant would refer to as synthesis, when some of the old and some of the new coalesce to form something altogether different. Van Gannep would call this "incorporation," and Victor Turner named it "re-aggregation." Regardless of terminology, all recognize that this is not a return to the old normal. Rather, it is a new normal incorporating some old with much that is new to create something altogether different.

This will not be a return to worship as we previously knew it. Some of what we remember may be included, as will some of what was created during the crisis period. Reordered imagination will be something we have probably never seen or experienced before. It will be a new way to address old issues while finding answers to a completely new set of questions—simultaneously. Or, as has been said so many times by so many, we will be building the plane when it is already in the air.

How are we going to rethink worship when the future probably holds some combination of in-person and online experiences? What portions of the worship we had before March 13, 2020, are going to remain? Why will they remain? What parts have become, or were already, superfluous? What movements in worship do we still value and love that have become too dangerous to continue? What about congregational singing, corporate prayers, passing the peace, and the choir? How do we safely and meaningfully celebrate the Lord's Supper? How do we create fellowship and togetherness when hugging, touching, and even conversations in close proximity to others may be dangerous, or even deadly?

So many questions and very few easily discernible answers.

Now is the time that we must address those questions. Many congregations, both large and small, are grappling with the realities. In many cases, concrete answers are not yet emerging. New

Dedicated church leaders are using all the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love available to them exploring ways to continue being the church in this unsettled time.

directives from the Centers for Disease Control, other government authorities, professional organizations, and middle governing bodies are not being released as frequently as before, but new research continues to change our approaches. Mistakes are being made. But when faithful and thoughtful people prayerfully consider important and timely questions, solutions will emerge. Dedicated church leaders are using all the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love available to them exploring ways to continue being the church in this unsettled time. After nearly a year of pandemic, congregations are considering ways to reopen their buildings for in-person worship. Upgrading HVAC systems to filter and eliminate environmental pathogens, establishing strict cleaning protocols, adding nontraditional service times to accommodate limits on safe numbers of people gathered, and the understanding that online and in-person worship are going to proceed in tandem are but a few practical considerations. Congregations that have never considered projection of liturgical elements of worship and music or texts for a congregation's silent participation in song are exploring how to provide worship support without the use of shared hymnals, Bibles, and other printed materials.

And speaking of music, how can congregants participate in music without singing? Many are exploring handbells, percussion instruments of varied cultures and traditions, and simple movement in worship that can be incorporated while practicing physical distancing and abiding by masking protocols. Could congregations be taught simple sign language to communicate common responses of worship previously spoken or sung together? Children can be wonderful teachers.

Might groups of congregations or presbyteries find funding to support the addition of staff members skilled in the technologies currently being used and those that will certainly emerge? Job descriptions and training needs of church staffs will most certainly need to be adjusted to accommodate the time spent creating online content, preparing for worship or event livestreaming, and addressing technical issues that will invariably arise. Could purchases of technical equipment be leveraged among groups of congregations so that all have access to commonly owned hardware?

And what of membership? Will congregants want to return to worship at a set time and set place when they must get dressed, leave the house, congregate with other people, and observe physical distancing protocols? Or the converse, how will the church minister to former members or members still on the church rolls who now live in other areas, and even new prospective members from other geographic regions who have connected or reconnected with the congregation online? If physical proximity is no longer safe or possible, does geographic location preclude someone in one area of the country from joining a congregation in another? That is a question that may legitimately appear on a polity ordination examination somewhere down the road.

COVID weariness has become a real issue. Even introverts like me are itching to get out of the house—but how, when, and why? Experience with new technologies has taught even some of the most technology-averse church leaders and church members that online worship can be full, meaningful, and Spirit-filled.[4] Congregations are exploring new and exciting approaches to the church's worship into this unknown future.

For many generations prior to March 13, 2020, the church had built for itself elaborate walls of protection from forces that might challenge us. Within our houses of worship, we went about our work utilizing our most dedicated, though admittedly comfortable, imagination. We thought we were embracing innovation and creativity when we were actually just nibbling at the edges of what we were comfortably already doing. We understood our communities, our congregations, our challenges, and our opportunities. Life was good.

COVID-19, a novel coronavirus, has proven to us that that wall of protection, if it ever existed at all, was far from impenetrable. Overnight, we were catapulted from comfortable and complacent imagination into a time of existential crisis imagination. A year later we are coming to realize that what we experienced in crisis is going to be far more norm-altering and newly normal than we had ever expected. A new reality is emerging, and it is nothing like what we have ever experienced before.

As we live into this reordered imagination, may our commitment to all our ordination vows be stronger than ever before. May our resolve to pray for and serve the people of God with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love be the standard by which we evaluate our ministries into a new, uncertain, and eventually exciting future.

As we live into this reordered imagination, may our commitment to all our ordination vows be stronger than ever before. May our resolve to pray for and serve the people of God with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love be the standard by which we evaluate our ministries into a new, uncertain, and eventually exciting future.

O God,
you have called your servants to ventures
of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Notes

1. Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 468.
2. This formulation is often referred to as the Hegelian dialectic and is credited to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The idea originated in the writings of Emmanuel Kant and was expanded by Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Hegel never included this formulation in his writings.
3. Arnold van Gannep, *The Rites of Passage*, 1st thus ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). This progression was further developed in Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (Philadelphia: Routledge Publishing, 1996).
4. Note that I have carefully avoided the phrase "virtual worship." In my mind, "virtual worship" implies worship that is somehow not quite real. Online worship is real worship. People are gathered, prayers are offered, sacraments are celebrated (albeit in a new and different way), and the Word is proclaimed. While different from our previous experience, God has been worshiped.
5. Eric Milner-White and George Wallace Briggs, *Daily Prayer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 14.

Columns

On Liturgy: Communal Suffering and Words for a Border Crossing

Kendra Buckwalter Smith

Thanksgiving 2020 at my church (like most of the year 2020) was unique. As in every year, we offered thanks to God, for it is God from whom all blessings flow. And, as in every year, we also remembered in our prayers the pain and suffering of this world.

> As we give thanks over our Thanksgiving meals, we lift to you those who struggle to find their daily bread. As we gather to commune with loved ones, we lift to you those who struggle with strained relationship, those who are lonely, those who have no family with which to gather. And even as we celebrate, we also grieve, missing those whose places sit empty at this year's holiday table. Make us to be your church for all people—bringing the comfort of your love, the compassion of your Spirit, and the abundance of your blessing to all places, that Christ's peace may rule in all hearts. Amen.

The difference this year was that such prayers hit close to home throughout the church in a way they hadn't previously. Most years, so many of our congregants rest somewhere in the subordinate clauses—giving thanks over holiday meals, gathering to commune with loved ones, celebrating. But for so many this year the premise had changed. Certainly each year there are those who find themselves in the main clauses—the ones who find themselves unwelcome at family gatherings, the ones who observe the celebration around them while sitting in the darkness of loss and grief. Perhaps we construct certain borders even in our prayers, holding ourselves up against one another. But this year, gathering was difficult or impossible for most, and no one seemed to remain untouched by loss, grief, and loneliness. In the midst of global pandemic, I wonder if we have discovered a new experience of corporate sharing in the suffering of the world that fundamentally changes the church's prayer.

Most have known solitary suffering, the kind that too often causes a sense of alienation from community. We have known empathetic suffering, experienced secondarily alongside another who is suffering. And to be sure, particular communities have experienced a level of corporate suffering at the hand of violence engendered by various forms of prejudice. Yet in the midst of pandemic, the whole church finds itself in an experience of communal suffering that somehow calls us deeper into community within and beyond the church, even while physically separated. Our own individual struggles with loneliness, grief, and fear are overlaid with a suffering shared on a global scale. To be clear, the experience of individuals within the church continues to differ. Inequity along socioeconomic and racial lines has meant that certain groups of people experience the pandemic to an extent unmatched by others. Yet we are at once together and separate in a way we had not previously experienced.

Can we learn from this experience something about God's heart for the church? Through liturgy, we speak of and enact God's longing for restoration of community. We know that God so desired to be in communion with us that God took on flesh and suffered at the hands of humanity so that not even death would separate us from God. Christ's very mission in the world was and continues to be that of gathering creation unto himself. And God's promise—the future in which we hope—is everlasting communion among all creation with the

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triune God. We know that in the heart of God there is deep longing to gather us into one. By this point, the whole church has been invited to confront this deep longing that resides within our own hearts by virtue of the fact that we are created in the image of the triune God.

I'm struck that in the midst of the pandemic, we have seen greater awareness of and responsiveness to the struggle of others. For instance, conversations regarding accessibility of our worship gatherings have developed in new ways—we're now more cognizant of the technological barriers for some and the removal of physical barriers for others. We've also seen greater attentiveness on the part of many white Christians to the realities of racial injustice. The disassociation from normalcy in our own lives and the physical separation from the lives of others seem to have brought much of the church to recognize the value and needs of human life anew. Somehow, while we have found ourselves physically distant from community, the experience of communal suffering has tuned our hearts to seek wholeness all the more fully—not only for ourselves but for and in the body of Christ. And in this seeking, we find ourselves more closely gathered in the heart of God.

The Old Testament passage for Thanksgiving, Year A, comes from Deuteronomy 8, that lengthy preparatory sermon that Moses offered the Israelites as they stood at the border between the wilderness and the Promised Land, between barrenness and abundance, between what was and what would be. It was a vital moment, for the lessons learned in the wilderness were not only for a time past but also for a time yet to come.

In the wilderness, the Israelites learned to depend on God for the very necessities of life; they learned how to imagine and long for something better yet to come. In the rich land that lay ahead, their temptation would be to rest comfortably, forgetting the One on whom they depended always, forgetting that they had been blessed for a grander purpose than their own mere comfort. Both God's promise and God's call is the same on both sides of the border.

Throughout the time of pandemic, many have spoken of getting "back to normal" or of settling into a "new normal." As we confront our own border crossings, as we return to a time when in-person gatherings will be safe once again, we need to remember that God does not call us to return to the past, whether remembered as wilderness wanderings or the glory days. But neither does God call us to rest too comfortably in the blessings of the present. We need to remember each time we are gathered, in our prayer and in our praise, that the God who leads us through the wilderness is still at work gathering those who continue to find themselves wrecked by the challenges of a broken world. Only when they too have been gathered will we find Christ leading us across that final border into the Promised Land.

Through liturgy, we carry the lessons learned in the wilderness by remembering God's faithfulness to all, by embodying Christ's gathering of all, by continuing to imagine anew what wholeness might look like for all through the power of the Holy Spirit. We now know what it is to long with God for the restoration of community. So let us not seek the days before we knew this longing; let us not rest too comfortably in the days to come. Rather, let us continue to grow in our awareness of and responsiveness to the suffering of the world; let us continue to long for the wholeness of Christ's church. For in that longing, we find ourselves closest to God's heart.

On Music: Keeping the Songs That Keep Us

Phillip Morgan

On March 11 our governor made the recommendation that churches suspend in-person worship because of the increased threat of COVID-19. A meeting of the session was called and I made plans for the possibility that we would temporarily suspend our services. Just a few weeks before Holy Week, I selected new choral repertoire. I thought this might be the last time I saw the choir for a few weeks so I selected anthems that we all loved and knew well so we would be ready for the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the joy of Easter morning's resurrection. We ended that evening's rehearsal with the tried and true "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's *Messiah*. Although we were all unsure of what was happening around us, joining together to sing music as familiar as this chorus most of us had known for years was what we needed at the moment. That was the last time I lifted my hands and felt everyone in the room take a breath and sing.

The next few weeks were incredibly difficult. Singing was no longer something I thought about every day, or led and did several times a week. I made recordings of the previously scheduled preludes to be played as people gathered virtually for worship each week. In those early weeks of anxiety and uncertainty I took shelter at home alone, and there was very little music and mostly silence.

On April 1 my friend and a member of one of the choirs I had conducted died suddenly. I wanted nothing more than to gather with our wide circle of friends and grieve. Scott was one of the kindest and most loving people I have ever known. His smile was contagious and he possessed a laugh that was mischievous and somehow had the power to melt my generally gruff exterior. Our strong bond was our love of music, particularly the hymns that shaped our early religious experiences. We both had grown up Baptists in southern, African American congregations, and although we had in our adult lives found different denominations and predominately white congregations to call home, we would sit for hours and trade our memories of the songs and the singers of our past that we would never forget. In the days after his death, I realized that I was singing these songs to accompany me in my loneliness.

I decided since I couldn't gather with my friends to grieve, I would record myself singing a hymn that was repeatedly on my heart and share it on social media. I turned the sanctuary into a make-shift recording studio and sat at the piano to play and sing these words:

> Jesus is all the world to me,
> My life, my joy, my all;
> He is my strength from day to day,
> Without Him I would fall:
> When I am sad to Him I go,
> No other one can cheer me so;
> When I am sad, He makes me glad.
> He's my friend.

The reaction on social media was overwhelming and comforting. The many comments and messages offering me support in my grief helped stem the loneliness the pandemic was beginning to make me feel. I was also surprised by how many people had similar memories of this hymn. I hadn't heard, sung, or played this hymn in nearly two decades, but as I sat at the piano and began to run my fingers over

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the keys, it was there just as fresh as the last time I encountered it. This song is in me somewhere deep down where it can't be removed, no matter how my faith may grow and evolve. Others who didn't know this particular hymn shared similar stories of other hymns sustaining them through the isolation, and the number of requests I received to sing songs that people had cherished through their whole lives was overwhelming.

Many call these familiar hymns and spiritual songs "heart-songs," the songs a congregation particularly loves and enjoys singing frequently and can often sing from memory without the help of hymnals or projections. Because of that last distinction I began to quickly realize these songs were particularly useful in virtual worship situations where the curve for learning new technology was often steep.

While I have not given up on lesser known hymns—my congregation finds joy in singing new texts and tunes—weekly worship has now become infused with heart-songs. The challenge with many of these songs is that they often reflect a faith or theology that perhaps we don't completely embrace as we once did. My congregation's commitment to music and liturgy that uses inclusive language often keeps us from singing these songs. They are often also written in musical styles that great church musicians can judge pretty harshly. I have been guilty of it myself. However, the unprecedented time we're living in has taught me there's no reason for such distinctions. In a time where everything is unsure and daunting, we should rob no one of joy. One of my choir members works with young people to make healthy eating choices, and when children turn their noses up at brussels sprouts and the like, the expression they use is "Don't yuck my yum." I think we have labeled some songs that let some hearts sing as yucky; that is to say, not worthy of singing, especially at 11:00 on Sunday morning.

If it seems that I'm advocating that we pay no attention to sound theology in what we sing, rest assured I am not. In an exchange of text messages that would have been a conversation in the office, one of our co-pastors articulated it perfectly. She said about such songs, "They are no longer the words I use regularly but they reach the foundation of my faith that was formed by this music and these words. . . . Because I know you and your theological orientation, I hear these songs when you are singing them in a different way. You're not asking me to go back in the closet or get out of the pulpit. And it's comforting to hear this music that I sang and listened to, crying out to God at different times in my life, from you. My heart (and voice) sings it with you. (If it were someone else singing, I would feel alienated from it.)" She then shared with me the story of her spouse, a former Baptist like me, gathering friends at their house and singing all of the "blood hymns" from the *Broadman Hymnal*. She said, "Neither she nor her friends hold that theology any more but it was profound for them to sing the hymns that had shaped them. I think it's an experience perhaps of the Spirit being deeper than the words themselves."

The Spirit is deeper than the words themselves. It has a power to comfort us in times of isolation, grief, and uncertainty. It possesses a power to connect us to those who are suddenly no longer near us physically. One of my old friends reminded me that the African American church has often called these gems "songs that will keep you." I believe that our ancestors passed songs down to us through many generations for a time when we would need them. The songs had kept them through hurt, harm, and danger, and they wanted to make sure that I would know them, too, when my life became turbulent. As many are now turning their minds to the technology and expanded worship practices they've come to embrace out of necessity in the past few months, I am finding a new determination to keep the songs that keep us.

On Preaching: Mentoring Hope

Buz Wilcoxon

Church historian John W. Kuykendall claims, "Our memories become the mentors of our hopes."[1] During times of significant transition in the lives of congregations, discussions of past and future are brought to the forefront of conversations and have the potential to shape a community's identity in powerful ways. There is little doubt that memories and hopes are present at such a time; the question is how the two are related to one another. What kind of memories does a congregation have access to in its shared consciousness, short-term or long-term? Do such memories cultivate a sense of hope or fear for the future of the congregation? If, as Kuykendall suggests, memories have the potential to "mentor" hopes, then what are the implications for what happens when congregations begin to forget the memories of their past traditions?

It is rare for pastors to have an opportunity to glimpse the congregation that they serve from the perspective of an outsider. As a candidate visiting Spring Hill Presbyterian Church to interview for the position of senior pastor, I was given such an opportunity. Part of the interview weekend included a tour of the congregation's physical plant. I was led on this tour by two members of the pastor nominating committee, and as might be expected, one of our first stops on the tour was the sanctuary. The architecture of the sanctuary reflects a sense of simplicity rooted in the church's Reformed heritage. One committee member pointed out that the communion table was hand built by a longtime member of the church who had died a number of years earlier. The caliber of the craftsmanship was impressive, and upon further inspection, I found a plaque on the back of the table explaining that it was given in memory of many of the elders from the earliest days of the church in the 1940s and 1950s. This prominent connection to the past, in the center of the sanctuary, made a strong impression on me. I wondered how many members and visitors worshiping on Sunday mornings were aware of this representation of "the communion of saints" in their midst each week.

The tour continued as we made our way to the newest building on the church's property, a free-standing chapel. Built in 2010 but crafted to resemble an eighteenth-century colonial meeting house, the chapel is a unique blend of old and new. As we walked through the chapel, I noticed something odd. The pews, lectern, pulpit, and communion table were all designed to match with professional precision. They had clearly all been ordered and installed at the same time. The one piece of liturgical furniture that did not match was the baptismal font. Painted white (instead of a mahogany stain like the rest of the liturgical furniture), it was figuratively out of place. Nearly hidden in the back corner of the building, it was also literally out of place. I asked my tour guides about the font and its location. They explained that it was actually the church's original baptismal font, from the first decade of the congregation's existence when worship occurred in the original sanctuary about half a mile down the road from the present location of the church. The font, which had been used to baptize the first children in the congregation, had been replaced in the new sanctuary by a larger version sometime after the move to the current campus. This original font was kept in the chapel for occasions when it might be needed there during worship services, but it was placed on wheels so that it could easily be rolled out when desired and rolled back to its hiding spot when it was not in use. The font, which was a connection not only to the particular history of the congregation

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but to the shared history of the baptized community of the church through the ages, could be rolled away and ignored when it was not needed.

After seven years of ministry with this church family, I still find myself thinking back to these initial images—an interesting and illustrative dichotomy between the table in the sanctuary and the font in the chapel. One was a very present reminder of the shared history of the congregation, the other a relic from the past that could be rolled out of sight and out of mind when present circumstances necessitated. The image of gathering around the Lord's Table with the communion of saints throughout the ages is a powerful theological statement about the role of tradition, memory, and history in shaping the identity of a congregation. Likewise, the image of wheeling out the past and hiding or ignoring that same tradition, memory, and history is also a telling metaphor for the impact that America's cultural rejection of the past has had on congregations and entire denominations in an age that is "deeply suspicious of tradition."[2] The effect in many churches is a state in which the shared, formative memory of the congregation as a whole is disappearing through lack of intentional engagement with the past. Contemporary scholars have labeled this condition as "spiritual amnesia," and Diana Butler Bass in particular wonders, "Is spiritual amnesia a precursor to religious Alzheimer's, a fatal loss of memory for which there is no cure?"[3]

In his work *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Tom Long advocates for a renewal of memory in the realm of preaching. He argues that a major task in the work of shaping corporate memory entails acquainting worshipers (often for the first time) with the grand narrative of God's activity told through the biblical accounts.[4] This biblical remembering is a theological response to God's revelation, and Long quotes H. Richard Niebuhr to illustrate this point:

> [B]ecause the Christian community remembers the revelatory moment in its own history, it is required to regard all events . . . as workings of the God who reveals [the divine self], and so to trace . . . the ways of God in [human lives]. It is necessary for Christian community, living in faith, to look upon all events of time and try to find in them the workings of one mind and will.

Long suggests that this rebuilding of memory and the search for meaning in historical events can be performed within the community of a local congregation, in particular through the occasions of corporate worship and preaching. Could it be that even in this age of spiritual amnesia, preaching rooted in memory could indeed mentor our hopes?

Notes

1. John Kuykendall, "A Liberal Learning Is a Dangerous Thing" (speech, Founders Day Lecture, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA, February 20, 2008).
2. Ronald P. Byars, *Christian Worship: Glorifying and Enjoying God* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000), 19.
3. Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 8.
4. Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillian, 1941), 45.

On the Arts: Healing and Wholeness

Lauren Wright Pittman

In pivotal moments throughout history, artists have been integral in helping communities emote, process, and heal. Instead of avoiding difficult subject matter, prophetic artists boldly create what needs to be seen while processing their own emotions and amplifying the harsh reality of the world for those who have eyes to see.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, artist Titus Kaphar painted an image for the cover of *Time* magazine titled *Analogous Colors*. In the piece he depicts a Black mother fiercely and lovingly holding her child. However, her child is cut out of the image, as though someone took scissors to the painting, leaving a harsh, blank hole where her child should be. In a reflection accompanying his piece, titled "I Cannot Sell You This Painting," Kaphar wrote, "I can change NOTHING in this world, but in paint, I can realize her. . . . This brings me solace . . . not hope, but solace. She walks me through the flames of rage. My Black mother rescues me yet again. I want to be sure that she is seen. I want to be certain that her story is told. And so, this time America must hear her voice. This time America must believe her."[1]

In his reflection you can hear Kaphar's wrestling with hopelessness. He courageously engages with excruciating subject matter, rendering the furrowed brow of a mother stripped of her child. He hopes that this Black mother's story is seen, and that this mother and those whom she represents might find Worship During the Time of COVID as a result of systemic change.

In the face of incessant police brutality, Brooklyn-based artist Adrian Brandon began drawing portraits. In a series titled "Stolen" dedicated to Black victims of police violence, Brandon sketches each person in pencil, and then adds one minute of color for each year they were alive. The constricted time and contrast of pencil to marker results in haunting, unfinished portraits that beg for more time. "I want the viewer to see how much empty space is left in these lives, stories that will never be told, space that will never be filled. This emptiness represents holes in their families and our community, who will be forever stuck with the question, 'Who were they becoming?'"[2]

I think what makes Kaphar and Brandon's pieces so successful is that they appear unfinished. The viewer instantly recognizes that the image is incomplete, the image is not as it should be—which creates a visceral tension and longing for wholeness. The mind desires to complete the image. This uneasiness then propels the viewer to consider why the image isn't finished and what is required to bring the piece to completion. In some ways these images simplify such huge issues of injustice. Instead of only processing hazy glimpses of pieces of what seem to be distance narratives through fragmented news stories and wandering interpretations by politicians and talking heads, the artists simply express that things are not as they should be. This Black mother should be holding her child; the series of portraits should be full of color—these people should still be alive.

Worship During the Time of COVID cannot be truly realized until all find Worship During the Time of COVID.

As communities of faith, our goal should be to put an end to Brandon's portrait series. He should no longer have to engage with narrative after narrative of lives cut short while staring into the eyes of pure potential. In an Instagram video Brandon reflects, "I hope that one day I can stop creating 'Stolen.' I want it to be a piece of history, not a representation of the present." We should

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strive for a day when Brandon's portraits are fully realized, full of color and dimension, celebrating long and full lives. We should fight for a day where the mothers represented in Kaphar's painting can bob and sway with their child in their arms, without knowing the debilitating grief of losing a child to senseless violence.

In these wild times of worshiping in the midst of a pandemic, we have opportunities to push our creativity and to try new things. A wonderful tool for deeper devotional practice and engagement is the visual meditative practice called *visio divina*. This repetitive process of gazing on an image can help people practice attending while fostering empathy, understanding, and compassion. White people of faith, what if we were to engage with the artwork of these courageous artists, particularly artists of color, who have continually magnified the urgent need for Worship During the Time of COVID all around us? We owe it to our siblings to face the emptiness and to wrestle with our role in it all.[2]

White people of faith, what if we were to support artists of color in their work both financially and by sharing their work through our platforms? In the long pursuit of shalom, we could bolster artists as they continue to challenge, process, emote, and pursue healing, all the while allowing their work to take root in our hearts, propelling us to change.

It is the work of the church, the hands and feet of Christ, to cultivate God's shalom here on earth. The picture is incomplete, and we need to be willing to engage with our unfinished work.

Notes

1. Titus Kaphar, "'I Cannot Sell You This Painting.' Artist Titus Kaphar on his George Floyd *Time Cover," Time*, June 4, 2020, time.com/5847487/george-floyd-time-cover-titus-kaphar/.
2. www.adrianbrandon.com/stolen/.

Amy E. Gray

Call to Worship

Book Reviews

Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship

Lester Ruth, editor (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020)

Reviewed by T. J. Shirley

Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship presents a collection of articles that intend to establish a foundation upon which a comprehensive history of contemporary praise and worship (CPW)[1] can be built in order that the phenomena may be more thoroughly chronicled, studied, and analyzed. The compilation is edited by Lester Ruth, research professor of Christian Worship at Duke Divinity School. Ruth is a preeminent scholar in the study of CPW and has written numerous articles and books on the subject including (with Lim Swee Hong) *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (2017).

In the introduction to *Essays*, Ruth classifies two channels in the development of CPW: Praise and Worship (PW), currents in CPW which emphasize experiencing the presence of God through new forms of praise based on a "scripturally grounded theology of worship,"[2] and Contemporary Worship (CW), currents in CPW formed in response to a perceived disconnect between worship in the church and the sociocultural developments of the twentieth century. Essays in this volume attending to PW include topics such as Vineyard Church's influence on a Catholic charismatic renewal movement community called Word of God and a brief history on the overlooked impact Integrity's Hosanna! Music had on CPW. Chapters classified by Ruth under the header of CW include the liturgical experimentation by James White, Grady Hardin and Highland Park United Methodist Church in the 1970s, the practice of many mainline churches of adding services with different styles as influenced by Willow Creek's church growth model and seminars, and a summary of Robert Webber's philosophy of using ancient practices of worship to inform and evaluate liturgical renewal. The confluence of CW and PW can be observed in an article detailing the replacement of sacred music diplomas with worship degrees in Christian music education.

Perhaps most helpful in the range of topics covered is the final chapter, where Ruth presents a methodology to form a bibliography for continued study of CPW. He sets out clear principles that are vital to the analysis of an emerging field of study. He encourages researchers and scholars to identify untapped primary sources, demonstrates how they might use those sources in their work, and discourages them from forming judgments too hastily due to a limited bibliography or their own theological biases.

An exciting possibility for continued research can be found in Wen Reagan's comparison of the development of Afro-Pentecostal gospel music in the early twentieth century to CPW's progress in the mid to late twentieth century. He posits that the evolution of gospel music in the Black church, occurring roughly half a century earlier, in many ways runs parallel with CPW's advancement. If further attention to this hypothesis continues to demonstrate merit, analysis of the current dynamics of Afro-Pentecostal gospel music could give insight

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into what is to come for CPW and could possibly serve as guideposts for those attempting to guide the future of CPW in one way or another.

Another significant asset in this collection is Lim Swee Hong's description of the transmigration of CPW sources for Chinese congregations in China and the United States. He traces music from North American sources, which made its way into the church in China through missionaries, to the development of original worship music in China—some of which falls under the umbrella of CPW and was brought to Chinese-American churches by Chinese immigrants—to new Chinese CPW developed in North America and sent back to China. These three waves could describe a pattern of evolution in many immigrant churches, or they could serve as a contrast to the experiences of other immigrant communities. At the very least, Lim's article exemplifies an imperative that scholarship of CPW must encapsulate global perspectives and movements other than the forms CPW takes in the Western church.

Noticeably missing in this book are the perspectives of people who are not male. Every contributing author in this volume is male, as is every person whose work is highlighted as significant in the history of CPW. A more complete historiography of CPW must include feminist, womanist, and LGBTQIA+ analyses and criticisms, as well as discussions of the roles women and LGBTQIA+ people had in the progress of CPW. Also of note is the lack of guidance on how to analyze CPW theologically. While Ruth advocates for historians to fight the urge of prematurely assessing topics in CPW theologically lest they inaccurately chronicle their subject by not exploring its full depth and breadth, sound liturgical criticism at some point must include theological evaluation. A more comprehensive methodology might include guidelines for when such theological criticism is appropriate and strategies on how such analysis might be achieved.

Even though this collection might not prove very helpful to the pastor or church musician looking to the history of CPW to inform or shape current practice in the local church, it does serve its intended purpose as an overture to scholars to delve deeper into the history of CPW, as a broader view might bring better understanding. Above all, it encourages historians to check their biases about CPW and commonly held notions about its development in order to pursue research that brings out untold stories and overlooked movements that hold important insights into CPW.

Notes

1. Contemporary praise and worship is the phrase Ruth uses to refer to encapsulate the entire movement.
2. Lester Ruth, "Introduction: The Importance and History of Contemporary Praise and Worship," in *Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, ed. Lester Ruth (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 5.

Teach Us to Pray: The Lord's Prayer in the Early Church and Today

Justo González (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2020)

Reviewed by Laura Blank

Justo González's latest book, *Teach Us to Pray: The Lord's Prayer in the Early Church and Today*, joins a host of other publications that have sought to engage the Lord's Prayer for today's church. While there are any number of resources to help deepen one's understanding of the prayer, this book will easily find a home on the bookshelf of any pastor, theological student, or church member. González sets out to put us in conversation with the early church. How did the earliest Christians pray this prayer? How did their world and faith shape their understanding of this prayer? How did the early church use it in corporate worship and private devotion? And then, how does their use of the prayer that Christ taught us illumine our own understanding of it? How can we use ancient wisdom to breathe fresh air into our practice of praying the Lord's Prayer?

González sets the context in Chapter One by examining the use of the prayer in the early church. Drawing from a long list of ancient Christian writers, González shows the rich life and usage of the prayer by our Christian ancestors. The remaining chapters examine each individual petition in the prayer with care and reverence. González blends Scripture, ancient writing, and his own personal and pastoral experience to invite readers into a more expansive reading of the Lord's Prayer. Most pastors will find several of González's works on their shelves, remembered with great fondness from their theological studies and with deep appreciation for their continued importance as a resource for understanding church history. As a Cuban American United Methodist pastor and scholar, he brings a global perspective to an area of scholarship that has been dominated by white European voices. He is a trusted and reliable source, and this latest publication is a wonderful addition to his contributions to the church.

Teach Us to Pray will find a home in college classrooms, pastor cohorts, congregational book studies, and many other settings. Any pastor and worship team planning to embark on a series exploring the Lord's Prayer should consider reading this text as part of their preparation! Gonzalez wonderfully balances ancient writings, which may be intimidating for the average reader, with contemporary reflections. (However, those using the book in a congregational setting may find it helpful to skip the first chapter and dive directly into the subsequent chapters examining the prayer itself.) The reflection and discussion guide at the end of the book offers many provocative questions to reflect upon, either individually or as a group. These questions may also help preachers develop a direction for a sermon series.

We have been in a long season of upended lives, and our church life has not been exempt from that. As a precaution against spreading the Covid-19 virus, many of our congregations have refrained from spoken prayer, song, and other practices that are deep within our worship bones. One such practice that has been missing or modified in many congregations is a corporate praying of the Lord's Prayer. While this may cause a feeling of disorientation, González offers a redirection. The first petition of the prayer is broken down to give the very first word its own dedicated chapter. He reminds us that even when we pray the prayer by ourselves, we do not pray *My* Father, but rather we always prayer *Our* Father. González reminds us that we always pray alongside Christians of every time and place, and on behalf of all of

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creation. This news should be an encouragement and help to a people who have been scattered and displaced from the gathered body: we pray "Our Father" together, even when we must refrain from sharing space as we pray.

Teach Us to Pray offers clear and concise discussions of many common questions: Does praying to God as Father mean that God is masculine? Why do some people sin or trespass while others have debts? Why does my church have an extra phrase at the end of the prayer? However, the beauty of this short book is that it answers the questions many do not even think to ask after years of daily and weekly recitation. Readers will come away with a renewed conviction that when we pray, we not only remember God's promises to us but also commit ourselves to helping those promises come to fruition in this time and place. Through my reading of this book, with great thanks to its author, I found that my own prayer is enriched and given a new dimension. Readers will discover that while our liturgical and devotional practices shape how and when we pray the Lord's Prayer, *we* are shaped by this prayer. Each petition will lead the believer to commit to a new way of life, and a new kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amy E. Gray

Ideas

Our Faith Is the Assurance

Words by Buz Wilcoxon
based on Hebrews 11:1-12:2

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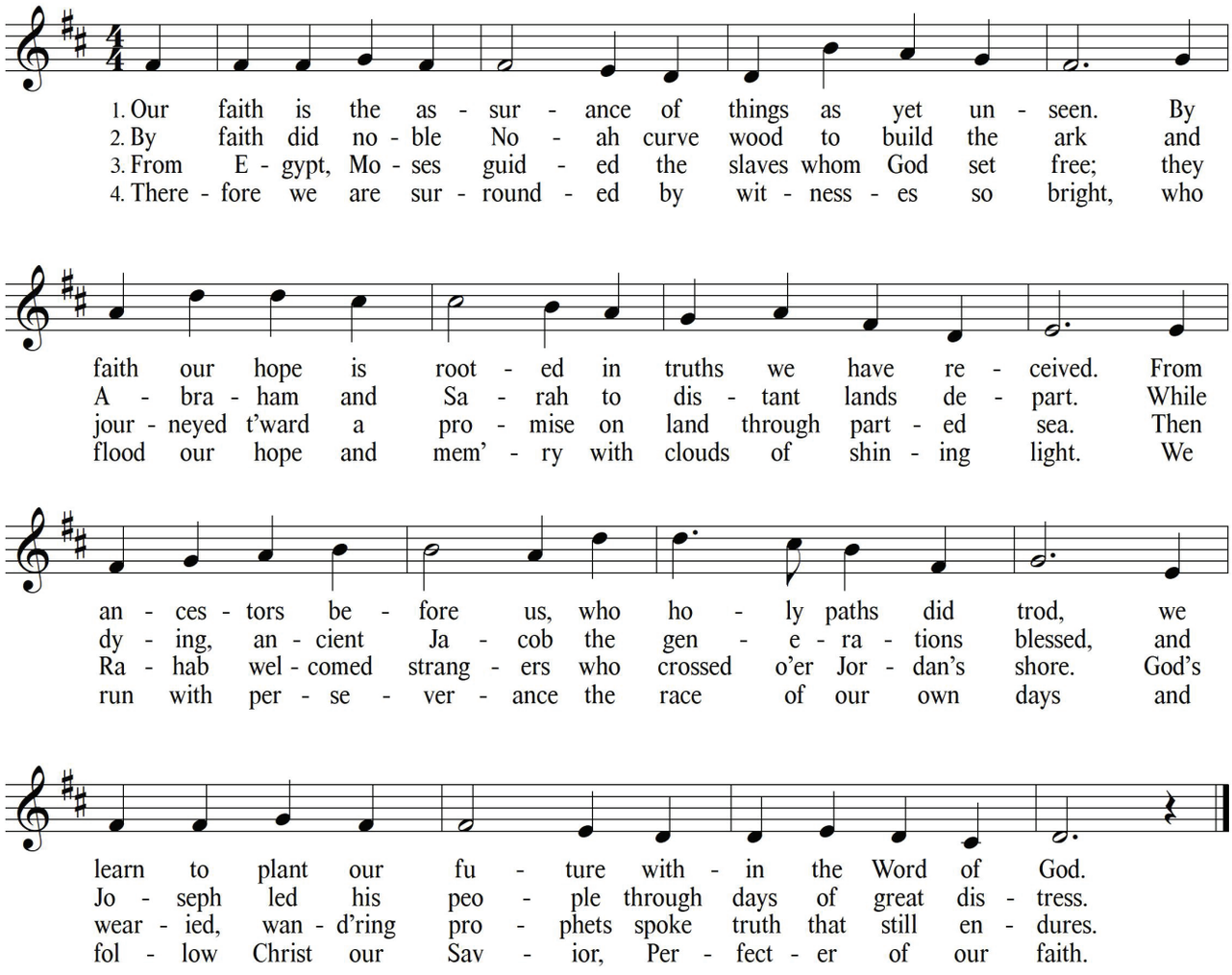

On the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of
Spring Hill Presbyterian Church, 2019

Our Faith Is the Assurance

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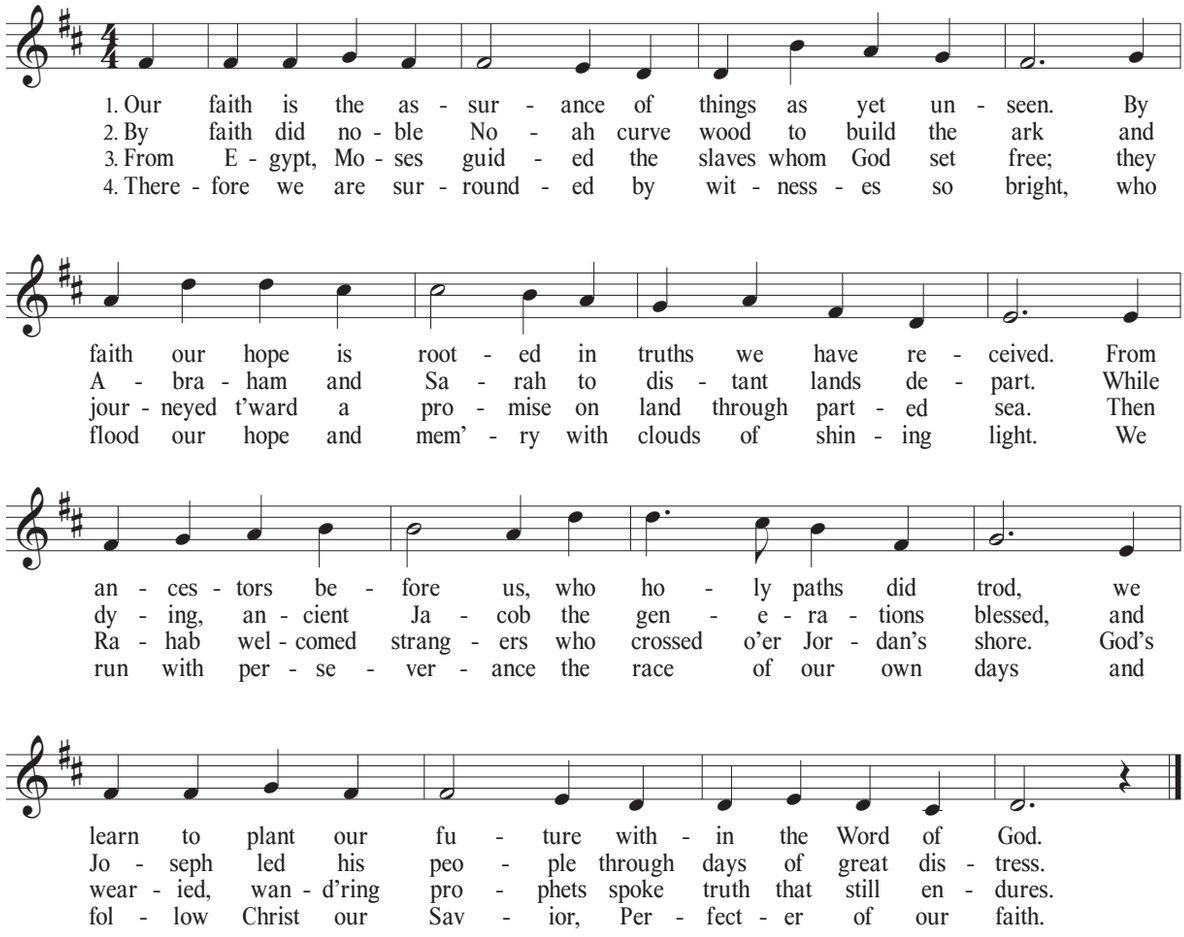

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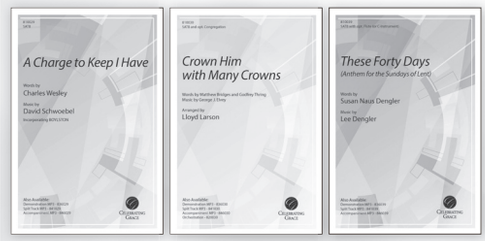

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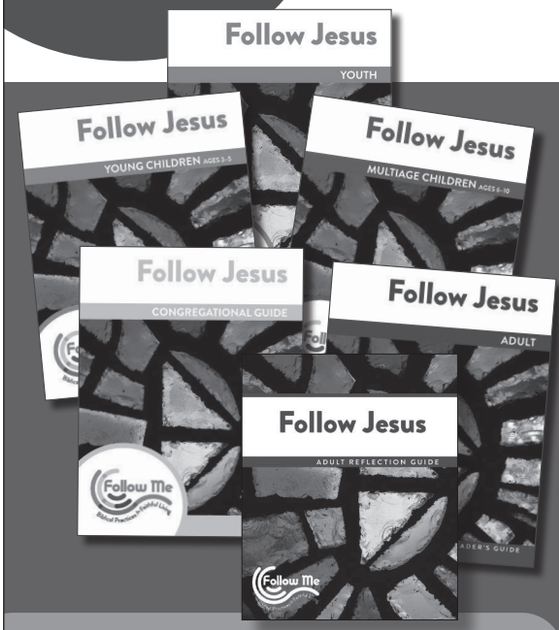

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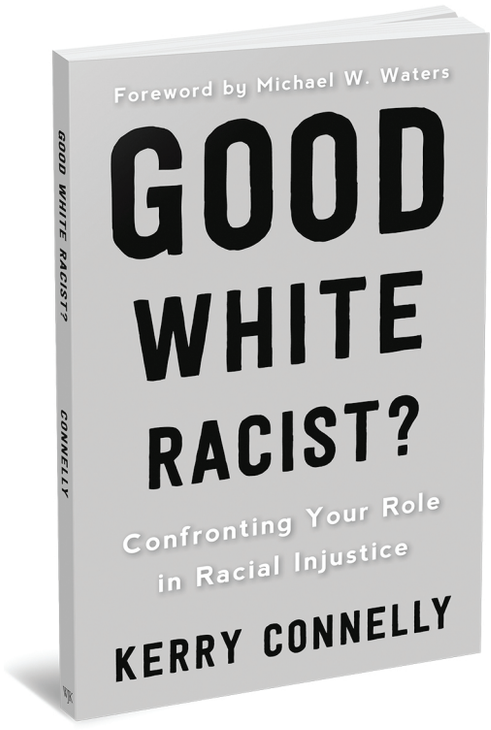
"A no-nonsence call to action for all those willing to confront their complicity, *Good White Racist?* promises 'This is going to be hard, and you are going to be uncomfortable. but it will be worth it.'"

—FOREWORD REVIEWS



**\ good · white · racist ** *noun*

1. A well-intentioned person of European descent who is nonetheless complicit in a culture of systemic racism

2. A white person who would rather stay comfortable than do the work of antiracism

In *Good White Racist?*, Kerry Connelly exposes the ways white people participate in, benefit from, and unknowingly perpetuate racism—despite their best "good person" intentions. *Good White Racist?* unpacks the systems that maintain the status quo, keep white people comfortable and complicit, and perpetuate racism in the United States and elsewhere. Connelly shows us that even though it may not be our fault or choice to participate in a racist system, we all do, and it's our responsibility to do something about it.

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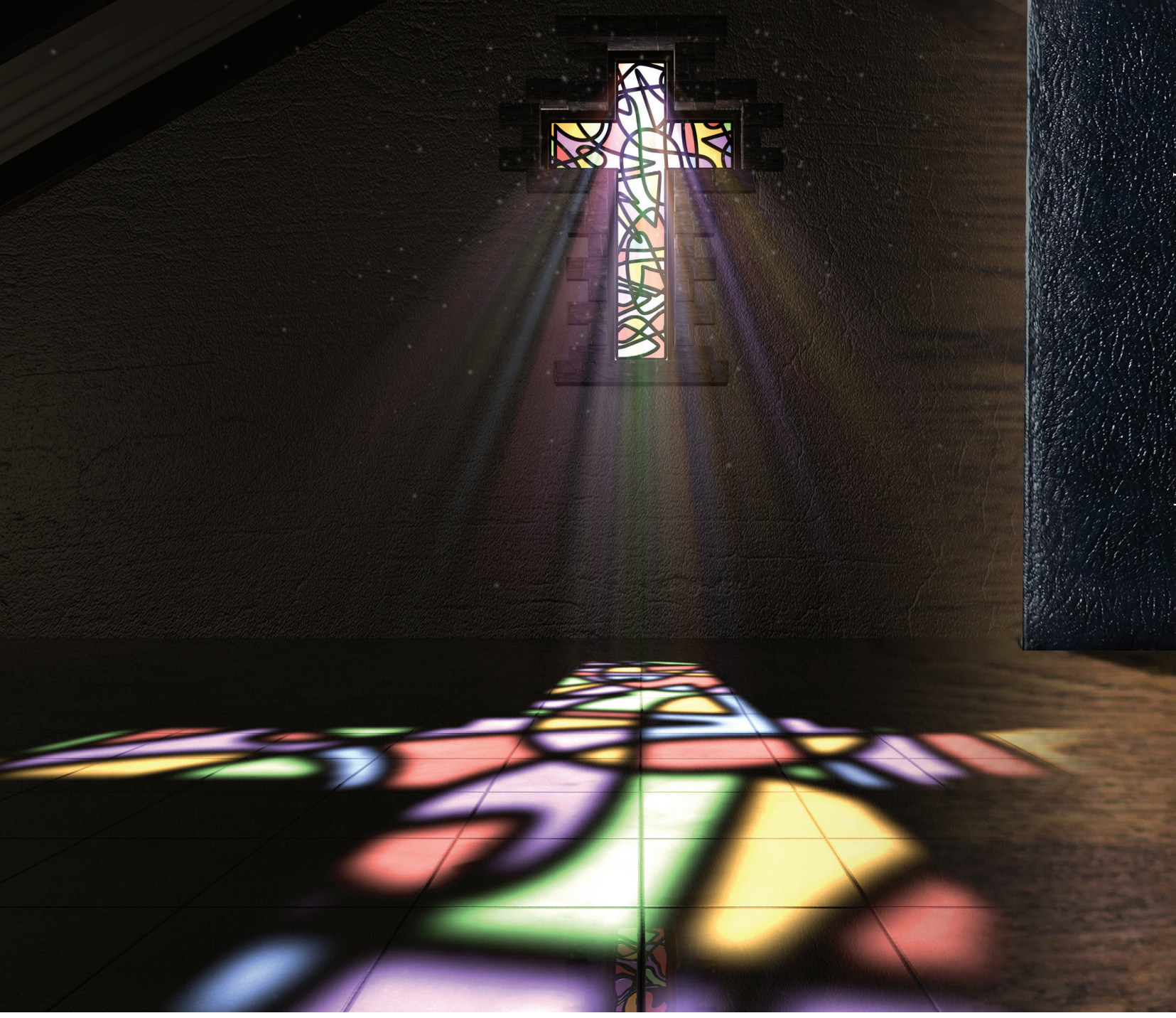

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