LITURGY,
MUSIC,
PREACHING,
AND THE ARTS

Call to Worship

Volume 58.4

Shared Space

CHURCH MUSICIANS:
WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Take part in our Salary Survey to help us better understand and share the story of worship leaders, pastors, and church musicians across the country. Your participation will provide valuable insights that support both our members and the churches they serve.

SCAN TO TAKE THE SURVEY

This survey is open to individuals of all denominations, and your confidential responses will help us paint an accurate picture of the current landscape for worship leaders in the U.S. Add your voice today to make a difference!

PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS

@PRESBYMUSIC PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS PRESBYMUSIC.ORG

Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Volume 58.4

Shared Space

Published by the Office of Theology and Worship
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
The official journal of the Presbyterian Association of Musicians

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.

Editor: Sally Ann McKinsey
Copyeditor: Nancy Goodhue
Layout Designer: Michelle Vissing

Theology, Formation, and Evangelism
Ray G. Jones III, Director
David Gambrell, Associate for Worship

Address editorial and advertising correspondence, materials for review, and unsolicited manuscripts to:
Sally Ann McKinsey
Editor, *Call to Worship*
Phone: (502) 569-5022
E-mail: sallyann.mckinsey@pcusa.org

To access online content, update your shipping address, provide new contact details, change payment information, or purchase a new subscription, visit calltoworshipjournal.org. For questions about the website or subscriptions, email or call David Gambrell: david.gambrell@pcusa.org; (888) 728-7228, ext. 5311.

PAM members should submit change of address via e-mail or by phone:
pam@pcusa.org, (888) 728-7228, ext. 5288

PDS# 21162-24-004

Indexed with abstract in Religion Index One: Periodicals, American Theological Library Association; available online through BRS (Bibliographic Retrieval Services) and DIALOG; by Music Article Guide and by Religious and Theological Abstracts. This publication is available in microfilm from ProQuest.

This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database,* a product of the American Theological Library Association, 300 S. Wacker Drive, Suite 2100, Chicago, IL 60606; e-mail: atla@atla.com; online at atla.com.

Call to Worship

Shared Space
Volume 58.4

Contents

Feature Articles

Ideas

Columns

Book Review

On the Art throughout the Issue

Joel Schoon-Tanis strives to view the world through a childlike lens—full of color, whimsy, and honesty. His work helps others unlock a sense of childlike wonder about God's world. For over thirty years, Joel has been a working artist in Holland, Michigan. He has written and illustrated a handful of books (recently *40: The Gospels, At Psalms School,* and *Lulu and the Long Walk*), painted murals around the world (including in Kenya, Zambia, Germany, the Dominican Republic, Mozambique, Palestine, and northern Wisconsin), and painted nearly a gazillion paintings in his career. His work is in churches, children's hospitals, schools, restaurants, businesses, and many private collections. In 2016, one of his images was presented to Pope Francis. In 2017, he joined international artists in Leipzig, Germany, to create art around themes of social justice in conjunction with a gathering for the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. He lives with his wife, Kathy, and two creative, clever daughters, Harper and Beatrix.

For more about Joel's art, visit joelschoontanisgallery.com/.

Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

I have experienced many flashes of beauty in worship over the years, moments that make the hair on my arms stand up or bring tears. We all know the kind. Usually, they accompany the celebration of sacraments, a critical turn of phrase in a sermon, or a time when voices join to sing God's praise. My most recent hair-raising moment did not come from the preacher or the music, but from the hands of a woman sitting in the back row with me at North Anderson Community Church Presbyterian in Anderson, South Carolina. Just as the room went silent for the Scripture reading that day, my three-month-old child began to cry. Baby in arms, I stood up and moved to the edge of the sanctuary, swaying and bouncing to calm him.

While I worried about the disruption, my mind racing with the decision before me—continue my awkward dance or carry him out—Cynthia was already halfway to the nursery down the hall. Before I could plan my next move, my baby quieted as I swayed in the large rocking chair she had carried into the sanctuary and placed behind me. Instead of giving me a side-eye indicating my baby needed to go cry somewhere else, Cynthia sensed my needs and changed the environment so that we could be part of worship. I can identify this moment as one in which liturgy was the physical work of the people, one person laboring so that another may be able to be part of the body just as they are.

The words of hymn #301 in *Glory to God*, "Let Us Build a House," often run through my head and heart in hopeless moments, when hate, violence, injustice, and division seem to consume this country and world: "Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live . . ." Space for worship should indeed be space where "all are welcome," as that hymn goes on to proclaim. Building this kind of space takes intentional action on the part of each member of each community. In a culture and country where violence and inequality have become normalized, congregations have a responsibility to build spaces that resist the dominant narrative.

Contributors to this issue reflect on the theological implications of such decisions in worship. They give material suggestions for how we may investigate our spaces critically, exercise honesty about whether those spaces reflect what we say we believe, and activate our theology in the space we share. Articles in this issue address the intersection of disability studies and liturgical theology, worship with creation, and other interpretations of "shared space," including daily prayer for sustainable ministry, online worship, and vocabulary for visual literacy.

Kiara Jorgenson develops concrete suggestions for worship based on a deep analysis of how we might approach neurodiversity with a theological lens. Her research at the intersection of faith formation, worship, and what she calls "neurospiciness" educates and inspires. Alexandra Jacob and Sonja Dziekciowski share a conversation about the importance of supporting neurodiversity in their work with children and youth, reflecting on the pastoral lens they bring to worship leadership. Rebecca Spurrier also recognizes the impact that

difference and diversity have on liturgical decisions and names the special awareness church leaders need to create spaces of belonging.

Erina Kim-Eubanks shares her perspective as a pastor of a congregation that continues to meet online, analyzing the ways the congregation's theological convictions have shaped their practical life together. Karl Heimbuck offers a reflection on his experience with the *Book of Common Worship*'s Daily Prayer liturgies, giving suggestions for the ways this resource might transform worship in the sanctuary and beyond. Carol Soderholm gives a reflection on what it means to worship with creation.

Catherine Kapikian has contributed a primer for visual literacy that worship committees and church leaders can use to expand their understanding of visual elements and principles as we critically engage our spaces for worship. Her work will be particularly helpful when reading the fascinating conversation I had with stained-glass artist Steve Wilson, who shares his perspective on color and light and the place of stained glass in art history in the Work of Our Hands section. His work pairing an old medium with context-specific imagery and design invites us all to wonder about the ways we interpret ancient practice in new times.

The church operates in a time of profound alienation, when systems built by racism, nationalism, colonialism, and capitalism keep us from being present with one another and with creation. These systems, normalized over time, are at odds with the gospel. It is more important than ever that we articulate our theology of belonging with God and one another through physical space, with our words and our bodies in worship. May we continue to investigate the practices we may take for granted, being transformed by the God who has chosen to share space with us through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

—Sally Ann McKinsey, Editor

Joel Schoon-Tanis, *Seeds*, Acrylic on paper, 20" x 24"

Call to Worship

Feature Articles

Many Ways to Pray: Consenting to Shared Space as Worship

Rebecca F. Spurrier

My grandmother Ruth's favorite word was "togetherness." When she said it aloud, it was never just a word but rather a monument to the effort she put into gathering her family, flung across the world for a time, into a single space. These celebrations involved sitting for hours on couches, recliners, and the stone ledge of the hearth, with some of us cross-legged on the shag carpet of her living room floor. We listened to Scripture and family stories and remembered our relatedness to one another through slideshows. The in-laws spread a word of welcome and warning to newcomers to the family; it was important to find a comfortable seat. For when my grandmother succeeded in gathering us in, she meant to keep us together for as long as she could.

As one who directs chapel at a Christian seminary, I spend much of my time, like my grandmother, contemplating the conditions for shared space. I focus not on biological family but instead on those whose practices of worship vary widely, shaped by a breadth of contexts and traditions. I seek practices that can hold us together for a time, through written and extemporaneous prayers, in choreographed ritual and informal testimony, through silent affirmation and vocalized participation, sitting and standing, eyes open and closed in prayer, hands raised and stimming, sitting in a seat with others and sheltered in a corner drawing, gathered in across the multiplicity of traditions we identify as Christian worship. Like my grandmother, I trust that the Holy One is intent on holding us together through the varied lived experiences with which we inhabit this space. I also seek intentional collaboration with the Spirit of God in the unfolding of generous and accessible sacred space and time.

As a non-disabled liturgical theologian who centers disability in my understandings of Christian worship, I have come to believe that worshiping together requires those who pray to consent to the differences of our own bodies and the bodies of those with whom we pray. In consenting to the differences of others, I learn from siblings with disabilities who emphasize God as the creator of disability—a God who works out divine purposes in and through disability both because of God's great love for people with disabilities and through divine pleasure in the variation in creation that God has made and continues to fashion and shape. Thus, to consent to human bodies in worship is also to assent to or agree with the God who has made each one in the divine image, deepening respect for each creaturely form and transforming practices of alienation in worship into a desire for those whom God has always cherished.

For most of my life, I considered gathering for worship itself to be an act of consent to shared space with others; because my body was in a certain place and time, I had agreed to be there and to participate in whatever happened with those who had gathered alongside me. But informed by greater awareness of ableism,[1] among other forms of oppression in Christian congregations, I now assume otherwise. While Christians often emphasize the gift of an assembly of diverse humans, worshipers' preferences and expectations both unintentionally and explicitly suppress the diversity and humanity of those with whom they pray.

Rebecca F. Spurrier serves as associate dean for worship life and assistant professor of worship at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and is the author of *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship*.

Disability theologian Nancy Eiesland describes this strange tension, observing that "the members of the church represent an essential diversity, interrelated by necessity and often hating the very differences that make us indispensable to one another."[2] Thus, in different ways than my ancestors, I consider the potential violence of Christian worship with greater awareness of that which alienates worshipers from one another even and especially when our bodies inhabit the same room. In a quest for more just worship spaces, I offer three sets of practices that inform my understandings of some conditions for consensual worship space: (1) worship as creative, multimodal, and expansive; (2) worship as explicitly invitational; and (3) worship as collaborative through addressing and transforming conflict. To explain these practices, I share insights from the ecumenical chapel spaces in which I lead worship alongside insights I have learned from disabled Christians and the disability community over the past twenty years. I also highlight wisdom drawn from interviews with disabled Christians in support of a collaborative worship project that is producing a forthcoming worship resource, *Disability Wisdom in Worship and Prayer*.[3]

Consensual Worship through Creative, Flexible, and Multimodal Spaces

Where there is consent to the bodies that God has created, God reveals Godself through creative, flexible shared spaces for worship and through expansive names for God and understandings of the human person. In interviews with disabled Christians, worshipers testified to many different ways that they found connection with God and others through prayer in communal worship. As one person described:

> I really like various positions of prayer and so I've tried, you know, like the typical way in my pew is like sit, head down, pray. Right? Like fold your hands, close your eyes. There you go. You're praying. I often pray with my eyes open because it's too complicated for me to like close my eyes and relax and think and—like that's—I can't do all of those things. So people have thought that it's weird when I'm praying with my eyes open. I used to be self-conscious of that. I'm not anymore. Or I'm less so. I also like to pray prostrate, like lying on the floor.

While one worshiper emphasizes freedom in posture and gesture, another situates access to others as a primary concern as she emphasizes the freedom to bring her body to the same spaces as others:

> I remember being able to sit on the row that I wanted to sit on in my wheelchair and just being more surrounded and not off in a corner. To be able to worship and hear people singing all around me and not way back in the back, and I have to watch everybody else. So more like being in the community. . . . Yeah. And then they have a pause for a greeting moment, I feel like I can actually participate because somebody is going to be right behind me, right beside me, right in front of me.

In this narrative, consenting to a diversity of needs in shared space requires making space for each one to intimately connect with the bodies of others. Simultaneously, shared space also requires making distance in worship possible so that those for whom social proximity produces anxiety or distraction may also worship. One of my students helped me understand the need to have a stim corner, a place set apart from rows of seats or pews, with fidgets for those who might need them in our worship. Based on her experience as a pastor of a congregation that centered neurodivergent participants, she found that it wasn't enough just to have a stim corner; it was also important for pastors and other leaders to inhabit these spaces from time to time so that these sites for worship also became part of what the whole community valued and considered part of its sacred movement and activity.

While some congregations frame multiple options as an accommodation to the preferred practices of a congregation, the disabled and neurodivergent worshipers from whom I continue to learn connect this multiplicity to the creativity of God and to freedom in relationship with God and others. Such multiplicity reflects the God who is known and named in many ways through Scripture and experience and through a freedom that God encourages and makes possible in worship. As another interview partner said,

> The use of our bodies. The use of the instruments. You know. We're to praise with everything. So if you've just got to wave your hand, wave your hand. Being in an

Multiplicity and creativity in sacred space are made possible by those whose own bodyminds open up new possibilities both for human ritual and for God's revelation through the expanding practices of worship leadership.

> environment where you're free and people aren't looking at you sidewise, like what are you doing? That is not, you know, that's not proper decorum. And I'm always reminded of, well, David danced his clothes off. So, I mean I'm not trying to dance my clothes off but I'm going to get as close as I can, you know, to that experience. . . . When it comes to worship people should be able to be free to worship God however God tells them to worship.

Such freedom is further encouraged by the presence of disabled clergy and leaders. In other words, multiplicity and creativity in sacred space are made possible by those whose own bodyminds open up new possibilities both for human ritual and for God's revelation through the expanding practices of worship leadership. One interview partner, for example, shared about changes that took place when she was serving communion because she could not hold communion elements. A TV tray in front of her supported the elements; her voice communicated that she was the one offering them to each one. Congregants had to learn that they were not "serving themselves" but that she was serving them through the use of her voice rather than through a physical gesture. Her own body broke open and multiplied one congregation's communion practice into other sacred possibilities. Such creativity unfolds when disabled leaders are not only present in worship spaces but also presumed competent and encouraged to reshape those spaces and practices as faithful stewards of tradition rather than perceived as those who disrupt or interrupt sacred traditions.

Consensual Worship through the Generosity of Invitation

Summoning such diverse practices of gathering the bodies of worshipers into a common space, I continue to learn new aesthetics for worship that involve more explicit opportunities for each one to say *yes* or *no* to the rituals unfolding among us and to perceive the many ways to participate. Let me explain how I've changed. When I fell in love with the study of liturgy as an adult, it was the poetry of it that captured me. This poetry required an economy of language, relying as much on gesture and symbol as on spoken words to support a community. As I perceived it, announcements and detailed introductions to services were laborious and took time away from the real worship of the people.

But in more recent years, as one who often gives an expansive welcome with detailed information about ways to participate in worship, I emphasize the generosity and beauty of ample instructions as a theology of consensual encounter with God. Such a welcome might gather in the one who needs to know they are welcome to sit, stand, or move about the room as the Spirit leads and the one who needs the option of a stim corner. Such instructions do not assume that each one can follow through a single form of communication but rather layer spoken words next to written ones on top of gestures in ways that some may feel redundant but that provide vital access for others. These explicit choreographies of worship make it plain that no one who gathers is an exception to a rule nor do they require a few of us to improvise our own ways into the liturgy because our access needs were not anticipated. Rather, consensual worship creates real options for each person present to say *yes* to any given practice. Thus, if in worship we say, "Stand if you are able," participants in worship have only been given an exception to a preferred practice rather than a real choice to participate in worship; the community has made an exception but not acknowledged and invited the participation of those who may sit. Encouraging those who gather "to sit or stand as the Spirit leads" offers more than one explicitly valued form of participation. If I am asked to close my eyes and bow my head, but I need to keep my eyes open in order to see my interpreter or read the lips of the one who is praying, then I have not been offered a way of worship that takes into account my body in connection with the bodies of worshipers around me. Inviting worshipers to "assume a comfortable posture of prayer, praying with eyes open or closed" affirms that keeping one's eyes open communicates as much reverence as closing them. Encouraging a community to share signs of peace in ways that respect differences in comfort with

being touched may also involve articulating options verbally or through the use of name tags: bowing, hugging, shaking hands, or asking your neighbor the ways they prefer to be greeted. Practicing consensual rather than coercive worship requires that leaders anticipate the range of ways that each one who gathers accesses common worship and continue to modify our invitations to participate as we learn more about practices and access needs of those with whom we worship.

The Institute on Theology and Disability names this multiplicity as a complex phenomenon, an emphasis that is reflected in their annual meeting guidelines. Those gathered for their annual conference are urged to remember that

> any presentation may include people with apparent or non-apparent disabilities who require access/support in areas such as: vision/seeing, audio/hearing, kinesthetics/moving, expressive communication and/or processing/understanding information presented. There are diverse levels of access/support needs, which means while two people might each identify as visually impaired, they may individually find different supports to be helpful or necessary.[4]

Such explicit naming of differences helps to imagine communication in worship as a complex and dynamic process, continually responsive to those who are present and anticipating those who might desire to join both in person and in online modalities.

Honoring the creativity of God's Spirit across multiple spaces in the same sanctuary also asks those who worship to honor the real embodied presence of those gathered across space and time, finding new ways to identify and welcome online worshipers to the creation of shared spaces. Livestream and recorded access to worship has helped some to imagine this multiplicity and freedom, anticipating alternate practices for those joining online and for those who are gathered in person while still honoring each one's participation. Recognizing that those who worship do so through a range of mediated forms of access—such as glasses, PowerPoint slides, electric lights, microphones, and musical instruments—frames the use of livestream and recording technologies as one modality of technological access among many. While screens may be a form that makes it harder for some to feel connected to other worshipers, others are vitally connected to spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible. Disability communities often emphasize real connections made with those accessing worship through online mediums as an equally meaningful form of communion rather than as a lesser or nonideal form.

The poetry of the liturgy includes instructions that chart diverse options and choreographies for participants. These might take place at the start of a service but also punctuate our bulletins and slides. Such maps for participation might also be woven throughout a service: a reminder before passing the peace to seek consent in practices of touch or an invitation for live streamers to also participate during a time of greeting or testimony. My conversations with disabled Christians have emphasized the significance of clear and ample instructions for participation by recounting times when options were opaque or only one option was given. As one research partner explained,

> There are so many times where I love communion so much, but there are so many times where it is a really anxious experience for me. Pre-pandemic the community I was worshiping with most recently does communion by intinction every Sunday. And it's kind of a dimly lit sanctuary, and I don't super love standing in lines when I'm not sure if I can see the person in front of me. And so I would prefer to go up with someone, to have someone walk with me to get communion. In this particular setting I was usually going to church by myself. So it was always a fun game called "who am I going to find to ask to go up and get communion with me." There is just never a real communal sense of how to get that need met.

Composing clear instructions for multimodal participation, I reorient my approach to liturgical invitation by prioritizing worship not simply from the time when a community gathers but also through the "holy logistics" that make a gathering possible before the service begins. When disability activists remind me that "access is love,"[5] they also animate the planning, coordination, and logistics for services as acts of love: the careful choreographies of invitation that create and sustain the possibility of shared space. Disability communities also

regularly remind me that in such practices of sacred preparation, access is not simply a checklist of options nor a practice of perfectionism but rather an act of offering to God and a trust in the gathered ones to improvise and adapt when explicit options or preparations have not been made.

Interdependence through Conflict and Collaboration in Worship

When I broach a theology and practice of consent in worship with others, I find that attention to human need appears to some as a distraction from an explicit focus on God, particularly as the adjudication of a range of human needs in worship often feels impossible. Multiplying options in a space ostensibly amplifies the freedom of some worshipers while also decreasing a feeling of connection to one's neighbor for others. If my neighbor is standing while I am sitting or fidgeting while I am silent, or drawing while I am speaking, might that not remove me from the ones with whom I breathe and move in unison and also divert from the one to whom I pray? Yet attending to the witness of Christians who gather in spaces where they do not assume the privilege of a liturgy that has been shaped by and for bodies like theirs has revealed the social artistries and Spirit-led discernment that becomes possible when some of us relinquish our preferences so that others might become co-creators of worship spaces.[6] For if Christian worship invites those who worship together to imagine and rehearse the future that God desires for God's people, a future that imagines the flourishing of all creation, then new choreographies can also help worshipers practice this manifold and sometimes disorienting approach to God's presence in fresh ways.

Of course, anticipating a multiplicity of bodies and relationships in worship may also feel constrained by the limits of a particular space and time: how can a single space be quiet and noisily exuberant, multisensory and low-sensory? Yet even here those of us who haven't been practicing such modalities can learn from those of us who have: for disability centering communities have long fostered the navigation of multiple access needs not by assuming that all needs can be met perfectly or uniformly but that they all be considered worthy of time, attention, negotiation, and collaboration. Rather than assuming a utopian gathering where bodies fit together perfectly with others, disability communities demonstrate the co-creation of shared spaces as a collaborative work that anticipates tensions that emerge from divergent access needs. For example, in the Institute on Theology and Disability's annual meeting guidelines, invitations to multiply forms of participation in a shared space also anticipate that some of our needs may conflict with the needs of others:

> Please attend to the needs of your body in this space. Move, lie down, sit, fidget, stim, switch seats, vocalize, rock, leave, use the toilet (wash your hands), get water/coffee/food, etc. In short, respond to yourself as needed without fear that you are being disruptive. If you find that you need to move to a different location within the room to avoid conflict with another participant (such as one needing to stim vocally and another needing quiet in order to focus), please feel free to do so quietly. We are a diverse community and everyone's needs matter, so we will covenant to work together to establish a room in which everyone is welcome.[7]

God's promise to be with those of us who have experienced oppression and alienation in worship means that attending to such experiences can itself be an encounter with the presence of God.

In addition, anticipating and making explicit such tensions and conflicts summons those who worship to distribute the resources of a worship space more equitably so as to recognize that each one has a humanity worth offering to God. Negotiating differences in access to communal worship may also help congregations prioritize the access of some over the preferences of others and reorient budgets to reflect those priorities. Recognizing structural inequities can help to center those of us whose access needs are often ignored, disbelieved, or minimized. But to reorient worship in this way invariably requires hard conversations and a desire to be transformed by those with whom we pray. In this way, worship spaces become not only shared spaces of consent to the differences of those who gather but also resistance to forces of ableism that honor some of us and denigrate others. Sacred spaces are understood in relationship to times and places outside of worship spaces and to experiences of oppression that some members experience not only in congregations but also in schools, grocery stores, doctors' offices, on public transportation,

and in public parks. What might it mean to practice our sacred spaces as sanctuary from ableism rather than as complicit in practices where some bodies continue to matter more than others? Can those who worship together imagine and extend the abundance of God with one another?[8]

Conclusion

Before or after the stories, the Scripture, the prayers, and the slideshow, there was always a meal at my grandmother's house. The meal had abundant options for food and drink, articulated by the women of the family in detail before the start of the meal. We circled around various tables, with different ways of accessing our common relatedness yet still gathered in the *togetherness* of the moment. Sometimes when I summon students, staff, and faculty for a communion rehearsal, I invoke the preparations and instructions for such a family feast, urging our worship leaders not to see the logistics of the meal as a burden or a checklist to get through as quickly as possible, but as a love song to a family gathered and to our knowledge of the many ways our extended kin need and desire access to this common prayer and meal. In this context, we seek to honor those who experience God's presence by coming forward to drink from a common cup or from an individual plastic cup as well as all who stay seated to partake in the meal. We recognize those who participate in this meal through a blessing instead of eating, and those worshiping from their homes and offices, who have gathered their own elements. In all these ways, we who serve communion become co-creators with God's Spirit present in and across our varied forms of participation, inviting us to map anew the shape and feeling of the sacred spaces in which we worship through the unity *and* diversity of our practices. We trust the God who has succeeded in gathering us to keep us together for a while by making provisions for each one to be nourished, and we partner with the Spirit of the risen Christ, the disabled God, to make it so.

Notes

1. By ableism I indicate the systematic preference for non-disabled bodies that results in structures and systems that benefit some of us over others.
2. Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 109.
3. We anticipate this worship book will be available in the summer/fall of 2025. Those interested in receiving updates about publication should contact the author.
4. "Accessible Presentation Guidelines," Institute on Theology and Disability, Boston College, June 2024.
5. See for example this entry in *The Disability Visibility Project*, https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2019/02/01/access-is-love/.
6. I offer an extended meditation on these social artistries and collaborations in "Unfolding Space: Human Difference in Common Worship," *Call to Worship* 51, no. 3 (2018).
7. "Accessible Presentation Guidelines," Institute on Theology and Disability, Boston College, June 2024.
8. I offer an example of this within a specific congregation in "Disabling Eschatology: Time for the Table of Our Common Pleasure," *Liturgy* 31, no. 3 (2016).

Joel Schoon-Tanis, *Eat Up Evryone!* Acrylic on paper, 20" x 24"

Explorations of Nature and Neurospicy Childhoods: Moving from Inclusion to Justice in Spaces of Worship

Kiara Jorgenson

Worship finished and I stepped into the light-filled narthex. With the postlude still swelling in air, a parent caught me on the way out. "Weren't the stars a great idea? My son never sits still and pays attention in worship, but he was happy to cut and paste shapes for an hour!" I nodded in agreement, and then wondered about her son. What is worship typically like for him, when he's not flanking the altar with paper constellations to remind us of God's covenant with Abraham?

To the extent that societal indicators tell us some things about the people in the pews, the church is an increasingly neurodiverse place. Our faith communities include many folx whose brains attend in unique ways, and research shows this is especially true among the young. Compared to their parents and grandparents, children and youth of Generations Alpha and Z are far more likely to identify with one or more of the diagnoses increasingly referred to as forms of neurodiversity.[1] They most commonly include autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, nonverbal learning disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Tourette syndrome, and a variety of mood and personality disorders.

With this in mind, how must Christian communities reimagine worship? Along with Erin Raffety, I believe today's church is called to become not only a welcoming and inclusive community for all children, but a just one.[2] In this essay I explore one piece of what it takes to live into this vision—providing access to nature and natural elements in the context of child-attentive worship. Regular exposure to embodied and elemental experiences greatly benefit neurodivergent children. When churches commit to centering embodied and elemental practices, children who are frequently on the fringes can lead from their strengths and help the church experience the presence of God in new ways.

A Brief Word on Neurospiciness

Since sociologist Judy Singer coined the term in 1998, neurodivergence has been widely accepted in disabled communities and now generally refers to the unification of advocacy movements representing people with atypical neurological conditions like those mentioned above. In coining the term, Singer drew inspiration from the field of ecology and the concept of biodiversity. On earth, variety of life is critical. At the genetic, species, and ecosystems levels, life thrives under conditions of difference. When things get homogenized, too "typical," biological systems destabilize, and needed ecological services cannot be performed. Likewise, Singer claims neurodiversity increases the resilience and efficacy of human communities. The more diversity of minds is recognized, respected, and facilitated into culture the more stable, adaptable, and sustainable that culture will be.

The lens of neurodiversity should therefore be understood as part of a wider trend away from obsessions with norms, pathologies, and cures toward an optimistic view of human difference based on potential strengths and questions of how to enhance flourishing. In the last two decades the field of psychology has shifted away from a medical model focused on deficits toward a strength-based model that considers optimal psychological functioning. The recent change is most evident in the subfields of positive psychology and positive youth development. Dr. Pamela Ebstyne King's team at the Thrive Center of Fuller Seminary suggest youth be

Kiara Jorgenson, Ph.D., is an associate professor of religion and environmental studies at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

viewed as resources for ongoing development rather than problems to be solved. This sentiment provides a sharp contrast to the meaning of the term "mental health," which defines psychological health by the absence of pathology (e.g., anxiety, depression) and reflects the traditional deficit bias within psychology. Consequently, psychological theory and research have expanded their focus from solely being problem-oriented towards being strength-based.[3] Many within the autistic community see the ongoing shift from divergence as deficit to strength beginning with one of their own, Jim Sinclair. His 1993 essay "Don't Mourn for Us" challenged dominant parent-centric narratives wherein autism was presented as a reality to grieve and a problem to mitigate. In his work Sinclair replaced such foci with first-person accounts from the autistic community, insisting that one's neurological disability(ies) are never separate from one's identity. "Autism isn't something a person *has*, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside," he asserts. "There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is *pervasive*; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence."[4]

To lift up the ways exceptional minds enliven our communities, I often use the stand-in word "neurospicy," a term of endearment increasingly common among neurodivergent social influencers.

To lift up the ways exceptional minds enliven our communities, I often use the stand-in word "neurospicy," a term of endearment increasingly common among neurodivergent social influencers.[5] In this essay I do so from a position of strategic essentialism and accept the risks related thereto.[6] I also use the term as a neurotypical mother of an autistic thirteen-year-old, well aware of the damaging effects of labels. "She's so spirited," some have said of my daughter. "What a little butterfly, here, there, and everywhere." And, "You'll have to curb the will of that one; she's a pistol." From libraries to grocery stores, parent groups to familiar congregational settings, strangers and friends offer these characterizations of my neurospicy child.[7]

This may be due in part to the cultural ways many U.S. citizens regard children. Developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik explains how most Americans view children as small persons en route to the destination of adulthood. Neurodivergence is therefore a roadblock of sorts. Gopnik and many who build upon her work within the child theology movement observe that when communities center adult experiences and perspectives, children's agency, moral capacities, and experiences are called into question.[8] Various forms of "adultism" reduce children to what they do rather than who they are and can therefore lead parents and caregivers to focus upon behavior with a critical eye for deficits. In *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology*, R. L. Stollar exposes this problematic mindset within the Christian tradition and demonstrates why so many "spirited" children are cast as subordinates, property, and even vipers to be controlled. Rather than seeing children as whom we wish them to be, Stollar argues we must understand children as image bearers here and now.[9] Theologically, this resonates with most Christian baptismal and dedication liturgies, wherein even the smallest are welcomed as full disciples of Christ and fellow workers in the kingdom of God. In principle, Christians believe this. Consider the commitments we make to children when they are dedicated, baptized, and confirmed. At these thresholds in Catholic and Protestant liturgies, adults affirm children's full membership in the body of Christ and promise to support them in their pursuit of God. In many cases pledges are made to not simply include children, but to also disciple them and for the adults themselves to grow as disciples by becoming more like children.

Naturally, plenty of alternatives to these problematic models of child-rearing exist.[10] But in my experience even those who regard my neurospicy child's will as something to respect rather than curtail injure us both with suspecting glances and pitying statements. "I can't imagine how hard it must be to be her mom; I'll pray for you and for her," or "I'm in awe of what you do for your daughter. You're amazing." As if I'm the valiant heroine while my daughter, the one constantly negotiating who she is to simply function in society, is the troublesome burden. These interactions are akin to what disabled scholar Amy Kenny calls "curative encounters" with "prayerful perpetrators." Commenting on her own experience with these types of conversations, Kenny says, "It's draining to endure, especially because the people who do this don't intend to cause us harm. They just haven't

Children learn by observing and practicing in real time, and in the case of worship by receiving encouragement and affirmation from within the larger faith community.

considered how the assumption that disability needs 'fixing' is dehumanizing."[11] Perhaps this is why many within the disabled community invite the larger community to consider vulnerability as inevitable and disability as normative. The illuminating question isn't *whether* a person is disabled. It's *when* in some capacity they will become so, and the extent to which they'll experience pressure to cope and conform to ableist expectations.

The Church's Mode: Inclusion through Accommodation

Christians worship a disabled God, and a disabled child-God at that.[12] Yet most of us remain wholly uncomfortable with the vulnerability that accompanies disability and the change of perspective it can bring. It's no wonder the proud temple-goers of Mark 2 couldn't abide the paralyzed man coming forth from the rooftop with his faithful friends in tow. The presence of his crip body prompted them to further examine their own vulnerability in the context of the worship.[13] In many sacred spaces neurospicy children are metaphorically greeted at the front door rather than lowered through the roof; that is, they are included. This is notwithstanding the fact that churches remain exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates and rarely have, let alone enact, formal accommodation processes. But as theologian Erin Raffety convincingly argues, inclusion isn't justice, and accommodations don't necessarily lead to belonging.[14]

Our Christian communities undertake many practices of inclusion through accommodation. We bring Holy Communion to homebound members, invest in better sound systems for the hearing impaired, and update spaces for greater mobility. And much more remains to be done, as scholars like Raffety and Kenny argue. The church also includes children through accommodation in the ways we worship with them (or perhaps more clearly the ways we *don't* worship *with* them). In my experience as a rostered leader in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) worshiping children are most often "accommodated" in three ways.

First, children and youth are regularly removed from corporate worship in the name of "child-friendly" programming. In some contexts children experience an altogether separate worship service and various modes of catechized entertainment in a church basement or alternative space. In other settings children leave worship before the quiet, sit-still part of the service. In both cases functional theologies of worship are child-centric rather than child-attentive. They focus upon the needs of the child over and above the needs of the community, and they separate the apprenticing children from their teaching elders. This is unfortunate because children learn by observing and practicing in real time, and in the case of worship by receiving encouragement and affirmation from within the larger faith community.[15]

Another example of inclusion through accommodation is the kiddy bag phenomenom. Churches purchase and bag all sorts of gadgets, usually cheap and made of disposable plastic, to help children "make it through the service." Most often the bags are not child-attentive; they don't give children the resources they need to learn about worship or practice engaging in it, let alone the tools to creatively shape it. Kiddy bags distract. To the exasperated mother who caught me in the narthex I want to ask, is this a solution for your son, or is this simply kicking the can? Do we really expect so little when it comes to children's experience in sacred spaces?

Third, more congregations now dedicate space within sanctuaries as a play area, sometimes referred to as "praygrounds." In these spaces children create, explore, and play in self-directed ways. Sometimes the "prayground" is curated with components linked to the service, such as Abraham's stars in my congregational context. Thanks to busy, little hands the stars were as plentiful as the Patriarch's descendants. Other praygrounds are spaces for children to playact the liturgy. I recently saw a progressive example of this in Linköping Cathedral, Sweden. Adjacent to the altar was an identical mini altar with felted Eucharist elements, a wee baptismal font, small albs, board-book hymnals, and dolls. As worship took place, children could mimic and make meaning from the community experience.[16]

All three of these practices seek to honor children.

Whether by separating people or space, each attempts to include through accommodation. But, all three do so from a neurotypical perspective, and none seriously consider the role of nature in the spiritual questing of the child. First of all, each option provides children few opportunities to move in undirected ways. Yet studies show that all children, and especially the neurospicy, benefit from pedagogical elements like shared action, agency in movement, and elements of delight and surprise.[17] Second, whether directly or indirectly, all three examples ask children to auditorily receive information from adults rather than be tapped as a source of it. It's important to remember that receptive language is challenging for many neurospicies. To listen is to hear, understand, process, and interpret. For those who have underdeveloped theories of mind or brains that prioritize visual or tactile information, this form of engagement is tantamount to exclusion. Yet another problem with these models is the social rigidity they present. In the case of removing children from spaces of worship and placing them into settings like Sunday school classes, group selection is usually made by way of age or school grade rather than by learning style or needs. Rarely are children or their caregivers given a choice about these social groupings, and few opportunities are granted for mixed-age mentorship. Even in the latter two examples, where children can choose to participate, socialization isn't fluid. Children cannot easily opt in or out in the moment, a kind of nimbleness required by many neurospicies. And for those desirous of social connection, preference should be given to one-on-one encounters and/or small groups, given that most neurospicy folx report increased anxiety in large-group gatherings.[18] In the context of worship, we can move from inclusion to justice by granting children more agency in how and when they choose to group.

In the case of removing children from spaces of worship and placing them into settings like Sunday school classes, group selection is usually made by way of age or school grade rather than by learning style or needs.

Why Nature?

Incorporating nature and nature access into spaces of worship helps meet some of these needs. But what's more, because nature access plays a critical role in the well-being of neurodivergent children, infusing nature and natural elements in worship builds belonging and empowers neurospices to shape liturgies in authentic ways.[19] With Catherine Bell I affirm that the logic of ritual is always inscribed into the body. Liturgy must come from the body.[20] All bodies, typical and not.

Our bodies need nature. This is not a new idea. Poets and philosophers of old understood this, and contemporary science supports the claim. All brains have what Richard Louv calls "nature neurons." Our nervous systems are built to resonate with set points derived from the natural world.[21] The late E.O. Wilson, champion of the Biophilia Hypothesis, saw humans' innate and hereditary need to emotionally affiliate with other living organisms as a natural consequence of biocultural evolution; learning rules were inaugurated and fine-tuned by an adjustment of sensory thresholds. At the genetic level connection to the natural world, ranging from affects like attraction to aversion, enhances survival and reproductive fitness. Add to this humans' strong tendency to translate feelings into narratives and all of the necessary conditions exist to showcase human need for nature in channels such as art, literature, and religion.

If this is true, why do so many humans spend less time outside than ever? Why have screens, for example, replaced nature in our homes, schools, and spaces of worship? Psychologist Paul Atchley suggests we've undergone a currency shift. Whereas throughout 99.9 percent of evolutionary history humans have thrived by deeply attending to place, today's attention economy bombards our nervous systems. We can't take in a fraction of the information presented to us.[22] Atchley goes on to explain how most connections in our brains are inhibitory functions, little on-and-off switches to help us filter and focus on what's important. As a species we process slowly; our directed attention is limited. When this precious resource is tapped, we burn up oxygenated glucose from the prefrontal cortex of the brain to fuel ongoing cognitive and physical performance. In this age of distraction our brains fatigue and require restoration.

Emergent neuroscience also shows how the prefrontal cortex of neurodivergent brains usually differs in size and/or in function. For neurospicies this brings both benefits and challenges. On

the upside, because most neurodivergent people experience overwhelm regularly, they tend to be more adept at recognizing it and leveraging strategies to address it. Ask most verbal neurospicy adults how they regulate and I can almost guarantee they'll have a thoughtful answer for you. On the other hand, this biological reality usually makes neurospicies less pliable and therefore more likely to experience acute forms of mental exhaustion. For this reason, practices and techniques related to the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) are gaining more attention in neurodivergent communities.

Popularized by University of Michigan scientists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, the ART hypothesis builds upon Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis and submits that sustained access to nature restores cognitive performance and executive function.[23] Gradually, it is possible, with sustained access to nature, for fatigued brains to be restored. Roger Ulrich, the Kaplans' student, added a dimension to this study. His Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) investigates how nature access immediately benefits people by lowering cortisol levels in the bloodstream, impacting not only cognition, but also emotional and physiological health.

Studies related to ART and SRT are ongoing, and some show promise for how science might better support disabled communities. What is clear from existing literature are two things: (1) any amount of nature access aids neurospicy brains, whether five minutes of exposure or a multi-day immersion; and (2) nature access doesn't have to include direct access to the real thing. While not a substitute for the real thing, indirect or perceived forms of nature such as nature images, recordings of birdsong, faux plants, and diffused indoor scents give the brain respite and can help atypical nervous systems recover and heal.

So how might these scientific insights shape our spaces of worship and our practices within them? And specifically, how might access to nature and the incorporation of natural elements meet the needs of neurodivergent children? I'll conclude with a brief menu of suggestions but encourage the reader to carefully consider context when applying any of these practices. Physical and social landscapes should be honored. What works in the boreal forests of Minnesota won't necessarily work in the high desert of New Mexico and what works for some children won't work for others. For example, a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder might greatly appreciate digging their hands through a sensory table full of dirt when a preaching passage focuses on the land, but such an opportunity could incite disgust in another child living within the autism spectrum. What's key is that church leaders proactively create avenues for neurospicies and their families to share their experiential knowledge, needs, and ideas when it comes to what worship could be.

Practical Suggestions toward Child-Attentive, Neurospicy-Positive Liturgies

Considerations Related to Worship Space

- Wherever possible, blur the lines between outside and inside. In mild climates, consider ways an indoor worship space might open up to outdoor spaces.
- Create "childlife corridors" by arranging seating in patterns that mimic nature (curves, circles, spirals, starbursts) and afford children easy spaces for entry and exit. For inspiration visit the Biomimicry Institute's design website.
- Provide opportunities for children to connect with Earth by sitting, laying, and sprawling out on the ground. Use mats, cushions, and pillows to create worship dens. Provide a variety of flex seating wooden/cloth chairs in the sanctuary (i.e., rocking chairs, arches, hammocks) to meet proprioception needs.
- Simplify visual information on bulletins and screens; replace with images of nature.
- Rotate sensory inputs according to community needs.
    - Play recordings of birdsong and water during parts of the service. Use local soundscapes as much as possible.
    - Include a sensory table filled with natural materials linked to the liturgical or textual elements of the service, such as grains, flour, beans, seeds, grass cuttings, water, and snow.
    - Make optional barefoot service normative; create a space for shoes outside of the sanctuary.
    - Have church quilters make some weighted blankets with natural fabrics and keep them in an accessible basket within the worship space.
    - Diffuse oils; consider liturgical foci when choosing scents.
- Welcome children to change paraments and to decorate the worship space with natural elements. Do this during the service itself, with

local materials gathered by families.

- Replace seasonal plants like poinsettias and lilies with permanent ones! Over time welcome more plants into the space.[24] Regularly dedicate new plants as a part of the service and encourage watering as a part of Sunday morning rituals. Children can "plant parent" particular plants each week. This can be seasonal too, where original fast foods such as tomatoes, peas, and strawberries can easily be grown in pots. Invite children to harvest and eat during service.
- Add interactive running water to the worship space. Make a practice of children leading the congregation in a physical return to the water at certain times during the service.
- Keep a wonder bowl on or near the altar. Encourage children to bring things from the natural world (with some guidance on ethical collection), and physically include these artifacts when expressing gratitude in community prayers.
- Honor the presence of feast days in the Hebrew Bible by hosting congregational soup Sundays. Invite the congregation to contribute one simple vegetable during offering and give children space and tools to prepare ingredients (peel, cut, etc.) for a community meal immediately following worship.
- Take on occasional "Empty the Sanctuary" or "Elemental" Sundays. Take on an all-weather approach by providing the necessary gear (e.g., umbrellas, blankets, rainsuits for kids, etc.).

Considerations Related to Liturgical Patterns

- Pray for creation with tactile opportunities for children to touch and hold items such as leaves, seeds, water, dirt, etc.
- Emphasize the elemental in sacraments and ordinances. Invite families to fill the baptismal font with water from their homes or nearby creeks/waterways. Press/crush fruit from your region in a service and serve at communion. Invite bakers in your congregation to bring a loaf of bread and ask children to help cut and serve it at communion.
- Use natural elements such as charcoal pencils, plant-based paints, fish scales, and wool in a worship playground. Welcome older youth to draw, paint, create what they imagine while listening to the sermon and share their art near the end of the service.

- Connect preaching/teaching themes or liturgical seasons with nature-based learning. For example, bring in a root viewer to better understand biblical tree metaphors or care for caterpillars/chrysalises and then release butterflies on Easter morning.
- Hold services at different times (morning, late nights, etc.). Elements of surprise and newness will delight many neurospicies and afford everyone the opportunity to learn more about the place.
- Meet in alternative spaces within your biome. Ensuring accessibility for all, worship in prairies, forests, deserts and alongside lakes, rivers, and oceans. Spaces can be simple and near. Consider abandoned lots, nearby parks, or a parishioner's backyard. Backyard worship could be done in dispersed small groups, taking place concurrently in many different locations.
- Take the passing of the peace outside and allow for time needed. If this can't happen regularly, dedicate time for this practice at particular times in the liturgical year.
- Connect children/youth education with seasonal worship planning. Regularly use children's litanies, prayers, and songs in worship. Examples might include litanies for the insects in May when pollination is in full effect, or prayers for the rest/hibernation of creatures during Advent.

Considerations beyond Worship Spaces

- If your congregation has land and outdoor play materials for children, do what you can to encourage neighboring families to access the land. Consider having some young families in your congregation lead monthly play-ins on your property.
- Many families feel intimidated by camping because they don't have the necessary gear and are unable to purchase it. Dedicate some organizational resources to camping gear swaps and/or outdoor gear share lists. Make it possible for families to borrow gear from the church.
- Much like occasional community dinners, plan simple camping trips at a nearby state park.
- If possible, consider the purchase of a shared cottage/getaway to be used by families for nature retreats. Endow the upkeep and cost of utilities.

This is just a sampling of practices. Clergy and worship leaders might consider curating a list with colleagues that are more specific to place and discerning with regards to context. In the work of shared ministry the take-away is this—Christian churches must move beyond merely including children through accommodating them. As full bearers of the image of God and siblings in Christ, children should be empowered to shape spaces of worship. Neurodivergent children will be more empowered to do so when granted greater access to nature and natural elements. For the church to become a radical place of belonging for all children, we must therefore learn to intentionally nurture our great need for nature.

Notes

1. Recent studies show that 30 percent of Americans under the age of thirty identify as neurodivergent, compared to 6 percent of those over the age of sixty-five. For more insights see John Hopkins University's https://imagine.jhu.edu/blog/2022/10/05/neurodivergence-at-a-glance/ (last accessed on December 1, 2024) and You Gov's https://today.yougov.com/health/articles/50950-neurodiversity-neurodivergence-in-united-states-19-percent-americans-identify-neurodivergent-poll (last accessed on December 1, 2024). An equally enlightening resource is the public Neurodiversity Reddit community at https://www.reddit.com/r/neurodiversity/?rdt=64522 (last accessed on December 1, 2024).
2. Erin Raffety, *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022).
3. For additional insights see Joanna Leidenhag and Pamela Ebstyne King, "Neurodiversity and Thriving: A Case Study in Theology-Informed Psychology," in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36, no. 4 (2023): 827–843.
4. See Sinclair's full essay at https://philosophy.ucsc.edu/SinclairDontMournForUs.pdf (last accessed December 1, 2024).
5. I first came to this riff on neurodivergence from Christian Instagramer and ADHD-identifying Mary Ann Geffen. See https://www.maryvangeffen.com/about (last accessed on December 1, 2024).
6. In the late 1980s Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak championed the concept of strategic essentialism, which was later adopted by some feminist and postcolonial thinkers. Those who use the framework accept the risks of temporarily reducing or essentializing persons in terms of certain names or definitive qualities in order to accomplish some desired good. In her 2011 article "Attending to Children. Attending to God"

(*Journal of Childhood and Religion* 2, no. 7 (November 2011): 1–38), Joyce Mercer outlines the risks of strategic essentialism well. The same concerns apply in this case, as the language of "divergent" or "spicy" can connote that ideas of physical, psychological, and cognitive sameness are desirable. To advocate for children who are not justly welcomed in mainstream worship environments, I accept the risks of an essentialist term like "neurospicy" and follow the lead of disabled scholars in its use.

7. Others have studied and documented the parental experience in ecclesial settings. To better understand the loneliness of many parents raising neurospicy children, see Laura MacGregor and Alan Jorgenson's "Beyond Saints and Superheroes: A Phenomenological Study of the Spiritual Care Needs of Parents Raising Children with Disabilities," in *The Canadian Journal of Theology, Mental Health and Disability* 3, no.1 (Spring 2023): 25–38.
8. For a good introduction to Gopnik's work, see *The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us about the Relationship between Parents and Children* (New York: Picador, 2016). For a recent, excellent primer on the child theology movement, see Marcia Bunge's *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (New York: Orbis, 2021). Many more resources are reviewed at https://childtheologymovement.org/resources-reviews/ (last accessed December 1, 2024).
9. R. L. Stollar, *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023).
10. When my children were young, a favorite, respectful parenting resource was Janet Lansbury's *Unruffled* podcast. Read more at https://www.janetlansbury.com/2015/08/respectful-parenting-podcasts-janet-lansbury-unruffled/ (last accessed December 1, 2024). A good collection of like-minded resources for parents guiding children across ages can be found at https://www.fertilegroundparenting.com/resources (last accessed December 1, 2024).
11. Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2022). Kenny, and other disability scholars like John Swinton, provides helpful overviews of the problematic associations many Christians hold in relation to disability. They include disability in association with sin (on the part of the person or their parents), concepts of virtuous suffering, negative and segregationalist views on disability and charity, oppressive readings of the healing miracles, and bias against disabled people receiving ordination. To read more on Swinton's perspectives see *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of People with Mental Health Challenges* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020) and "Who Is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities" in *International Journal of Pastoral Theology* 14, 273–307.
12. Nancy Eisland's seminal work in 1994, *The Disabled God* (Abingdon Press), first normalized such theological claims. Lisa Powell's recent work, *The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation* (T&T Clark, 2023), is another important contribution within disability theologies. Neither work spends much time reflecting upon Jesus the child, but both articulate arguments that require such a christological view.
13. "Crip" is a shorthand, reclaimed term for the historically derogatory word "crippled." It is celebrated and widely used by disabled scholars. To learn more visit the University of Minnesota's Critical Disability Studies Collective at https://cdsc.umn.edu/cds/terms#:~:text=Crip:%20A%20term%20used%20historically,meet%20disabled%20bodies%20and%20minds.%22 (last accessed December 1, 2024).
14. In her lecture "From Inclusion to Justice: On Lamenting Injustice, Repenting from Abelism and Amplifying Disabled Flourishing" at the 2023 Institute on Theology and Disability, Raffety names this reality and makes helpful distinctions between polite gestures versus just accommodations.
15. Even secular parenting books are noting the need for children to learn alongside elders, not separate from them. In her best-selling book *Hunt, Gather, Parent: What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lost Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans* (New York: Avid Readers, 2021), scientist and journalist Michaeleen Doucleff explains the difference between children receiving acknowledgment in a mainstream familial/communal environment versus receiving praise in a child-focused activity. "Acknowledgment from parents fuels the child's interest in a task . . . it gives the child motivation to help more. A child sees that their contribution matters and they're helping the family. That's more powerful than any praise" (p. 113).
16. The spiritual benefits of playacting is carefully documented and superbly demonstrated in the work of the late child theology movement leader Jerome Berryman. Founder of Godly Play, Berryman's writings and resources can be accessed free of charge on the Godly Play Foundation's website: https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/ (last accessed on December 1, 2024).
17. Audrey Rivers and Lyn Litchke's "Spirituality, Friendship, and ADHD: Implications for Inclusion in Recreation," in *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 7 (2017) provides greater insight into these important pedagogical elements. The aforementioned article by Joyce Mercer is also useful.
18. For greater insight into autistic learners in particular see Nola Norris's "How Does My Student Learn?

Reimagining Church: The Gifts and Challenges of Online Ministry

Erina Kim-Eubanks

A ninety-year-old church elder reads a Sunday Call to Worship while her cat appears from offscreen and walks across her Zoom box, landing contentedly in her lap.

A cacophony of voices—young and old—unmute to sing the doxology together with a glorious, slightly off-key, digital delay.

A Zoom chatbox is filled to the brim with stories of both deep grief and delightful joys as people share their lives with one another during the prayers of the people.

Echoes of the words "the peace of Christ be with you" pass back and forth across the airwaves between voices from Zoom and dozens gathered in a church building.

A sanctuary swells with the sound of percussion—children shaking tambourines, adults hitting claves, elders clanging triangles—while a television screen on stage shows people on Zoom shaking tambourines and banging drums from home.

In May 2019, when my husband and I began a church revitalization process at Bethel Community Presbyterian Church in San Leandro, these were scenes of church worship I could never have imagined. Scenes I didn't even know could exist.

We arrived, as most eager church planters and revitalizers do, to an aging, fatigued community nearing closure—vaguely optimistic, cautiously hopeful, and completely uncertain of what the future would hold. Yet not even a year later, we saw our world and our church ministry turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the enactment of shelter-in-place orders and the fears and uncertainties surrounding a virus that literally filled the air, we had no choice but to move our ministry online, a move that was certainly not part of our church revitalization strategy.

Like thousands of other churches across the country, we learned the Zoom platform and how it could serve our community in our spaces of worship. We hosted phone call tutorials with elderly members on how to use new technologies. We held prayer meetings and Bible studies and midweek groups online. We organized trivia nights, game nights, and movie nights on Zoom. We figured out how to share in the Lord's Supper, to celebrate Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, all through a newly formed digital worship space.

And miraculously, we began to see the Spirit's work.

Through our intentional and strategic curation of Zoom spaces, we saw our ministry begin to thrive and quickly realized the potential of digital ministry. Experiencing church online together was not just a way to temporarily survive the pandemic, but an invitation to lead our church into the future. Here are just a few of the significant gifts that online ministry offered.

The Gift of Increased Accessibility

Online church offered us the gift of increased accessibility amidst traditional church structures that have often been marked by ableism and exclusivity. Digital church spaces helped us grant health and safety for the immunocompromised, giving those unable to risk exposure to viruses the ability to worship in community with others. Technological platforms also enabled accommodations like closed captioning and visual image descriptions to those with disabilities, those who would not normally have such options on a Sunday morning. It granted

Erina Kim-Eubanks (she/her) is a Korean-American pastor, writer, and justice seeker who loves reimagining church alongside her husband, Michael, daughters Amara and Jarena, and diverse faith family at Bethel Community in San Leandro, California.

parents with neurodivergent children the flexibility of being at church while still tending to their kids' unique needs. It even provided those with physical or geographic barriers, such as being in a wheelchair, having difficulties driving, or having moved to a new city, immediate access to a church space that they couldn't enter otherwise.

Experiencing church together online meant that our gatherings often included people in San Leandro, alongside people in Los Angeles, Denver, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn, and even in Spain, Hong Kong, and Taiwan! And we were not alone in this reality. Even today, with the height of the pandemic several years behind us, a Pew Research survey found that because of their access to online ministry, 34 percent of people attend church services they would otherwise be unable to attend.[1] The vast increase in digital ministry spaces over the past few years has coincided with a greater inclusion and accessibility of worship spaces for those whose needs previously may have been minimized or unattended.

Reshaped Participation

In addition to increased accessibility, digital services also offered us the potential for reshaping participation in church gatherings, especially Sunday worship services. The usual hierarchy of Sunday gatherings, reinforced by people at podiums elevated above the congregation, quickly became flattened in the digital plane. While a typical in-person service would involve everyone facing the stage, looking up at the speaker, Zoom gave us a window to see each other's faces on one shared screen together.

The urgent need for human connection in an isolating time was also partnered with the permission to be creative about Sunday gatherings, and we saw existing rituals and Sunday traditions become more participatory. Kitchen tables and pantry elements were transfigured into sites of grace during communion as we shared our diverse "bread" and "wine" items like pandan mochi waffle and sake, or tortilla chips and agua fresca, or coco bread and sorrel, or naan and chai. Each week, all participants were able to use the chat after the Passing of the Peace to introduce themselves and where they were joining in from in ways that wouldn't be possible in person. The chat also became a sacred space to hold each other during Prayers of the People, as it made sharing burdens and blessings easier for those more anxious about public speaking. Music times were no longer dominated by choirs and professional musicians but became accessible to all, as participants from young to old were invited to sing, to drum, and to play along, and the lack of pressure toward high production in music allowed us to be more experimental and introduce new songs. Sermons became much more interactive, as both the chat and breakout rooms allowed people to reflect, respond, and engage on a deeper level with the sermon.

This culture of increased participation also kick-started new rhythms of co-creation in our community. Having services online meant we could share our pulpit with guest preachers from anywhere, and we began hosting prophetic voices from communities all across the country and even across the world, greatly diversifying our platform for preaching.

This culture of increased participation also kick-started new rhythms of co-creation in our community. Having services online meant we could share our pulpit with guest preachers from anywhere, and we began hosting prophetic voices from communities all across the country and even across the world, greatly diversifying our platform for preaching. Moving online is also what engendered community rituals like our church's Gifts of the People testimonies during cultural heritage months, through which people shared important ancestors, historic figures, and artists from different cultures. It allowed for greater intergenerational community building, as we held Godly Play sessions for all members, young and old, and Jokes of the Little People segments on Holy Humor Sunday, during which our kids presented jokes to the community. It even initiated a Passions of the People series in the summer, where members of our community shared their vocational dreams and passions with us in TED-talk-like Sunday testimonies.

Ultimately, expanding our church's ministry to the digital space allowed us to let go of stale wineskins, on the brink of rupture, and inspired us to adopt new wineskins that were able to stretch and hold new kinds of ministry that the Spirit was

birthing. The newness of worshiping together on digital platforms became key to inspiring newness in other parts of our church revitalization.

The Gift of Redistributing Resources

Experiencing church in the digital space also offered us the gift of increased physical and financial resources, as decreased economic strains of constant building usage, material supplies for in-person gatherings, and hiring for Sunday morning staffing helped us accumulate a large financial surplus between 2020 and 2022. These resources, coupled with a new imagination around what church truly is and what the church building is for, allowed us to redistribute these resources toward a new vision for our material assets. For example, some of these surplus funds began to be redistributed toward community resourcing and neighborhood outreach, such as mutual aid funds, the construction of a micro housing village on our church site, and the development of our church as a hub for neighborhood resilience.

Additionally, the expansion of digital ministry in our church coincided with psychological and theological shifts, moving us away from seeing our church building as existing purely for Sunday worship services, to seeing our church as a center of community resourcing and resilience.

Additionally, the expansion of digital ministry in our church coincided with psychological and theological shifts, moving us away from seeing our church building as existing purely for Sunday worship services, to seeing our church as a center of community resourcing and resilience. With this shift, we were able to think creatively about how to serve and bless our neighbors and began expanding our capacity to do so. In the height of the pandemic, we saw our community food pantry feeding three hundred people on a weekly basis. We partnered with a local climate justice nonprofit to not only build a community garden that feeds and greens our community, but also host community education and listening projects around climate resilience.

Thus, moving our ministry from a purely in-person church to a hybrid community that included both online and in-person ministry allowed us to expand our imagination for church being more than just a physical building. The alternative uses of our physical campus, allowed by hosting more of our community gatherings online, helped us to de-center in-person Sunday worship services in the life of our community, and helped expand both our imagination and capacity to not just "host" church but to "be" the church in our neighborhood and beyond.

(Un)expected Growth

The surprise blessings of online ministry not only helped us to survive during the pandemic, but also helped us to reimagine church through it. Through God's grace and the Spirit's creativity, our church revitalization happened hand in hand with the transformation of our church into a hybrid community.

As we intentionally created an online Sunday gathering that built human connection and addressed the problems of our world, we began attracting many new people, especially young adults and young families. As we used our social media platform to speak out about injustice, police violence, racial uprisings, and Asian hate crimes, we saw many queer and BIPOC individuals find refuge in our community. As our pastors were invited to speak on several different podcasts, we reached a new wave of people from a range of geographic locations, most of whom we had no previous connection with. As we held discussion groups, Bible studies, and book groups online, we were able to dive into conversation more deeply, with greater room to acknowledge the diversity of temperaments, communication styles, and speed of processing through Zoom.

Through it all, we saw our church grow more than sevenfold—from a community of about ten to fifteen people when we first arrived, to over a hundred adults and more than thirty children now a regular part of the community. We added thirty-six new members to our church member rolls and have seen dozens more attend our gatherings on a regular basis. And we were amazed that up to 20 percent of those who joined our community were people who didn't live within fifteen miles of our church building but were people who lived farther away, even in other parts of the state and country.

While many churches were struggling and in decline due to the pandemic, we saw online ministry as a tremendous gift that not only helped contribute to church growth but also helped us reimagine what church is and can be. This discovery corresponds with a Pew Research study that found that "32 percent of those worshiping in hybrid fashion were growing by at least five percent since 2019, whereas only six percent of those only in-person . . . had grown."[2] Moving our church into a hybrid reality has changed both the makeup and the trajectory of our community. There's no turning back from it.

Challenges Ahead: Embracing Hybrid Church

The need to shift to online ministry during the pandemic was in many ways a blessing in disguise. And rather than quickly "going back to normal" and returning to the same forms and structures of church that we had before the pandemic, our community has thoughtfully considered both the invitations and the questions that online ministry during the pandemic presented to us:

- How do we continue to be a community that is accessible for all our members, inviting participation and co-creation?
- How do we continue to shape structures that serve us rather than the other way around?
- How do we continue to think of church as more than just a building that hosts church gatherings but a community asset?
- How do we also balance digital and embodied presence as we try to actually build community in this new season of church life?

With these questions in mind, we opened up in-person gatherings again in the spring of 2021, yet we tried to be intentional about the choices we made. While many churches jumped back quickly into weekly, in-person Sunday services, abandoning their online spaces entirely or opting for a livestream which led to a second class of people who simply "viewed" a service, we instead sought to embrace a truly hybrid church structure. By considering both the needs of our community and our unique capacity, we intentionally chose to meet twice a month in a fully hybrid form, with people having access to worship together in the building on Sundays, as well as people on Zoom who were still given access to full participation and engagement in our service rather than spectating. The other Sunday gatherings in the month remained fully on Zoom, for all the ways it continued to serve our community.

Beyond our Sunday gatherings, we also began to host more in-person gatherings for connection and formation, such as community hikes, game nights, parent meetups, seasonal celebrations, and more. We launched a number of monthly regional gatherings in people's homes, allowing people to meet regularly by geographic region for in-person connection. Yet we also kept most of our midweek formation groups online, for greater accessibility and convenience, along with our monthly committee meetings, session meetings, and other regular gatherings.

All of these intentional choices in pursuing a hybrid model of church have not been without challenges.

There are some clear limitations to both worship services and community gatherings that are exclusively online. As a study by COVID Religion Research found, the increased accessibility of online spaces sometimes also results in decreased levels of connection and engagement. For example, a 2022 study found that only 28 percent of people experiencing church online feel a strong connection with those attending in person. And the same study found that 61 percent of those watching a worship service on a screen do *not* do the things they would normally do when attending in person, such as praying out loud, singing, or kneeling.[3]

Moreover, a continued challenge of our church community—particularly one with mostly people who have been at the church for two years or less—has been trying to foster relationships and build community when our in-person gatherings are not as frequent. Many of our in-person attendees have noted that missing a hybrid church service or even a monthly regional gathering means they don't get to see other church members for an entire month. They continue to express a desire for deeper connection, friendship, and relationship, while struggling in their busy lives to find time and space for gathering. In the last year, there's also been some attrition of our faraway people, as people who love our community have finally made the hard choice to try and find a church in which they can have some local and embodied relationships. The craving for in-person connection is often unsatisfied in a hybrid community, and important questions remain about both the theological and anthropological significance of embodiment in a digital age.

However, as we hold these tensions and continue to move forward into uncharted territory, I am hopeful for the ways that online ministry will help guide our church and other churches into the continued reimagining of church. Just as the unexpected emergence of online ministry through the pandemic helped catalyze both new imagination and new structures for our community, I am hopeful that our ongoing transition to hybrid ministry will continue to stretch us to receive more new wineskins, expanding our vision of what's possible for church. I am hopeful for movements toward greater accessibility and inclusion in all of our church structures. And I am hopeful for the church at large to continue to stay alive through innovation and adaptation rather than grasping on to conventions that are approaching their death.

May we continue to keep our hearts soft and our spirits malleable to be stretched together in the act of reimagining church, for the story of God's people is always unfolding, no matter what forms and structures it takes.

Notes

1. Michelle Faverio, Justin Nortey, Jeff Diamant and Gregory A. Smith, "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular," Pew Research Center, June 2, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/06/02/online-religious-services-appeal-to-many-americans-but-going-in-person-remains-more-popular/.
2. Scott Thuma, "The Pandemic Church: Adapting to a Digital Culture and On Demand Context," Covid Religion Research, August 21, 2024, https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/the-pandemic-church-adapting-to-a-digital-culture-and-on-demand-context/.
3. Faverio, et al, "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans."

Joel Schoon-Tanis,
The Kingdum of Heaven is Awsum!
Acrylic on paper, 20" x 24"

Courage to Pray: Daily Prayer in Congregational Life

Karl Heimbuck

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

It was a short time into the pandemic when I first heard the opening sentences for the morning prayer liturgy in the *Book of Common Worship (BCW)*. A former seminary classmate invited me to join an online prayer group working to connect church musicians and pastors in that uncertain moment. I was intrigued. The only other time I had used the daily prayer liturgies in the *BCW* was my senior year in seminary when Dr. Martha Moore-Keish taught our Company of New Pastors cohort to chant the psalms in her living room as part of evening prayer.

Folks were gathering for prayer on Zoom in less than an hour from the time I had received that initial invitation. I was tied up in committee meetings, so I missed that time of prayer. I offered my apologies, and my classmate texted back, "We plan on doing this for a few more weeks at least, so if you can't join today, I can keep you in the loop." I asked her to keep me informed, and I'd see what my schedule held for the next week.

I serve as a solo pastor at a church in the northern Rocky Mountains. We are a rural community of about twenty thousand individuals in town and thirty thousand in the county. Ours is the one PC(USA) congregation in town. Further, we are an isolated community. We sit on a stretch of I-90 where it is at least an hour and a half drive in whatever direction you would desire to go if you would like to reach another community that is larger than a few thousand people. We have a Walmart, but the closest Target and Costco are each 130 miles away. Trader Joe's? Five hours each way. Stock up on those dark peanut butter cups when you have to make the trip to Denver.

My nearest PC(USA) colleague resides in Billings, Montana, where the previously mentioned Target and Costco are, and serves in a completely different presbytery. The geographic area for the presbytery in which I am a member is the entire state of Wyoming. The furthest I have ever driven for a presbytery meeting was 440 miles one way. Because of the sheer distance, our presbytery meets just twice each year, and many of our delegates opt for joining virtually. A former governor of Wyoming noted that the state is like a "small town with really long streets" because the degree of separation between most Wyomingites is one or two. When you meet someone new, you almost always know someone in common. But degrees of separation and deep connections are different sorts of relationships. As the isolating nature of the pandemic bore down in an already isolated area, I pined for some sort of connection.

A few days after that initial invitation to join the prayer group, my former classmate kept me in the loop as promised and encouraged me to make some time in my schedule for the next gathering. I joined, and what was initially meant to run for "a few more weeks at least" has turned into just about five years of gathering around the daily prayer liturgy. Moreover, it has been five years of finding connections in a way I could have only imagined as possible.

In the early days of our gatherings, participants would sign in from coast to coast. I recall one meeting where we covered all four time zones in the contiguous United States. There was wideness to both God's mercy and to our geographic boundaries. I thought my presbytery was a large space to gather people across. This was something else entirely! It

Karl Heimbuck is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Sheridan, Wyoming.

was clear that we were longing for deep connections and that in the moment of so much uncertainty prayer was among the best ways to do that.

The Brief Statement of Faith reminds us that "in a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing." The world has felt broken and fearful to me more often than not since I graduated seminary and took my ordination vows almost a decade ago. The spring of 2020 was one culmination of that combination, but I found, in addition to the comradery of our shared space, a distinct courage from the Spirit by praying with others in our group. It was the same bold sentiment I heard from a young couple in our own congregation when an elder asked them why they wanted to baptize their young child on the heels of a pandemic and with all the confusion they professed feeling in the complexity of daily living. "Given all that is happening in the world," the mother replied, "what else can we do?"

What else could we do in our little group but pray? Where else would we find courage? Most importantly, where else could we find hope? I learned quickly that the group would not be a sounding board for my petty gripes about folks who complained at every precaution we took. Scripted and thoughtful liturgy does not leave space for gripes, and that was what gathered us together. *The Book of Common Worship* notes that the purpose of morning prayer is to "give thanks for the gift of new life in Christ and seek God's grace for the day ahead."[1] I was in need of such grace, not gripes. I found that the group would not be a space to air our frustrations. If I was inclined toward griping, the liturgy encouraged me to go deeper, to think about what I was actually lamenting, and to identify the difference between complaint and lament.

The liturgy also shaped more profound connections between myself and the world. The connections with other church professionals were incredible, but when the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession within the liturgy lifted up different geographic regions of the globe, I could not help but think of the privileged resources my congregation had to keep us safely connected in some fashion. Our choir could figure out recording their parts individually, and our music director could patch those together to build an anthem for a virtual service. In praying globally with the liturgy, I was, oddly enough, reminded of the small churches in our presbytery down those long streets of the state, many without clergy, that would have loved to have any sort of music, not to mention a virtual service of their own.

There was a learning curve to figuring out how to adapt the morning prayer liturgy to an online gathering. This is true of any congregation's use of liturgy in any space. We learn where to place different pieces in the order of worship to reflect the tradition, comfort, and character of the worshiping body. We discover favorite hymns and the tempos a congregation is used to singing (usually because the same organist has played it for them for decades). We incorporate visual expressions of the liturgy where appropriate and possible within the worship space.

The morning prayer liturgy begins with the words with which I opened this article. Then, the order of worship prompts a morning psalm or hymn. It would have been easiest to speak this part, but the group was at least half musicians. How could we keep from singing? But how do you sing via Zoom? You might recall the SNL pandemic sketch "Zoom Church" where Keenan Thompson plays a pastor holding a virtual service and the congregants cannot figure out mute. A chorus of "Amens" makes the screen bounce around in a dizzying fashion from person to person. One woman steals the spotlight when her son turns up the volume on Sportscenter playing in the background and her microphone picks it up clearly for everyone else to hear. Thompson, as the pastor, boils with frustration until he tells everyone, "The Lord wants you to click the little microphone with the red line through it! Amen!?" But the sudden silence becomes as confusing to him as the noise was. Where did everyone go?

The same sorts of problems persisted with our music. If we played and sang, would we mute ourselves? If we did not, in addition to the screen jumping from participant to participant, nothing would line up. It is difficult to do things in sync on the platform simply because of the geography we celebrated. Distance creates lag no matter how near

The Brief Statement of Faith reminds us that "in a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing."

or far, and no Internet connections seem to be built equally. There is no clearer indication that you are not in the same physical space as when you try to sing in real time together on Zoom. Even those with musical prowess, of which there were plenty in the group, would not be able to keep matching time. Scripted liturgy has a lot of firewalls. That is not one of them.

Experimentation and the recording capacities of computers and even cell phones solved the issue. One musician could record a hymn in advance and play the recording during the service while we all muted and sang along. You could see that mouths were not singing the same words at the same time, but we were yet held together in the common song. In time, we would experiment with one person singing live as a cantor. This worked particularly well for chanting the psalms. Later, we would have an individual voice for the solo part of the chant and then one other leading the unison while others kept muted. Recently, we tried this with a drone incorporated through the Zoom audio to help all keep pitch, and it worked swimmingly.

Five years down the line and for me, the music shines as a part of the service. A plethora of musicians have taken a crack at leading this part of the service, so it is commonplace to hear something like a trombone medley accompanying one hymn while the next is a recording by a full choir. Sometimes I'll record a hymn accompanying myself with the guitar, and this will be paired with a traditional recording done on the organ. Once, another participant and I tried to provide all original music for the service and were able to collaborate both in the writing and the recording as we sent instrumental and vocal tracks back and forth via GarageBand.

Outside of the music, we had to be adaptable in the next piece of the order of worship, too: the Thanksgiving for Baptism. I have seen old church pews in homes and even offices but never a baptismal font. Many of us in those early days of COVID wished for some sort of communal worship in a sanctuary, and this piece of the liturgy was the starkest reminder that we were not in such a space. But then, one week, when one participant volunteered to take this piece of the service, I could see light reflecting off something made from glass at the bottom of their screen. When it came their turn to lead, they tipped the camera on their laptop down and revealed a glass pitcher and bowl. The slow pour of the water into the bowl was as sweet or sweeter than the music we had been figuring out. When the last drop had fallen and the slow sound of the water's movement had ceased, they said the familiar words, "The Lord be with you." As I replied, "And also with you," I was as sure of the Lord's presence as I had been in months.

The order of worship for the morning prayer liturgy begins with opening sentences which are followed by a morning psalm or hymn. The Thanksgiving for Baptism is offered, and then the service moves toward Scripture. Traditionally, a psalm is the first reading. Typically, this is offered in a responsive manner as dictated in the psalms printed in the *Book of Common Worship*. You may also chant the psalms as I learned to when first using the evening prayer liturgy.

Another reading or readings from Scripture follow the psalm. Our Zoom group has most often pulled these from the two-year cycle of daily readings, but there is no prescribed way to choose what to read. The response to Scripture is a period of silent reflection. Depending on who is sharing their screen and running the slides, the silence might be shorter or longer.

The reading of Scripture is followed by either The Benedictus (GTG #109 or PH 601–602) or another song before the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession are shared. The prayers end with the Lord's Prayer, and this is the one time in our group where everyone unmutes themselves and uses the version of the prayer closest to their heart as we all pray together. We do not end at the same time, but unity does not always dictate starting and stopping at the same time. A sending hymn then moves the liturgy into the words of dismissal. This sequence reflects the following order:

Opening Sentences
Morning Psalm or Hymn
Thanksgiving for Baptism
Psalm(s)
Scripture
Canticle or Hymn
Thanksgiving and Intercession
Dismissal

The simplicity of the service lends itself to adaptability across more platforms than Zoom. I want to now offer some ideas for how the liturgy might be used in a variety of ways within congregational life.

Sunday Service

Two times each year, our congregation does not livestream the Sunday service. One of these Sundays we are in the mountains worshiping without a reliable Internet connection or streaming hardware. The other Sunday we are sharing our favorite Christmas stories and do not have all the proper licensing to read those stories aloud over YouTube. It doesn't help the livestream cause for that Sunday that a host of our congregation is in their Christmas pajamas and would rather not be seen on camera. On these occasions, I use the daily prayer liturgy to record a service of prayer in advance for those who are unable to join worship in person those days. The order of worship is similar enough to what we do in Sunday worship that it provides familiarity, even though the length is typically fifteen to twenty minutes, and I have had congregants who say that they have a favorite prayer service or two from the few years we have done them that they will use regularly in their own prayer life because of its easy accessibility online.

The liturgy's use on a Sunday does not have to be bound to an online service, however, or used in its entirety. Its components could be used every Sunday, especially in churches without pastoral leadership. The prayers of thanksgiving and intercession from each day of the week could be used as the Prayers of the People on a seven-week rotation. If done, consider all that the congregation would pray for over that time: the church in distinct regions across the world, our stewardship of creation, the lonely and forgotten, the hurting and the dying, those in need of reconciliation, and all those who live their faith in service to others. Additionally, the congregation would give thanks for God's good work of healing and renewal in Christ and for music, people and their gifts, and the promise of hope for tomorrow, among other prayers of thanksgiving.

Because the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession from the daily prayer liturgy are so vast when considered as a whole unit, using them on a rotation could help diversify the congregation's prayers. We each have causes and people that occupy a lot, if not all, of the space in our hearts. Sometimes we need to be guided beyond those petitions (without forgetting them) so that we can see both the breadth of the need in the world and the breadth of God's loving response. Prayer is gentle enough to do that, and these prayers offer a reminder of the many ways people suffer, a call to respond to that suffering, and an inspiring list of the many things in our lives for which we should offer gratitude to God.

Finally, when we use components of the daily prayer liturgy in Sunday worship, we are reminded that we worship with the larger church. We do not have to be in the same place or even within earshot of one another to be connected. To utter the same words across space and time in joy and praise is to be the family of God across and through all space and time.

Midweek/Seasonal Worship

If your congregation has a midweek service, adds a midweek worship service during Advent and/or Lent, or wishes to do so, you might consider using the daily prayer liturgy for these services. The shorter and reflective nature of the liturgy adapts well to the longer nights of these liturgical seasons, and the Thanksgiving for Light (used in place of the Thanksgiving for Baptism) is a balm for congregations like ours that are further north.

Taizé services can make for nice midweek gatherings, especially during Advent and Lent, and I have found that many congregations use this style. The reflective chanting and long periods of silence can work well in these seasons. Where the Taizé style of worship relies on the repetitive nature of the sung word, however, the daily prayer liturgy uses the repetitive nature of the spoken word. If your congregation is not strong musically, the daily prayer liturgy might make sense. It may also be right for you if you desire those services to be focused around corporate prayer. The prayers of thanksgiving and intercession offer guided but spontaneous interaction in a way the sung Taizé chants do not when they ask, "People of God, for what else do you give thanks?" and "for what else do you pray?"

Within Studies and Meetings

Each time I lead a study, we open with prayer. Typically, that prayer is fairly short, but it doesn't have to be. A study could begin by using the opening sentences and thanksgiving for baptism/light as its gathering words. This could even be followed by a psalm and silence before moving to the Scripture passage, other reading, or whatever else is being considered for discussion. Grounding the time together with the liturgy might help the study find more layers in their discussion and allow participants to feel more comfortable and safer

in being vulnerable with one another. The study could close with the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession and then the words of dismissal.

The daily prayer liturgy could also be used to help shape committee and session meetings. I struggled for a number of years to begin session meetings in a way that would help the elders see that all we do is an act of worship, even a session meeting. Actually, *especially* a session meeting! I wrote my own short service and led the music, but that took more time than I had available. Eventually, I decided to quit reinventing the wheel, and I gave my elders copies of the evening prayer liturgy. I put a candle and match in front of the chair of our Properties Committee and told him he'd know when to light it. I gave the Scripture readings to two other elders and then asked for volunteers to lead the other parts of the service. By the time we finished, most of our session members had led a piece of worship, spreading leadership responsibilities rather than me trying to do it all. It was a painful but profound lesson. I was less involved, and they were more involved. In our tradition, worship is at its best when we share ownership and it becomes a natural and corporate experience. That same pattern carried over into the meeting, and our conversation was more fruitful and less like pulling teeth. It was worship.

The use of the liturgy during our session meetings also offers a gentle transition for the elders as they arrive from work, making dinner for the family, school, or wherever else they have been and gather in the new space together. It helps them reset more easily than an immediate study or approval of the agenda and reminds them that they are sharing the space not just with one another but also with the Holy Spirit we trust to be at work in the discussion.

Committee meetings could be shaped in a similar way. If time does not allow, one suggestion would be to offer one part of the liturgy for every committee to use and to make it clear they are all gathering and/or closing with the same words just as they work and serve with the same mission in mind.

Spiritual Formation of Elders

We are reminded in our *Book of Order* that Presbyterian ruling elders are spiritual leaders, as they are called not only to govern but to nurture the congregation's faith. They should be able to be called on to preach and to pray. But ordination alone does not make what one "should" be able to do something that is easy to do. As a pastor, I had the advantage of taking three years of my life to be immersed in the basics of worship leadership in seminary, and I still struggle with it at times. If elders are going to do this well alongside pastors, they too need training and words on which to lean.

As we have begun session meetings with the daily prayer liturgy and our elders have begun to know its format and flow, they have started to use what they have learned and heard in that meeting in Sunday worship. Once again, the prayers of thanksgiving and intercession not only integrate easily into Sunday worship, but they also offer reliable and faithful words for elders to use to lead a time of corporate prayer. Not all elders are poets or writers. Not all are confident in crafting prayers on their own (another good opportunity, however, to grow those who can). But these challenges do not mean that elders cannot lead, listen, and shape a space for the congregation that allows our breath to draw near to God's ears, and the daily prayer liturgy provides the words to do just that.

Whether you use the order of worship for the morning, midday, evening, or night liturgy, there is a lot of flexibility and possibility in the *Book of Common Worship*'s daily prayer liturgy. As with the online prayer group I am in, it might take some adapting to your context to figure out what works best. But the options are deep and wide enough to fit a number of uses and spaces. Finally, the use of the liturgy across congregational life helps us find common ground and roots us and our congregational families in faithful practices of discipleship. In a world that is often broken, sometimes fearful, and typically joyful, what else could we do?

Bless the Lord.
The Lord's name be praised.

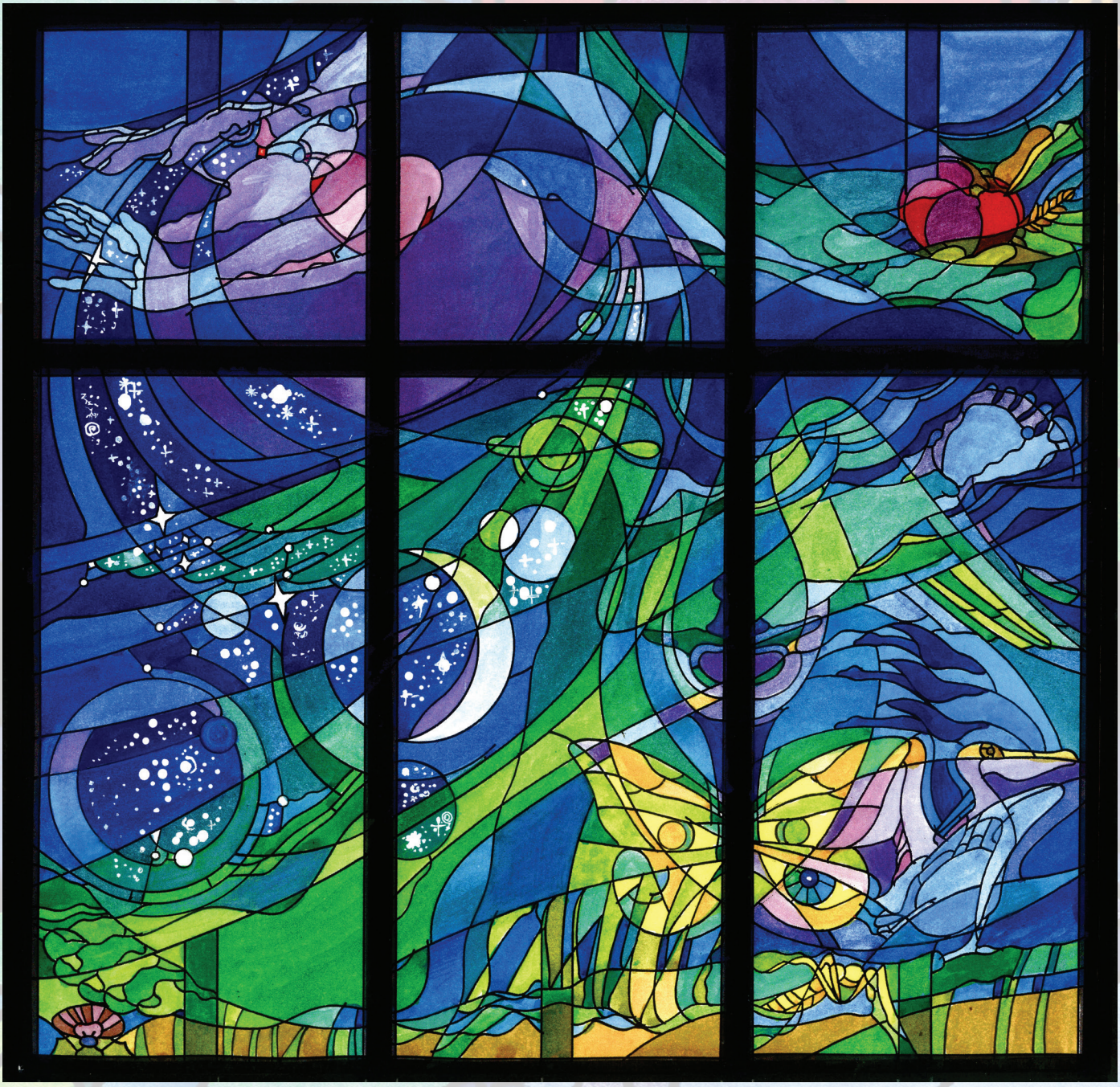
Note

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 874.

The Work of Our Hands: The Music of the Spheres

A Conversation with Steve Wilson

Steve Wilson (SW) is a stained-glass artist working in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
Sally Ann McKinsey (SAM) is the editor of *Call to Worship*.



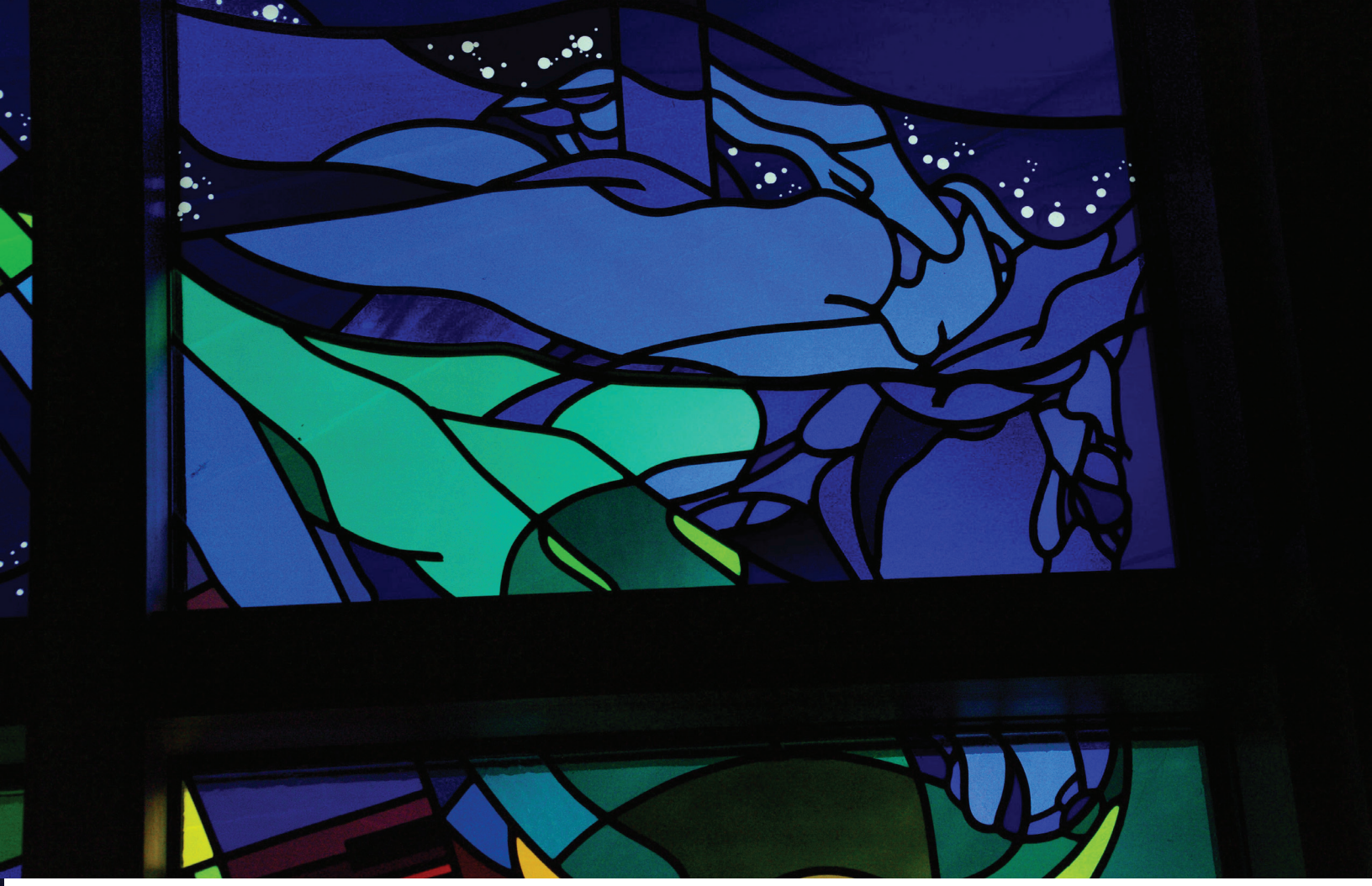
Creation
Chapel of St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, Louisiana
Steve Wilson Glass

SAM: Thank you so much for sitting down with me and for sharing your work with the journal. Can you tell us a bit about the context for the project at St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church in New Orleans?

SW: Thank you. The pastor and the donors were on a search to find someone to do the stained glass in their chapel and columbarium. The imagery is Louisiana centric, celebrating creation using Louisiana's flora and fauna.

SAM: The windows are beautiful. How did you get started in stained glass? What is your history with the material?

SW: I went to graduate school at Louisiana State University (LSU), and most graduates of the stained-glass program there major more in full-bodied color than in the narrative. Now, the narrative is important too, but Paul Dufour, the faculty who taught us and developed a master's degree program in the fine arts department, studied under Joseph Albers at Yale, who was strong in color theory and the Bauhaus. A lot of our projects in school were Bauhaus-oriented, problem-solution focused. Paul was old-school and rigorous, and I liked that. My first degree was in landscape architecture, and I had to take some art electives and found out that you had to have so many hours of design and color theory under your belt before you could get into Paul's stained-glass classes. Design was really good training.



I had a couple of teaching jobs when I got out of school. While applying to universities for teaching positions, I was active in the Arts Council. Looking in the paper for jobs, I saw a posting for an art teacher at our state school for the deaf. So I went there and interviewed. At that point I was very frustrated in the job search process, but I really believe that God had put in my heart to do art. I always intended to glorify God through it. So I got back from the interview and I got on my knees and prayed, "Okay, Lord, what's going on? I need to make a living." The phone rang, and it was Derek Gordon, who was our director at the Arts Council. And he said, "How would you like a job at the School for the Deaf through the National Endowment for the Arts? We will sponsor you as artist-in-residence for two years, and you'll get a teacher's salary but work with students and teachers half your day on art-related projects. For the other half of the day, we will fund a studio space and materials for you to pursue your own goals as an artist. And I just went, "Wow!" It was like an answer to prayer. And so I did, and during the time I started cold-calling all the architects across the South that do liturgical designs, asking for referrals, and asking for them to look at my portfolio. I just hit it hard for about five to ten years while producing glass, and it's been up and down, but it's been great. I find that all my clients are just wonderful people, churches, residences, or public commissions.

SAM: I love hearing about the influence of the Bauhaus and Josef Albers, your use of color, and your design perspective. I've read your talk about the liturgy of light, and I wonder if you would be able to reflect on how you think color and light function in the context of worship.

SW: Yes. In school we studied Abbot Suger at St. Denis in northern Paris, the first Gothic ideal church. Suger wrote about why you bring stained glass into the sanctuary and why you use more ascending windows as opposed to Romanesque windows, which were smaller. The Gothic style used larger windows and stained glass to bring light into the worship space, to bring the cosmos into

the worship space. Suger talked about the colors sapphire and ruby and emerald and about how those colors were elements in the cosmos, pinnacles of beauty when it comes to transparency, color, and light. I was really inspired by that. He was reading Dionysius the Areopagite, who converted to Christianity by Paul's sermon at the Areopagus, Mars Hill (Acts 17:34), though it is now understood that he was actually reading later writings that were attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite. I started reading these writings on light as spirit and spirit as light, which was part of Suger's inspiration for making the stained-glass windows bigger and lighter. And of course, St. Denis was the king's church, so the king endowed Abbot Suger with all the money he needed to knock it out of the park with sculpture and stained glass and architecture. I took Gothic, Byzantine, and Romanesque art history and had a wonderful teacher at LSU, Marchita Mauck. She studied liturgical design at Notre Dame, wrote a small book on building a house for God, and became a liturgical space consultant. Some really large congregations around Louisiana and in Houston consulted with her. We've done about fifty-five churches in Houston, and Marchita was instrumental in recommending me to these churches to do their stained glass. She was a great resource and really inspiring for me in my work.

SAM: Your influences are so interesting to place in conversation, from Suger to the Bauhaus to scholars like Marchita Mauck. I appreciate the way you are working within a very particular artistic tradition in terms of the context and material and bringing new influences into that process. How do you hope that the windows will impact the life of the congregation and their worship?

SW: I believe one thing we have enough of are windows with decorated saints in them. Do you know what I mean? The saint could be anyone, and the only way you know who the saint is supposed to be is because of a symbol or thing that he's holding. I've seen gorgeous old windows done by Jacoby, Frei, and Tiffany—all the mainline old studios. They're gorgeous, but they're often repeated. All over Europe, too, the windows are really decorative—the person in the window with all the bordering devices, the rich fabric, and painted faces. They're gorgeous, but we didn't dare do that in my program at LSU. Paul would have killed us! Let the glass and

the lead tell the story. Keep the paint for the canvas. So ours is a contemporary style, but, nonetheless, controlling of the color and the value of color. The value is so important in a stained-glass window. I've seen so many instances where there might be an eastern exposure window behind the pulpit in the morning, and in the morning the stained glass might be too bright, so that people get eyestrain looking at the silhouette of a pastor. In the event that exposure is there, I always tell the client that we need to go extremely low in value, using blues, blue purples, blue greens, colors that have darker value, so that your eye can relax while looking. In graduate school, after we had finished a design, Dufour used to get us to take it to Kinko's and get a black and white print of it so that we could see the values. And he said, "Now, think of this window as a light filter. Where do you want the highest values and the lowest values? How are you going to mix them?" So in my windows next to architecture or a wall that is blocking the light, I usually start with a lower value color adjacent to the wall and then move toward a higher value for the center or as it goes up.

This is not always the case, because, you know, there are all kinds of circumstances where you might do something differently. But for instance, one of our new jobs is the Our Lady of Lourdes Women and Children's Hospital in Lafayette, Louisiana. They are part of the Franciscans, and the Franciscan nuns are hospital nuns. Of course, their patron is St. Francis. The chapel is a really nice building that a local architect designed, and it has about a four-foot-tall clerestory window going around the whole building just under the roof, an old invention to lift the roof off of the space to make it feel lighter and to let light come in. There are eleven windows that are each three feet wide by twelve feet tall, but they go up and touch the clerestory. So we are going full bodied in value and color on the bottoms of these windows, rising up to clear glass, probably textured clear, before it hits the clerestory. So when you look around the room, the stained glass will reflect what the architect was doing in the space. They wanted the Canticle of the Sun in the windows, but since there are eleven windows, the Canticle of the Sun is a bit limited. So I suggested that the Canticle of the Sun is really about St. Francis's praise of creation, of God's beauty and grace, so let's do the seven days of creation, the three persons of the Trinity, and Mary in one of them. They liked the idea, but because it's a women's and children's hospital, they

want Mary to be pregnant Mary, Our Lady of Hope. I'm really excited about it because I'm working with the architecture to create a light statement from low values at the bottom to high values at the top. And again, they wanted Louisiana-centric flora and fauna, with all of the bottoms of the windows rising up to the creatures.

SAM: That sounds so exciting. This illustrates how contextual each of your projects is, since you are working with the architecture, the community, and the natural environment of Louisiana as content. And add the layers of your formal influences on the design. Again, I see the influence of Albers and ideas of transparent color and value.

SW: You ask how I might hope that these windows would inspire worship. Instead of more and more traditional figures, I like to focus on the movement created by the whole. Hopefully, in the way I design them, you see movement and animation in the windows. Even though it's lead and glass, and it doesn't move, there's a sort of action, the mood flowing through all of those windows. Circles are a constant theme in my work—I use lots of circles, perfect circles. Some get broken and interrupted with other forms, but if you look in those windows, you will see movement in circles. One of my favorite hymns is "This Is My Father's World," and it has influenced my design: "Nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres." The other hymn I use in my artist statement a lot is "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," the line "Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I'm come." Often the titles of my work, especially pen-and-inks, will be "Ebenezer," colon, and then another bit of title.

SAM: There's a lot of movement in your work. It doesn't look like it stands still to me but moves the eye in circles or spirals. I very much appreciate this conversation and your work. Thank you for the opportunity to meet you and speak with you. Your perspective is a gift to the journal.

Reimagining Accessibility with Young Worshipers

Alexandra Jacob and Sonja Dziekciowski

Sonja Dziekciowski (SD) and I (Alexandra Jacob/ AMJ) work together collaboratively as part of the Families, Youth, and Children staff in our congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Over the past four years of working together, we have sought to strengthen our commitment to accessibility in worship and faith formation for our community's youngest worshipers. This is a process that continually unfolds over time—much as our community of young people and families is shaped by the particular people who inhabit our worship and formation spaces. In the spirit of our own patterns of collaboration, Sonja and I offer our own experiences of growing in accessibility practices through a question-and-answer format. We begin in the youth suite of a local Presbyterian church in Rochester, Minnesota, in summer 2024.

Introduction and Theological Grounding

AMJ: I thought of you, Sonja, this past summer while I was away with our congregation's middle school students on our annual service-learning trip. We had reached the final evening of the week, and I planned to surprise students by sharing communion together. As you know, our middle school youth are a delightful bunch, full of energy and vibrant silliness. And many of them benefit from accessibility tools like fidget toys in order to aid their full participation in group discussions or activities. For our celebration of communion, I wanted the communion table to reflect that commitment to accessibility, particularly after having learned so much in recent years about how our young people interact with the world in diverse ways. So, in addition to my usual table setting—a Bible and candle, communion elements, a sign from the youth room proclaiming that everyone is welcome—I added an array of fidget tools. Multicolored stretchy bands, fidget spinners, and sensory balls added a certain character to the communion table. And the image of the table itself struck me as theologically rich: we are invited to the joyful feast *just as we are*.

SD: My eyes welled up with tears when you shared that image of fidget tools around the table, inviting our youth to use those tools to calm bodies to help them mindfully partake of the elements. That picture reflected the ongoing discernment process our ministry has been undergoing due to a focus on hard and holy questions. What do we hope our children are experiencing when the congregation gathers for worship? How are our children and youth invited to be full participants and leaders, rather than outside observers? What practices are not aligning with those goals?

It was through that lens that I realized that our Children's Church did not feel like a worship service for children. Our four-year-olds through first graders parade out of the late morning worship service before the sermon for their own time of programming. Most of the children attending Children's Church had attended Church School the hour before worship.

Arriving upstairs to a classroom for the second time that morning felt like an attempt to teach another Church School lesson with squirmy children who were not fully engaged. Once I named that Children's Church was my least favorite part of children's ministries programming, you stepped in with inquiry. Through setting down ego, making space for curiosity, and asking focused questions

Alexandra Mauney Jacob is associate pastor for families, youth, and children at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
Sonja Dziekciowski is director of children's ministries at Westminster.

alongside committee members, we discerned a need to revamp the location and structure of Children's Church. We designed a new worship format that centers the needs of our children for routine and movement, while inviting in the Holy Spirit and focusing on what it means to be a part of the church, God's community.

AMJ: These intentional changes have allowed us to live more fully into a Reformed commitment to worship as an act of the *whole* people of God. If some of us can access elements of worship in a fuller and broader way than others, is our worship "a collective activity of the people of God and an expression of our common life and ministry" (*Book of Order*, W-2.0201)? One of the ways we have worked to ensure fuller participation in worship for our youngest ones has been by broadening our own practices around access and inclusion. This is hard work that really never ends, and we certainly do not get it right every time. But little by little, the changes make a difference.

SD: One of the most amazing results of changing our worship framing and structure for our youngest worshipers has been the ease with which our children display autonomy and express joy in the sanctuary. During a recent worship service, a kindergartner drew a picture for his father who was seated up front next to the clergy after being the lay Scripture reader. This child ran up the stairs with great enthusiasm to give his father his artwork, with the pastors' expressions reflecting this little boy's energy. Their faces lit up, as did the hearts of worshipers.

AMJ: That moment was a highlight of my spring! And those experiences are not possible without offering an eye towards accessibility for children, especially in our Children's Church spaces. One of the principles of access that has guided our work together includes an affirmation of neurodiversity as a gift from God. Neurodiversity refers to the inherent diversity that exists within each of us with regard to our neurological wiring. A neurodiversity model of understanding resists a pathology model of neurological difference; instead of measuring our children's needs and gifts against an imagined "norm," we celebrate the diversity and do our best to provide multiple paths of access that embrace difference. When we talk with children at Westminster about embodied difference, we often remind them of the creation story, where God creates the world and calls every single part of it *good*.

SD: I love how often you remind our children and youth about God's abundant love for us, meeting each one of us where we are. One of my favorite phrases that you use with our children and youth is "all bodies are good bodies."

That focus on embracing differences also helps us to craft meaningful morning devotionals for our weeklong summer day camp for children and youth. With our planning, we attempt to integrate the multisensory needs of our young people, from elementary-aged campers through high school counselors. We invite campers and counselors to use fidget tools or color in devotional books if that will help their bodies and brains focus on the message. Through breathwork, embodied prayers, children's books about social justice issues, and music with youth song leaders that incorporate movement, we focus on specific ways that we are called to honor each other's humanity and affirm God's abundant love.

A highlight of our day camp worship was when we invited local poet Joe Davis to share his spoken-word poem "Good and Worthy of Love"[1] with our day camp group. Hearing a full room of fifty-something elementary children through high schoolers echoing the saying "I am good, I am worthy of love; I am good, I am more than enough" was powerful.

AMJ: These theological affirmations ground our work with young people, and it is indeed powerful to have such a profound mantra to repeat to ourselves and to one another. Another principle that helps create greater access for young people includes repetitive and simple language. For instance, in our child-oriented Christmas Eve service, we often include a simple repeated refrain in the Call to Worship, reminding children that even if they are not yet readers, they can participate by saying that simple phrase along with the congregation. It can also help to offer welcoming messaging that is both explicit (saying, "Your little one's noises are welcome here!") and implicit (making friendly eye contact with caregivers).

SD: During the first year of implementing our new model of Children's Church, one noticeable change in our later Sunday morning worship service, which is held in the large sanctuary, was that our children

now come back into the sanctuary before the closing hymn to receive the charge and benediction. Several older congregants pulled me aside to express their delight in this new practice, as they loved seeing a few children skipping back to families. That practice seems to have lessened the formal feel of the service and added more warmth and joy with the additional sounds of happy feet and caregivers waving for their children to find them.

AMJ: And don't forget the children who dance in the pews along to the final hymn. These moments of joy are evidence that children feel safe in worship. There is no such thing as perfection when it comes to accessibility for children or for those of us who live with diverse forms of embodied difference. In the words of the Opening Doors to Discipleship team, "There are as many types of disabilities and accommodations for those disabilities as there are stars in the sky!"[2] But seeing a child dancing in the aisle reminds us that the small moments of inclusion are worth celebrating.

Discernment Questions for Worship Planners

When it comes to access, it can be hard for worship planners to know where to start. Below, Sonja and I reflect on the process of prioritizing. Our best strategies emerge when we begin with reflective discernment.

SD: One of the things I value most about my working relationship with you, Alexandra, is our practice of asking reflective questions about programming. What activities did we notice that our children were engaged in? What specific types of activities seem to help our neurodiverse children? What are our pain points? What activities became dysregulating and why?[3]

AMJ: These questions mark a subtle but important shift in thinking for our ministry area, particularly as we moved out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our congregation has benefitted recently from the wisdom of church consultant Susan Beaumont, with whom we have worked during a season of significant pastoral transition. Susan has helped us shift our thinking from a decision-making mindset to a discernment-minded framework, asking reflective questions and trusting the slow and holy movement of the Spirit.

The first set of questions that we have found it helpful to engage are broad ones. Who are the youngest members of our worshiping body? What kinds of embodied diversity is present within that group? What do we hope our youngest worshipers will experience in our worship spaces? The answers to these questions change often, inviting continual reflection. But before we work for greater access, we have to know who is present in the community.

SD: We started to have individual conversations with caregivers about specific needs for neurodivergent children, especially for how to help little ones participate in our Children's Church and the annual Christmas pageant. We have asked caregivers, "What type of supportive structures and activities help your child to participate?" Last summer, one parent of an autistic preschooler raised a different request: could we start a support group for those of us who are raising neurodivergent children and youth? After some discernment time, last fall we began a monthly caregiver support group, Supporting Diverse Minds.

AMJ: That group has been a beautiful, set-apart space for caregivers to support one another, and we have learned more about the needs of our young people who are neurodivergent or who struggle with mental health challenges. For instance, we learned that for our young worshipers who struggle with sensory processing, our congregation's annual Eastertide worship service that includes bagpipes can be overstimulating. That knowledge helped us to ask questions about how we can prepare one another for spaces like that. Can we make sure caregivers know that there are extra sets of noise-limiting headphones available for use? Can we reach out and remind families that the smaller, less formal 8:30 worship service won't include a bagpipe prelude, so that they can opt out of one experience and into another?

A second set of questions for reflection that congregations may find helpful has to do with how our worship spaces and practices respond to the unique configuration of people who exist within our community. Over the course of a Lord's Day worship service, how are we attending to the diverse experiences of our youngest worshipers? It helps to start by naming and celebrating successes. Do children lead worship by reading Scripture, or do you offer worship activity bags for children that engage their senses? Celebrate those practices!

As the Spirit works in and through us to help us name practices that might aid in young worshipers' participation, it is helpful to give thanks to God for those places where access is already happening.

SD: I am grateful for our reflection process that names the goodness of the holy moments we have witnessed with our young worshipers either engaged in worship spaces or leading in those spaces with ease. Also, sometimes our reflections bring up what feels like a calling for new practices. As we have individually reflected on programming with our various committee members, you and I sometimes notice that the Spirit is leading us to a new theme that has been weaving its way through different conversation spaces.

AMJ: In those spaces, we address a third question: are we co-creating the kind of community where people can name their needs? This is not always comfortable, depending on the cultural norms that may exist within a congregation. Advocacy, including self-advocacy, is a muscle that takes practice to develop, and it can take intentional time and space to practice it. I have been grateful for your own self-advocacy, Sonja, as you navigate Westminster as both a staff member and congregation member. When you openly practice the skill of self-advocacy, it helps others to practice it themselves.

SD: From my perspective, the practices of naming and advocating for our needs have had a ripple effect going outward from how our Families, Youth, and Children staff and lay leader team communicate with one another and with our broader community. Before I had corrective surgery to restore conductive hearing loss, I used a hearing aid. While I highly recommend hearing aids to increase ease of communication, it is also an imperfect technology in group settings. For team meetings, my colleagues knew that I had a preferred location to aim my better ear towards. Sometimes an organ rehearsal pipes up in the middle of one of our team meetings, and our team will ask if we should quickly relocate to a quieter setting for our conversation.

In our large weekly staff meetings, authenticity and naming needs have been met with respect and gratitude. Naming that microphones need to be used in that large space to amplify voices for those who are hard of hearing has become a routine explanation to guests and new staff members. While not everyone loves talking into a microphone or waiting for one to turn back on, that pause and effort to pass microphones around displays a commitment to providing access for those auditory needs.

AMJ: This continual movement of advocating for and responding to needs has set the groundwork for moving towards greater access in our worship.

Practical Tools and Adaptive Strategies

Acknowledging that the needs of young people and neurodiverse people are as diverse as our congregations themselves, we offer below a reflection on adaptive strategies and practical tools that we have found helpful in our own context.

SD: We have several ADHD students in our children and youth programs, which is a disability that has a lot of stigma and misunderstandings surrounding it. After one of my children was diagnosed with ADHD, I started doing more research. The more I read about the traits of executive dysfunction, the more I saw myself. As an adult who was diagnosed in her forties, my diagnosis brought the realization that what I had thought were character flaws were shared traits of how my brain is wired with ADHD.

At the start of this program year, our elementary Church School teachers participated in a neurodiversity workshop. Many definitions and examples of accommodations came from the nonprofit organization Understood (understood.org). An explanation that resonated with our lay leaders was the charge to be a detective when observing behavior. Get curious! What unmet need does this child have? Instead of taking behaviors personally or interpreting them as disrespect, so much of the work is internal to keep yourself regulated and calm.

AMJ: I often think of those questions when I am in worship planning and leadership spaces, wondering how we can make subtle shifts to help create new pathways of access. One of the practical changes we made several years ago was related to our worship spaces. We were in the process of redesigning our 8:30 AM worship service, which is held in an expansive, open space with flexible seating. We worship in the round for that worship service, with chairs set in a semicircle, oriented around the communion table. After talking with the families whose children would likely attend that service,

we designed a simple children's space with an area rug, soft bean bag chairs, worship activity bags, and child-sized weighted lap blankets. The space is situated near the entrance to the worship space, but behind a couple rows of chairs so that families are able to sit near and around their young worshipers. As that worship service has evolved, the children's space has become an integral part of the rhythm of the service. It was new for our congregation to set apart a space like that for children, and it is consistently one of my favorite spots each week to check in with young ones and see how they interact with worship in their own, age-appropriate ways.

A space set apart for children may or may not work for your worship spaces, but it is worth wondering aloud with dedicated leaders and church families how there might be elements of the spaces that you might *adapt* to serve the needs of younger worshipers with diverse learning styles, orientations towards movement, and adaptive needs. For instance, Westminster's sanctuary space, where our largest Sunday service is held each week, has fixed pews in rows oriented towards a large chancel. A set-apart children's area within this space is less feasible than in our more flexible 8:30 worship service space. After a significant building renovation project, we recognized that there was an unused room in the back of the sanctuary balcony that might be repurposed as another point of access for worshiping families. With input from families with young ones, we redesigned that room to be a space where parents can nurse or rock babies, and where children can get their wiggles out and encounter age-friendly board books. The room is connected to the sanctuary with audio access to the worship service, and there is a television on the wall that provides visual access.

Not all families make use of these adaptive spaces in either of our Sunday services, but together with worship activity bags and other tools, we hope that families with young worshipers can pick and choose the ways that work best for them to engage more fully in the worshiping life of the congregation.

SD: Planning out the design and layout of worship spaces to meet the needs of our families, children, and youth has been a lengthy, ongoing discernment process. In our committee work, we have been inspired by Priya Parker's book, *The Art of Gathering*. Parker writes, "Gatherings need perimeters" as "a contained space for a gathering allows people to relax."[4]

We learned that adding individual carpet spots in the front of our chapel, where Children's Church happens, helped to make that space feel more contained. That layout created a smaller perimeter to help our young worshipers feel connected and engaged.

After events, we reflect on how the spaces themselves have contributed to the tone of our worship. Several times we have learned that certain rooms or setups have been too big for our neurodivergent younger worshipers to engage, as large group settings can be challenging. For our morning devotionals during our children's day camp, we switched to a smaller room with tables in the back to create a smaller, more intimate worship space. That room also has built-in amplification for our students who use hearing aids and carpeting to absorb some of the background noise. With thoughtful design, we use our room layouts to work towards creating a welcoming and calming environment for all our young ones.

AMJ: Another important consideration for our young worshipers has been to subtly increase the ways we connect our worship practices to our bodies. Young ones are less likely than we grown-ups are to needlessly separate the spiritual work of our minds and hearts from the spiritual work of our bodies. You see this lived out in the wiggles, dancing, and noises of children in worship! Instead of discouraging this connectedness to embodiment, how might we encourage it within the framework of our worship practices? Are there simple body movements that might accompany a sung chorus, or might we involve children and youth in the processional or in the setting of the communion table?

I also love to remember a story you told me last year from Children's Church, Sonja. You all were working on a breath prayer, inviting the children to breathe in a message of peace and breathe out anything that was troubling them. One astute five-year-old worshiper volunteered, "Let's breathe in *hope* and breathe out *uncertainty*!" He was remembering our theme for a recent church art project, "Hope in uncertainty," and connecting that message to the practice of breath prayer. What a profound moment of connection!

The intentional use of breath in our worship is yet another way to connect beautifully with younger members of the community, who tend to

be far more in tune to their bodies than we older members are. A colleague of ours sometimes begins the Call to Confession by inviting the congregation to feel grounded in breathing in God's grace. That moment of stillness is a connecting point for younger worshipers, whether or not they are readers and can access the Prayer of Confession by reading the words aloud.

SD: Using breathwork in our worship designed specifically for children has helped us weave in an understanding of the Holy Spirit and the call for worship to be a truly communal act. Mindfulness practices are beneficial to all congregants, and especially for our neurodiverse children. Before our youngest children's choir sang in a worship service last spring, nerves were on display during warm-ups in the choir room. Several of our preschoolers were clinging to their caregivers in anticipation of singing in the sanctuary.

I led the group in a Butterfly Hugs prayer,[5] with all of us linking our thumbs together to form the wings, placing our wings on our chests, and gently flapping those wings. I explained how sometimes when we are nervous, we say we have butterflies in our stomachs. The gentle tapping helps us get our butterflies "in formation" and ready to go! Talking with those young ones, I drew on an explanation from Adam Grant in his *Re:Thinking* podcast.[6] By engaging our senses, we shift our thinking from the amygdala in emergency mode to the frontal cortex. Once those little bodies and minds had a chance to calm down, I led the children in a prayer while we flapped our wings. In our simple prayer, we asked God to help us get our butterflies in line to help us sing about God's love.

This practice of an embodied prayer helped our preschoolers through second graders focus on the meaning of their song as a part of the worship service in the sanctuary. Several of our children who had been too nervous to be up front and sing during a service were able to participate by shifting our focus to sharing God's love through song.

AMJ: Another favorite for our children is "starfish breathing," where you hold out one hand with fingers spread out (like a starfish!) and use the pointer finger on your other hand to trace the starfish points. Inhale each time you trace one side of a finger; exhale as you trace the other side. By the end of the exercise, worshipers have calmer bodies and more focused minds, *and* we have worked to reconnect our minds to our bodies.

SD: Inviting all to the table as they are requires continuous discernment to support our neurodiverse children and youth. It is a group effort that calls for inquiry, curiosity, conversation, and reflection. As you and I have evolved in our learning around strategies and accommodations to support children and youth with thinking and learning differences, our children and youth have demonstrated comfort and confidence in being their authentic selves in worship. Our discernment process has pulled in many voices—those with lived experiences, caregivers advocating for their children, committee members with backgrounds in education, and colleagues with experience in designing room layouts. Our process of weaving together threads of lived experience, strategies for inclusion, and Reformed worship principles has helped us weave together a unique and beautiful tapestry of worship in our congregation. Together, we worship as the *whole* people of God.

Notes

1. Joe Davis, "Good and Worthy of Love," from *Remind Me Again: Poems and Practices for Remembering Who We Are* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2023), 15.
2. "Disability Inclusion for Ministry," Opening Doors to Discipleship, https://odtd.net/disability-inclusion-for-ministry/.
3. As a former second grade teacher, I often switch over into educational jargon. Traci Pedersen of *Psych Central* describes dysregulation as an emotional response that occurs "when you're unable to manage your emotional responses. This means it's difficult to soothe yourself when you feel overwhelmed, sad, or angry, and you find it hard to return to 'normal' after these feelings come up." Tracy Pedersen, "What Is Emotional Dysregulation?" *Psych Central*, November 21, 2022, https://psychcentral.com/blog/what-is-affect-or-emotion-dysregulation#regulation-tips.
4. Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 65.
5. Traci Smith, "After a Natural Disaster: Butterfly Hug," *Faithful Families: Creating Sacred Moments at Home* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2017), 130.
6. Adam Grant, "You Have More Control over Your Emotions Than You Think with Lisa Feldman Barrett," *ReThinking with Adam Grant*, https://www.ted.com/podcasts/rethinking-with-adam-grant/you-have-more-control-over-your-emotions-lisa-feldman-barrett-transcript.

Worship with Creation

Carol Soderholm

> Days pass and years vanish and we walk
> sightless among miracles.
> God, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds
> with knowing;
> let there be moments when your
> Presence, like lightning,
> illumines the darkness in which we walk.
> —from the Mishkan T'filah,
> "A Prayer for Shabbat"

On Friday night the Sabbath began when my grandmother lit the candles which, in every Jewish home, traditionally begins the twenty-four-hour Sabbath.

> When all work is brought to a standstill, the candles are lit. Just as creation began with the word "let there be light!" so does the celebration of creation begin with the kindling of lights. . . . [1]

An awareness of creation is built into the Friday night Sabbath. It is for worship and rest, rest for the land as well as people.

> The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be *a sabbath of complete rest for the land* (Lev. 25:1–4, emphasis added).

A Sunday worship for rest? The busyness of our worship makes rest seem like an intrusion.

At the home of my grandparents (Abraham and Sophie) the Sabbath began with a simple but sumptuous meal. The candles were lit, the blessings said over the wine and bread. Songs were sung. The food was eaten. The meal always included a blessing of the children. As a child, I remember it well—the aroma of foods as we walked up the stairs to their apartment above Abraham's tailor shop. I remember the overflowing welcome, the abundant table. *All* of it was worship, not set apart as a distinct and different part of life but built into the very fabric of daily life. The children were even allowed free play afterwards; my sisters and I jumped up and down on the very old bed in my father's childhood bedroom, now shut tight and much colder than the rest of the apartment. The whole evening had a worshipful feel to it.

Almost all Jewish observances reflect nature and the environment. The festival of Tu B'Shvat celebrates the birthday of trees. A birthday for trees? In Israel today Tu B'Shvat is celebrated as an ecological awareness day. Trees are planted in celebration. The festival of Sukkot is a fall harvest festival. And Shavuot originated as an agricultural festival celebrating the beginning of the wheat harvest.

There is no separation between worship and nature. All God's blessings are acknowledged as from the earth, the wheat in the challah and the grapes in the wine.

Carol Soderholm was born in New York City and graduated from Union Theological Seminary in New York. She has been a working pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America since July 19, 1987.

From where else would blessings come?

It was natural for Jesus, as a Jewish teacher, to use nature for his teachings: mustard seeds, lilies, the sea, a lake, sheep, vineyards, fig trees, well water, grains of sand, sparrows. Creation itself provided a metaphor for his teachings: farming, fishing, shepherding. He went to wild places to be alone and pray. He used natural settings to teach and to heal—a well, the sea of Galilee, the wilderness, the Jordan River among others. Jesus was deeply connected to the natural world.

Christians are too, perhaps not fully realizing it. In the elements of bread and wine, we honor Jesus and take him into ourselves as a symbolic lover. In the wheat and grapes, we take fruits of the earth into ourselves as a holy remembrance. The earth gives herself to us in love. We become one not only with God in Jesus Christ but with creation as well.

> By what miracle does this cracker
> made from Kansas wheat . . . turn into Me?
> My eyes, my hands, my cells, organs, juices,
> thoughts?[2]

Can we re-member the earthiness of our practice of Holy Communion, our intimacy with God in union with the earth? Can our practice be about much more than our personal salvation, about all creation gathered into the heart of God as worship?

As Julian of Norwich suggests,

> Be a gardener.
> Dig a ditch,
> toil and sweat,
> and turn the earth upside down
> and seek the deepness
> and water the plants in time.
> Continue this labor
> and make sweet floods to run
> and noble and abundant fruits to spring.
> Take this food and drink
> and carry it to God
> as your true worship.[3]

Let's unite our Sabbath Sunday with an embrace of creation. Have worship outdoors. Use a tree stump for an altar. Have the grapes instead of wine. Baptize in a local stream. Have a birthday for the trees. Plant a tree as worship. Have Lord's Day worship in someone's home—or on a farm, or on a prairie. Worship at night and consider the stars and the wonder of night.

We know so much about our world at this time in history. We know about the cosmos in a way we didn't years ago. Can we weave the splendor of creation into our worship and spend more time in silence? In awe?

Notes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 66.
2. Judith Morley, quoted in *Earth Prayers from around the World*, ed. Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 357.
3. Julian of Norwich, quoted in *Earth Prayers*, 305.

Joel Schoon-Tanis, *Home, Free*, Acrylic on paper, 20" x 24"

A Guide for Visual Literacy

Catherine Kapikian

Visual literacy is the ability to access and understand meaning conveyed through images. As the church struggles to reassert its relevancy following pandemic-induced changes, might artful imagery be embraced as unselfconsciously and enthusiastically as hymnody? The basis for answering this question with a hopeful "yes" rests in a powerful assertion. We are sensory beings. Being human necessitates having deep sensory experiences. Since all of our senses belong to our humanity, it is essential for the church to foster experiences that support this assertion.

Works of visual art offer opportunities to engage in theological discourse in visual form when experienced in the context of the church. Engaging with art in the context of museums and galleries is commonplace, but in the context of worship, art is understood in a unique way as part of a larger, transcendent whole. In Sunday worship, when all of our senses are inundated (sometimes simultaneously), art becomes a catalyst for the shimmering breakthrough of the Holy. Such an experience of God's presence overwhelms us and causes us to bow our heads. Perhaps this is one of the paradoxes of attending to the visual in worship—sometimes it is not about the visual experience of the work, but about how visual art impacts the body's engagement with worship.

Visual art—like music—is comprised of a unique, nonverbal vocabulary that communicates in a language solely its own. Endorsing and understanding visual theological proclamation requires a rudimentary grasp of this unique language; its undertaking is a worthwhile effort. This guide introduces nonverbal vocabulary in general terms and its language in accessible terms to stimulate visual liturgical engagement in worshiping communities. I will introduce ideas in art theory, elements and principles of art, and spatial vocabulary to support church staff, worship committees, and congregants in visual engagement. Aesthetic encounters within the context of liturgy function in tandem with other sensibilities already in play, enriching the experience of worship beyond measure.

Parameters of an Aesthetic Experience

Four parameters of an aesthetic experience are the artist, the artwork, the viewer, and the context. A practical acknowledgment of these parameters provides a way to analyze and engage works of art and a gateway to understanding why the church should reestablish itself as a context for visual art. The elements of artist, artwork, viewer, and context have existed in relationship, with variations in their hierarchical arrangement in each time and place, throughout Western art history. Their positions in the hierarchy shift depending on the artistic perspective, era, and location, signaling diverse, culturally conditioned viewpoints.

In ancient Egyptian tomb art, context was at the top of the hierarchy. Context dictated the formulaic prescription of stylistic and symbolic constructs chiseled and painted by an unknown artist whose creations existed for the afterlife of the entombed. Today's commodification of art places the artist at the top of the hierarchy. Today's artist is concerned with self-expression at the core and sells through a gallery not knowing the final context in which his or her artwork will reside, all the while hoping that a future viewer will purchase it. First the artist, then the artwork, then viewer and context vying at the bottom forms today's construct. Whether talking about the Dutch Golden Age of painting (Rembrandt), the High Renaissance (Michelangelo), or French Impressionism (Monet), these four parameters of an aesthetic experience interact to

Catherine Kapikian is the founder and director emerita of The Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Her artwork can be found at catherinekapikian.com.

influence artistic choices that either honor, consider, or relegate context.

Because the visual arts have suffered neglect in many quarters of the church, especially in theological education, it is critical for church leadership to realize the relevance of context and reestablish its significance. In liturgical art, acknowledgment of context is vital, since the work is part of the larger whole of liturgy and is interpreted relative to a specific cultural space. In consideration of the transcendent nature of art and its capacity to communicate theologically, to relegate the church context to the bottom of the hierarchy cuts the church off from its potent ally. A change in attitude that positions context as a viable place for the contemporary artist does not lead to visual propaganda, vapid imagery, or both. What it does lead to is the necessity for visual literacy, the consequent interest of artists, and quality imagery.

Nonverbal Language

All languages, including music and art, have a syntax, that is, ways and rules for putting the vocabulary together with semantics unique to each. This syntax provides a method for making meaning of the joined-together vocabulary. The languages of music and visual art, by virtue of their unique vocabularies, syntax, and semantics, communicate a sense of the *mysterium tremendum* in a way that propositional language cannot. Art and music deliver that timeless moment of heightened awareness above time and space. In fact, they bear within themselves their own confirmation; we don't know we need them until we experience them. Spiritual enlightenment comes embodied in a rich variety of ways. The elements of art provide some basic vocabulary that can help to recognize how visual art creates these revelatory moments. They are line, shape, value, color, and texture.

(1) *Line* is a graphic device that functions symbolically; for instance, the outline of a mountain or in a letter of the alphabet.
(2) *Shape* is a defined area of color, value, texture, or lines that may define recognizable subject matter or may instead exist outside the given boundaries of an image's recognizable subject matter, as in abstract art. (I define abstraction later when I discuss categories of presentation.)
(3) *Value* refers to the relationship of one part to another in terms of lightness and darkness and is relative to a particular work or context. Imagine a chart of ten separately painted squares with white at one end and black at the other end and the in-between squares advancing from light to dark.
(4) *Color* has three attributes, the first being its hue—red, yellow, blue, green, orange, and so forth. Second, color has its own inherent value (lightness or darkness). Imagine placing a square of color, or hue, next to its closest value in a scale. For example, yellow is light, purple is dark, and red is in the middle. Third, color can be intense (bright) or muted (dull) or one of an infinite number of possibilities in between. An artist pays attention to all three of these attributes when thinking about color.
(5) *Texture* may be simulated to mimic the surface quality of things seen in nature (rough, smooth, grainy, etc.) or applied (think collage—ticket stubs, newspaper clippings, wire, nails, etc.). The artistic possibilities utilizing these elements are infinite, limited only by the artist's imagination and skill.

Following is a description of the effects (syntax and semantics) created by an artist's imaginative and thoughtful use of the elements described starting with the simplest.

(1) *Figure/ground* is the relationship of the markings (lines, shapes, colors, combinations, etc.) applied to a background. Both are of equal importance. In abstract images, the two are fused and often become indistinct from one another.
(2) *Balance* refers to the felt equilibrium between all parts (single or combined elements) of an image. Balance can be symmetrical, approximate, asymmetrical, and/or radial.
(3) *Movement* in an image is implied rather than actual to force the viewer to look at the entire image.
(4) *Repetition* of an element like a particular color throughout the whole image achieves implied movement.
(5) *Pattern* is the contiguous repetition of an element like a wiggly line that creates a distinct area
(6) *Rhythm* is a complex recurrence of adjusted intervals wherein the spaces in between the

areas of repetition or singular units of design resonate with the areas or units themselves.

(7) *Dominance* occurs when the artist stresses one visual item over all the rest to momentarily arrest and focus the viewer's attention, as for instance by introducing one spot of a different color or its more intense version.

(8) *Subordination* reduces viewer attention on aspects of an image by varying intensities of colors, values, line thickness, and so forth.

(9) *Harmony* in an image is a quality that lies between the extremes of monotony and discord or contrast and is achieved by successful transitional means such as uniform brush stroking or uniformity in textural surfaces between figure and ground or other means.

(10) *Proportion* is the relationship of all parts to one another as they work together to achieve a felt rightness of parts.

(11) *Space*, that is, its illusion on a two-dimensional surface, is implied the moment a mark is made on the surface. The artist creates the illusion of deep or infinite space by using the edges of the two-dimensional surface to act as a window frame through which the viewer sees a created endless recession of forms in space. In shallow or limited space, the artist can create the illusion of restrictive space as if looking into a box or onto a stage. Or an artist may not attempt to create illusional space, as in much modern art. Rather, the work has height and width but no depth. All parts of the image sit on the two-dimensional surface and appear as flat as it is. Art in the twentieth century introduced combinations, distortions, and new expressions of spatial imaging.

Art as Product and Process

Product relative to this discussion is the artful image or object. By analogy, it can be compared to an iceberg that we see above the surface of the ocean. In fact, we see about 10 percent of the iceberg. *Process* is the remaining unseen 90 percent of all the complex processes engaged in making an artwork. Generally speaking, music is valued as a product and a process (singing is participatory), but with visual art, the church, in its exclusive interest in the product, rarely engages the process. When understanding art in its totality as a unique language, product, and process, it is important to endorse all three of these capacities in the key areas of church life (worship, education, fellowship, and outreach/mission). It is important to engage in activities that focus on *process* in each one of these areas.

For an example, when members of a congregation make their own paraments (images that hang from the pulpit, lectern, and table/altar), the experience of the process is life-giving. Deep correspondences exist between the undertaking of a creative process and spiritual formation. In fact, stages in the creative process such as the incubation of ideas, frustrations, breakthroughs, illumination, and elaboration are akin to common experiences in a spiritual life, such as thoughts of gratitude and positivity, afflictions with possible loss of faith (dark night of the soul), breakthrough, transformation, and enlightenment. Both processes are undergirded by trust and grapple with what is at hand. In a creative process, intense absorption brings forth something new. In a spiritual challenge, enlightenment is achieved. In both processes, participants are open to insight and encounter and seek or achieve wholeness of being.

Creativity is the resource with which we bring new meaning into our world, and the ability to respond creatively reflects our genetic reflection of the divine image. The idea of the imago Dei from Genesis 1:27 is foundational to this discourse. Its straightforward implication of meaning derives its complexity of meaning from its diverse interpretations and relationship to other Scripture texts.

Categories of Presentation

When considering a change in liturgical imagery or the addition of art in the church, it is helpful to consider the differences between representational, abstract, and nonobjective imagery.

(1) *Representational* imagery contains descriptive representations of things visualized in our natural environment; Albrecht Dürer's etching of a rabbit is a prime example.

(2) *Abstract* imagery serves the needs of design. The artist is concerned with the skillful arrangement and interactions of line, shape, value, color, and texture more than with creating realistic representation. The resulting image(s) can be slightly abstract, as in Henri Matisse's portrait titled *Green Stripe* or very abstract, as in his *The Piano Lesson* or anything in between, as in his *The Conversation*. However, in all instances, some sense of subject matter is communicated.

(3) *Nonobjective* imagery offers motifs, areas of

colors, texture, shapes, and so forth, sometimes repeated, that are imaginative in their entirety and do not appear as recognizable in nature, such as Matisse's *The Snail*. All three categories are valid ways to deliver theological proclamation. The nonobjective way, the least-used and the most challenging one for most congregations, has compelling possibilities in a variety of ways throughout ecclesiastical space. A congregation's involvement with this design method is a way to engage a fresh means of visual theological proclamation, and an educational accompaniment would benefit the process.

Liturgical Paraments

Liturgy is a prescribed ritual/order of worship, and in the latter part of the twentieth century, liturgical practice underwent significant renewal in Protestant churches. One of the features of this renewal was the attention given to the unique attributes of each liturgical season. Consequentially, it became possible to communicate the uniqueness of each liturgical season in an indirect, nuanced, and suggestive manner, an abstract way of transmitting awe and wonder. These visual reminders of the eternal in the present (the ultimate purpose of a parament) offered more than the season's traditional color with a precise hard-edge symbol.

Paraments can transmit mystery and revelation when imaged with necessary design ambiguity. As liturgical renewal filtered through leadership into the church context, banners and other visual accoutrements also proliferated in the chancel space, on the walls of the sanctuary, in the narthex and fellowship hall. Instead of turning to a catalogue of prescribed images, some congregations turned to an artist to design and fabricate, or fabricate by community, artful paraments that challenged established tradition with innovation.

Whether their design is traditional or not, paraments function to visually frame sacred space with the church's unique way of marking time by remembering God's redeeming acts. The church through the centuries has amassed an elaborate collection of symbols (such as lamb, wheat, grapes, shell, fish, dice, nails, star, crown, dove, net, palms). The list is long, but do they inspire when seeing them visualized? A symbol has the ability to convey a complex surplus of meaning, inviting deliberation and triggering awe. They are effective when they are imprecise. Over time, though, symbols can become so familiar that they communicate like a sign, with straightforward meaning that conveys a one-to-one relationship between the sign and its meaning, like a red light directing street traffic.

Artfully designed symbols communicate obliquely through the power of suggestion and nuance. Consider infusing trite, unimaginative and/or redundant symbols with new energy by utilizing the visual category of abstraction. It provides a touchstone of entry with recognizable subject matter (symbol) while simultaneously introducing ambiquity, an ingredient that invites contemplation. Symbolic representation has a long history in the church, is essential to Christian theological proclamation, and requires innovation with a variety of materials that feature craftsmanship. The latter reflects the goodness of handwork and honors the materiality of our world.

Commit once in each liturgical season to the practice of lifting up children's images. Have early elementary-grade school children respond visually to the texts of each liturgical season. Select the most endearing and enchanting parts of their contributions (without changing a single twist or turn of their expression) by tracing them onto acetate and then projecting them with an overhead projector onto a paper or fabric background. When children's images are writ large, the result is captivating. Whether paraments include the images of children, images designed by an artist, or, especially, if they come from a catalogue, they should relate to the distinguishing design features of the chancel furniture on which they are placed. If they do not, they will create subtle but unnecessary visual noise. While it may not be consciously recognized, this condition is as distracting as hearing airplanes flying overhead during a sermon. Instead of enhancing what is, such paraments compete with what is. Artful, nuanced, and suggestive imagery that collaborates with the design features of chancel furniture aids in invoking a transcendent experience. Thoughtfully appointed imagery, like thoughtfully selected music, spoken word, and poetic prayers, can inspire profoundly.

Liturigical Space

Liturgical space includes the chancel, the sanctuary, the narthex, and the fellowship hall in many churches, but any space for worship becomes liturgical space. All are significant in their need of quality artful images. All of the visual elements and effects discussed are in play in the larger

volumetric context of the chancel and sanctuary, where the architecture rather than the edge of a two-dimensional image determines their use. Consider gathering a small group of people in your congregation to read your space together for the purpose of seeing your space critically, closely, and carefully. Study it from every angle—chancel, sanctuary aisles, entry from narthex, balcony—and look at it from the perspective of the *effects* created.

Some of the questions to consider are the following: What are the architecture's dominant sight lines? What elements in the space amplify the architecture and what compete with it? Do you see visual patterns or repetitions? Does a particular color move and echo through the space? Should it, and if the answer is yes, then why and how? When a color appears in its most intense manifestation, do values (relative relationships of light and dark) contribute or compete in arresting attention? Consider the scale of elements in the space and ask whether there is a sense of balance or visual hierarchy. Does the visual scale and weight of elements reflect visually the theological hierarchy or meaning you want the space to communicate? Additive accoutrements like banners can, surprisingly, create misplaced emphasis. Consider the placement of chancel furniture, the balance of each piece one to another relative to the categories of balance introduced.

The architecture of a space dictates the choice and style of visual additions, even if the choice is to use a contrasting style. Sometimes this can create visual harmony with the site by thoughtful consideration of balance and proportion. More often than not, visual noise exists. Clutter—too much of too many unrelated things—is one of its root causes. Other causes include inappropriate scale of additions, discordant design relationships, as in a parament's relationship to its chancel furniture, the decorative proliferation of too many crosses, an American or state flag in the chancel (an inappropriate place for their display because that which they symbolize is extraneous to chancel function). One of the glaring causes of visual noise is the large, fabric-covered "windows" that sometimes exist in prominent frontal walls to hide organ pipes but allow sound to come through. Consider changing the fabric to match the color of the walls as well as matching the frames of the windows, making these "garage doors" in the space visually disappear. The collaborative venture of looking to see the space (an artist pays as much attention to the spaces in between things as the things themselves) also open reflection on important spatial issues and solicit remarks such as, "Well, I never did understand that!"

Conclusion

Art making is evolutionary with revolutionary eruptions in its evolution. Imagery has been a part of human history since humans became conscious of themselves, and humans keep on recreating them. Think of the influence of television advertising with its rapid-fire delivery of manipulated images. Imagine the church, as countercultural ambassador of aesthetic encounters, as offering an opportunity to stop, look, see, and be. "Seeing" in this understanding ties the act to the discernment of mystery. It allows the numinous to break in because the context enables, in the religious sense, a "crossing over" into an experience of the Holy. "Crossing over" (derived from the Latin root word *transcendere* meaning "to step over, surpass") is the bridge connecting art and spirituality, the latter understood as the lived experience of the Holy. Art experienced in the context of the church hinges on the direct experiences of the senses where they mediate a flash of insight as a legitimate source of theological insight.

Reciprocity is essential in the act of seeing. It is a give-and-take encounter. When viewing abstract or nonobjective images, someone lacking a rudimentary knowledge of nonverbal visual language might say, "I don't like it. What is it?" The better question is, "What are you saying?" Advocate for visual literacy. Quality aesthetic objects will improve the health of the church by inspiring the faithful. Contemplation is implicit in the act of seeing with discernment. A jolt of insight is more likely with more time for looking.

In summation, look upon the arts community as a new mission field, not for evangelization but for hospitality, and the church as a space where aesthetic encounters might trigger a transcendent experience. Consider sponsoring an artist-in-residence with a studio on the premise in an otherwise unused Sunday school classroom. Artwork woos the imagination, nourishes those who "see in a mirror dimly," who

Joel Schoon-Tanis, *Triumphant Parade*, Acrylic on paper, 20" x 24"

Call to Worship

Ideas

Together in the Kingdom: Ideas for Inclusive Worship

Joanne Van Sant

There are many questions and myths/beliefs about the place for people with disabilities in our faith practice. How we hold the truths of disability and healing leads to our perspective about how our practices can support people with disabilities. How are we acceptable before God, and what do we really believe about the imago Dei, the image of God? While our theology dictates our practice, we may not always live it out in our congregations and ministry.

While PC(USA) ordained, I currently pastor the Friends to Friends Community Church, a congregation of the Reformed Church in America, located in New Jersey. We are a community of believers on the entire spectrum of ability including intellectual, developmental, neurodivergent, and physical. We continue to grow and learn as a congregation what it means to be open, welcoming, inclusive, and supportive of all who join us. Our life together is always taking new shapes and forms as we support the needs of all in our worshiping body.

We know that people of all abilities talk about the many ways that worship is meaningful to them, how worship is broader and deeper beyond the heard and spoken word. How can worship leaders provide worship experiences that address multiple abilities and engage many senses, and how do they? How can we create an environment that is more accessible, inclusive and meaningful, that allows all of us to feel and hear the gospel? How can we live into God's expansive hospitality, welcome, and inclusion in congregational life? How can we create one congregational experience, together, as the kingdom of God?

Here are some practical questions you can explore:

1. How has your worship engaged forms of communication and experience beyond words in the use of visual aids, music and sound, or rituals that involve movement?
2. How do these forms of communication and experience enrich your worship practice?
3. Have these practices facilitated the participation and leadership of people with multiple levels of ability and learning styles, including people with chronic illness and/or disabilities related to aging?
4. What resources would you need (and might we develop) to pursue other creative and experiential practices in worship that help it to be more accessible, inclusive, and engaging?

I invite you, wherever you are, to share your thoughts about various forms of supports you have used in worship or to share any questions you may have. Presbyterians for Disability Concerns and those in the Disability Ministry Network love working collaboratively about what is working in our faith communities. Additional resources can be found through the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns, https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/pdc/, as well as the Disability Ministry Network, https://disabilityministrynetwork.org/.

Joanne Van Sant is the pastor of Friends to Friends Community Church in Ridgewood, New Jersey, a member of Presbyterians for Disability Concerns, and the vice president of the Disability Ministry Network.

Call to Worship

Columns

On Liturgy: Shared Space

Maggie Alsup

Accessibility and sustainability are words that bring to mind all kinds of images. From a liturgical perspective, accessibility can be linked to the ways that people feel welcomed to the table. Accessibility connects to the practical side of life as well, such as the ways people are able to enter your building, and beyond that be able to functionally use the building space.

Thinking about sustainability can raise questions around financial longevity for programs or ministry tasks. From a liturgical perspective, it can lead one to think about how we are caring for creation and our use of space, energy, and resources.

Often people want to divide accessibility and sustainability and think of them as two separate concepts. I find that sustainability and accessibility have a great deal to do with each other. For at the heart of both concepts is creating space where practices of a community are inclusive and seriously address the diverse needs of those in the community.

With that in mind, what might it look like for the church to take seriously the concepts of accessibility and sustainability when it comes to our liturgy and practices? What changes might need to happen to make these concepts a reality? How does the conversation around the phrase "all are welcome" change when we really examine and live into what it means to use the word "all"? What might our community look like if we strive to examine our lives and practices to live in the abundance of human experience rather than live into the systems that fit the status quo?

As a college chaplain, it is a joy to celebrate the achievements of our students. Commencement season is one of the best times for our community. We have countless ceremonies: from celebrations for all the honor societies, to celebrations for those in Greek life, to the recognition and celebration of our first-generation graduates, to our pet graduation ceremony, to the big event of honors convocation—celebrating all the academic achievements of the student body. Recently, we examined all the ways we celebrated and realized we were falling short in celebration and care for our LGBTQ+ students.

We began to think about the ways we could honor and celebrate them reaching this milestone in their lives. We hosted our first ever Lavender Graduation a few commencement seasons back. This celebration recognizes all that our LGBTQ+ students bring to our community and their impact on our community life. It is a fun celebratory event that honors who they are as individuals and recognizes how important the accomplishment of a college degree is for them.

When we first came up with this idea and began to work with students, some in the larger community thought it was strange to have the chaplain be a part of such an event and celebration. But those who knew all the ways I pray, lead worship, and show up for our college community thought nothing of it. They knew I was doing what needed to be done to build a better campus community that celebrated the gifts and joy of all our students. In fact, students wanted me there and expected me to be the one to open with a prayer, to be the one to bring the Divine into the celebration.

As we began the event, we did what we always do at community celebrations and had the chaplain pray and offer a blessing. We acknowledged the ways in which God created the depths of diversity in human

Maggie Alsup is chaplain and head of religious life at Lyon College in Batesville, Arkansas.

life. We also marked and acknowledged the ways in which our ancestors came before us, making a way for us to celebrate and enjoy such a day.

We gave voice to the ways in which the church has not valued or honored LGBTQ+ people. Through liturgy and ritual, prayer and confession, we marked the day together honoring and celebrating all the ways our LGBTQ+ students influence our communal life. As we celebrated, we also made note that one day we too will be the ancestors of the next generation of students in our community, and so it was up to us to continue the work to make our community life one of an expansive welcome and love.

When we are intentional about who we are and the ways in which we support and care for others, we are an authentic community. It is in these moments that the expansive love of God is experienced. That begins with examining who we say we are, then working to live into that life. It is one thing to say "all are welcome," but it is an entirely different thing to live into that saying. For the truth is that it is hard work to do.

It can be a hard reality to realize that in the way you are living you are not who you claim to be. But the good news is you can do something about it. You can work to bring change to practices and rituals that widen your circle. And in doing that you are actively working to live into who you say you are.

The goal should be to find the ways in which the church can address the intersection of sustainability and accessibility. What does it look like for the church to take seriously the mindset of creating space for the authentic selves of their members to thrive? What ways does the church show up and work alongside the Divine to bring about love and justice? And what does that look like in terms of ritual and practice?

On Music: Creating Sacred Spaces

Laura Jeon

On a warm summer night, God intervened in a way that was beyond comprehension. During a time of worship, I felt God's presence, and the fullness of God's love became indescribable. It was not just in the words of the hymns or the warmth of the prayers but in the overwhelming sense of belonging in a space where love for God and for one another was palpable. The only thought I had was, "You satisfy me, Lord. I want to be next to you all the days of my life." Growing up in a pastor's family brought me familiarity with God, but I felt that night transformed my entire understanding of worship. Worship was more than a ritualistic act; it was a profoundly personal and communal experience of God's love into which everyone breathes and is welcomed, where all hover closely together, focusing on becoming complete in God. That night showed me that worship is not only personal but a corporate experience of the love of God. In today's context, when we use the term "shared space" to talk about a church that extends beyond the four walls of a building, it embodies two of our core principles: the principle that everyone can and should be a full participant in worship and the principle of caring for God's creation. At the same time, those values—accessibility and sustainability—are so related that both urge us to love our neighbor and to preserve God's creation.

Worship is an essential part of Christian spirituality, and, in addition to rituals, it is an ongoing reflection of God's love in our daily lives. Romans 12:1 further emphasizes this by urging us to offer our bodies as "a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." True worship extends beyond Sundays, inviting us to create spaces embodying God's love and care for all people and the earth. If worship is about offering our whole selves to God, then the spaces in which worship takes place must reflect this call by welcoming everyone. Imagine arriving at a place meant to include all, only to discover that the sermon cannot be heard, or the words of the hymn cannot be followed. That sense of exclusion can become a heavy burden and may seem particularly isolating to anyone who wears hearing aids, relies on live captioning, or would like large-print bulletins. Accessibility extends beyond the physical to foster an environment of serenity or comfort within each person, a form of goodness that everyone is recognized, heard, and truly valued.

Creating accessible worship means that the congregation's needs are as diverse as ever and can be met by ramps and elevators, hearing loops, sensory-friendly spaces, and large-print bulletins. These do not simply represent the church reaching out to include people with differing abilities; having accessible worship is an act of love and radical hospitality, ensuring everyone is included. In addition, worship can also be an expression of sustainability in not just small acts but also practice. Churches can reduce the use of paper by making bulletins digital and recycling materials used in services to reduce waste. Churches can also be mindful of their choice of communion elements, using more environmentally friendly ones and saving energy and resources by having energy-efficient lights or solar panels. When churches upgrade facilities to be more accessible with ramps, hearing loops, or elevators, they can also consider using eco-friendly materials, renewable energy, and energy-efficient technologies. This reflects a strong commitment to inclusion, care for the environment,

Laura Jeon is director of worship arts and choral music
at North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

and accessibility, highlighting how looking after both people and the earth are connected expressions of the same love for God's creation. When worship spaces are designed to welcome everyone—no matter their physical, sensory, or cognitive abilities—it truly embodies the heart of the gospel. In this way, sustainability becomes a vital part of the church's spiritual life, not just an added concern.

Worship should ultimately relay the values of care, accessibility, and sustainability. As a key component, music is perhaps the most profound aspect of worship that fosters feelings of connectedness and unity. Whether the familiarity of hymns or the resonance of contemporary music, it reaches into the soul and binds us not only to God but one another. We help everyone feel included when we worship using various musical traditions, languages, and styles. Whether that is a classical musician inspired by ancient hymns or the most current worship music songwriter, we are called to come together and share so that all of God's creation—every living being and everything else—can sing its part in the grand choir of worship. Although the two issues may appear distinct, accessibility and sustainability share a particularly powerful connection. They strive to create a worship space that honors the fullness of God's creation, whether it be the people sitting in the pews or the world beyond our doors. We do this by placing accessibility at the top of our list and being ready to lead wherever God's love sends us in our care for everyone whose paths we cross. Together, these values represent a missional approach, reflecting the very heart of the gospel.

Our worship spaces of the future must be an embodiment of God's love for all of creation, and we should use them for that purpose. Worship becomes more than just a time of common praise; it is the realization and vivid expression of God's love, mercy, inclusion, and justice—embodied in worship to possess a tangible manifestation here on earth and similar to God's kingdom where every soul, no matter the circumstance, is gathered together. Going forward, we have a chance to write our own history—one defined by openness and care for those who will come after us. Our choices today will be the legacy that determines when future congregations feel God's love in worship and do so in a manner that honors God's people and creation. Moreover, in doing this—in building a safe place to be close to God and one another—our relationship with God gets stronger alongside our connection to one another through faith. These spaces help us remember that creation is sacred; it is a gift we are responsible for. When an accessible and sustainable worship space embodies these values, we give God glory by creating a divine space for all people while also honoring the world we share.

On Preaching: Known, Called, and Empowered by God

Shavon Starling-Louis

One of my favorite parts of preaching, particularly as a preacher who regularly uses the Revised Common Lectionary, is that I get to return to passages over and over and discover anew their blessings and revelations, holy reminders of how God has been, is, and will be present with creation in the most intimate and enduring ways. Recently I have been returning to the words of the Psalms, the call story of Samuel, and the interconnectedness lifted up by Paul as inspirations on the call to share life for collective flourishing.

Known, Called, and Empowered by God: A Reflection for Preachers on Ministry and Community

In Psalm 139, we encounter a God who knows us fully: "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me." This profound knowledge is not just theological—it's deeply personal and pastoral. For those of us who are preachers, this intimate relationship with God serves as both a foundation and a guide. It reminds us that we minister not out of our strength alone but from a place of being fully known, purposefully called, and lovingly empowered by God. As we bring this message to our congregations, we help create spaces where our members, too, can experience what it means to be known by God and embrace the gifts of sharing life with God and neighbor.

Known by God: Embracing Identity and Vulnerability

In Psalm 139, the assurance of being known by God offers a foundation of safety that frees people to come as they are. In a world where many feel unseen, this promise from God becomes a source of comfort. God knows our thoughts, actions, and even our hesitations. For preachers, sharing this truth can help our communities understand that God's knowledge isn't distant or cold but compassionate and understanding.

This divine intimacy includes both our strengths and weaknesses. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV), "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul's words offer comfort, reminding us that God does not turn away from our limitations; rather, God invites us to bring our whole selves. By encouraging our congregations to embrace this vulnerability, we foster an environment where others can be honest about their struggles, knowing they are loved and accepted both by God and by their church community.

Called by God: Responding with Obedience and Faith

The story of young Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1–10) presents an example of calling that is both humbling and empowering. Samuel hears God's call in the quiet of the night—a moment that reminds us to be attentive to God's voice, even when it arrives in subtle or unexpected ways. For those of us who lead, Samuel's experience serves as a powerful reminder that God's

Shavon Starling-Louis is past Co-Moderator of the 225th General Assembly (2022) and serves as campus minister at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

calling may reach us at any stage in life, often asking us to step into roles we may not feel entirely prepared for.

Sharing this story can inspire our congregations to reflect on their own lives and calling. How might God be calling them to use their gifts? Whether in church, at work, or in daily life, there is an invitation here for each person to respond with a willing heart. Samuel's story reassures us that answering God's call doesn't require perfection or expertise—just a readiness to listen and trust.

Empowered by God: Strength in Weakness

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me," capture a transformative truth. For us as preachers, and for all who follow Christ, it is liberating to realize that God's strength is made visible in our limitations. This knowledge frees us from the unrealistic expectations of perfection that ministry can sometimes impose.

By sharing our own stories of relying on God's strength in times of weakness, we can model a ministry that depends not on our own capacity but on God's. This approach encourages our congregations to serve without pretense, trusting that God can work through their lives, even when they feel inadequate. Emphasizing this message helps break down barriers of self-doubt and encourages others to answer God's call with confidence in God's sustaining grace.

Sharing Space with God and Neighbor

When we gather as a faith community, we're reminded that we are sharing sacred space not only with God but also with one another. This shared space, enriched by the presence of a God who knows us deeply, allows our congregations to experience healing, trust, and encouragement. As preachers, we can nurture this by creating environments where people feel safe, celebrated, and supported in their journeys.

This communal life is both a gift and a responsibility, calling us to build a church that mirrors God's love and compassion. In sharing this space, we become a tangible expression of God's care for one another. Here, people can wrestle with their callings, find strength in their weaknesses, and know they are not alone. Together, we are part of a sacred journey—rooted in being fully known by God, bonded with our neighbors, and empowered to live out God's purposes.

Practical Ways for Preachers to Foster a Known, Called, and Empowered Community

1. *Highlight vulnerability as a strength*: Encourage your congregation to embrace vulnerability by preaching about God's power in our weakness, as Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12:9. In sharing your own journey, you help create a space where authenticity is valued.
2. *Empower individuals to discern their calling*: Like Samuel, each person has a unique calling. Offer practical tools for discernment, such as prayer, reflection, and community support, helping people listen for God's voice in their lives.
3. *Model dependence on God's strength*: Openly acknowledge your own reliance on God's grace. By showing your own trust in God's strength over personal ability, you invite others to step out in faith, even when they feel unsure.
4. *Celebrate the blessing of shared space*: Remind your congregation that sharing space with God and neighbor is a blessing that strengthens us all. Cultivate a sense of gratitude for this community, and encourage each member to see their relationships as opportunities to give and receive God's love.

As preachers, we are given the privilege of leading a people who are fully known, purposefully called, and lovingly empowered by God. Through our preaching, may we continue to build spaces where others feel truly known, valued, and equipped for their callings. In our shared life with God and with one another, let us witness to the beauty and power of community—a gift that enriches our lives and deepens our faith. Together, may we walk in love and service, ever mindful of the God who knows us, calls us, and strengthens us for divine work.

On the Arts: Photography in Worship

Ralph Basui Watkins

Tia Rínae Garett and The Excellent Praise Chorale (2024)

> Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."
>
> —John 8:12

Photography literally means "writing with light." Photographers see; we see what others do not see, capture it in our viewfinder, and make a picture. The picture freezes time, magically preserves the moment, and though a still life, is yet alive. When we look at an image of people as they were in the image, they are alive. We relive moments in time by looking at photographs of our past. There is something spiritual about photographs. They connect and touch us in ways we can't quite explain.

As we sit with photographs, we discover things that we didn't see at first sight. The camera magically captures details that become visible as we study the image. How can images in worship help us to see what we don't see? How can images in worship help us to see *who* we don't see? How can images in worship help us to imagine a more just world that embraces the principles of radical inclusion?

I had a photoshoot to capture one of my favorite choirs in Atlanta, The Excellent Praise Chorale, a choir made up of my LGBTQ+ siblings and allies. We had crossed paths in worship experiences as they were ministering and I was creating photos and doing documentary work, my ministry. I admired their work and they mine, so we decided to collaborate on the photos for their new album cover.

All the members of this music ministry came out of mainline churches, but in many mainline churches they couldn't be their full selves. We saw them in church, but we didn't *see* them. When we gathered in my studio to make their picture, I *saw* them. I had to *see* them to get to know them as persons and photograph them. A photo is a living relationship that captures a living moment that will never die. The making of a photo is a co-creative process between the photographer and the people in the photograph.

Ralph Basui Watkins is Peachtree Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and a professional photographer.

Tia Rínae Garett and The Excellent Praise Chorale (2024)

To create beauty in an image is to love those with whom you co-create. The photographer has to love to fully see. To see requires that you love and want to see. I wanted to see them because as my siblings in Christ I love them, respect them, and my ministry is to show them in the beautiful light. My goal was to shine light on them so that we could see all of them, to see the beauty of my siblings. No more darkness; no more not showing up as your full self.

My job was to capture the children of God, who have been gifted by God to sing God's praises. I connected my phone to my portable speaker, the music started playing, and we started praising God and making something beautiful. When the pictures were finished and I returned to my office to edit them, I could see the joy and feel the joy as I relived the time we had spent together creating something beautiful.

The images immediately appeared on Facebook and Instagram as the choir announced their upcoming concert. Members in the group posted the pictures on their pages and feeds, and the love came flowing in. People saw them, loved what they saw, and shared their love. The people wouldn't have seen them in this way if the pictures had not been created and shared. Many of my friends saw my work and commented on what I am doing and what it means for me to be an ally of the LGBTQ+ community and serve by making art with my siblings.

Many of my friends saw for the first time a choir so beautiful and grand. They saw Tia Rínae Garrett and The Excellent Praise Chorale as their full selves as we celebrate the God who loves them, you, and me and uses us for God's glory. The spirit of photography. What can we show in worship, who can we bring in that have been locked out, and how can we stimulate imaginations by using images in worship that create a counter-narrative? Images on bulletins, images on screens, and even images on our social media can stimulate imaginations and help us to see God in new and exciting ways. May the spirit of photography shed light so that we may never be in darkness.

Tia Rínae Garett, founder, director of The Excellent Praise Chorale (2024)

Call to Worship

Book Review

Imagination in an Age of Crisis: Soundings from the Arts and Theology

edited by Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden

(Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022)
337 pages, ISBN 978-1-6667-0688-8

Reviewed by Tricia Petraven

The arts have been eschewed by the church at various points throughout history, but the church has also been a great patron of the arts. This back-and-forth relationship is probably because artists are often edgy; we point out things that might be uncomfortable, nonconformist, or even blasphemous. As religion and the arts have found ways to work together and even embrace each other, artists continue to push boundaries and ask questions. This book came out of a conference on arts and theology that had been planned in Australia in July 2020. The conference was cancelled due to COVID-19 and turned into a published compilation of articles and writings on crisis, theology, and imagination. As such, it is a mixture of academic explorations in theology and the arts, poetry, artists discussing their work, aboriginal art experiences, and stories about how art empowers transformation in difficult times. I'm an artist and a pastor with both an M.F.A. and an M.Div., but I'm often more interested in doing art than in theorizing about it, so I related to some of the essays more than others. I'll share a few of my favorites.

The one I cannot stop thinking about is titled "Setting the Record Straight: The Prophetic Art of Ai Weiwei" by Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin. It follows the controversial career of artist Ai Weiwei, who uses his artwork to draw attention to social justice issues. He made significant art pieces related to the earthquake in southwest China in 2008, most notably *Straight*, which involved collecting thousands of pieces of bent and twisted metal rods from the earthquake zone, painstakingly beating them straight, and laying them out in an exhibit in a way that mirrors the Richter scale, with each rod representing someone who died in the catastrophe. Another of his pieces, *Remembering*, spells out in Chinese "she had been living happily for seven years" using brightly colored children's backpacks. This was to draw attention to the thousands of children killed because the schools they were in were not built to high standards and collapsed in the earthquake. Weiwei said this piece was "the artwork that made me the most dangerous person in China" (p. 155). He faced persecution by Chinese authorities but continued making art to criticize social problems, including consumerism in the West, the refugee crisis, and his own government's totalitarianism. He wrote in his memoir, "If in a pitch-dark room I find a single candle . . . I will light that candle. I have no choice" (p. 167).

A similar essay by Rod Pattenden titled "George Gittoes: The Artist as Prophet and Mystic" tells of an Australian artist who works in film documentary, oil painting, and community collaboration to offer hope in the face of war and destruction. Gittoes says, "I believe in art so much that I am willing to risk my life to do it" (p. 281). One wonders how an artist can go from one crisis conflict to another, seeing so much death and devastation, and not be completely hopeless. His calling is not just to observe but to help and to make art in the face of loss and grief, which is a way to heal. Gittoes says, "Wherever there is war, there need to be artists willing to create in the face of it—the ultimate act of resistance to the destroyers" (p. 293).

Tricia Petraven is a transitional pastor who uses the arts in worship to work especially with churches who are experiencing trauma. She has also been a college professor of theater design, a set designer, and a scenic and visual artist. She is opening a new church in the fall of 2025 called the Presbyterian Church of the Arts at Park Circle, in Charleston, South Carolina.

Another of my favorite essays is titled "Imagined Conversations and Real Letters During COVID-Times" by Naomi Wolfe. The author shares conversations she has with her dead father and her dead mother during COVID. Written from an aboriginal perspective, the article explores the role of imagination in coping with global and personal crisis. Wolfe converses with her parents, speaking to them and imagining their responses to her as they give her courage and sound advice. She emphasizes that "there is a strong desire to seek comfort and solace from our parents and other Elders when confronted with life's challenges" (p. 257). I felt so connected to her story of conversing with those who have died as if they were still here. I could easily see myself doing the same thing (and I have) when I lose someone I'm close to. What a gift to have that imagination and be able to manifest it in an uplifting way!

Several essays are written by artists who write about how the pandemic changed their work and changed the way they look at the world. Douglas Purnell, a retired pastor and artist, found his paintings becoming much less literal, with more layers, and found himself gravitating toward red paint for his work. Australian Penny Dunstan became moved by the phrase "choose the path you know," and it inspired her to create art with cotton and grass. Karly Michelle Edgar, a theatre student who was diagnosed with a physically challenging disease shortly before COVID hit, coped with her disease by repeatedly drawing tiny circles, covering page after page to distract her mind and make something tangible and beautiful during her suffering. During the pandemic, she expanded her circles into large, colorful pieces using repetition to reflect and wait, and found beauty through it. Libby Byrne made art in her sketchbook throughout 2020 and sent it to the Brooklyn Art Gallery, which invites anyone to submit a sketchbook to their collection for others to see. Byrne was specifically creating art that explores worship and faith. Submitting her work for others to see was a way of connecting to community.

There is so much more to this volume than I have been able to explore here, including stunning poetry, reflections on theater and film during crisis, and features about music and drumming as artistic outlets. I was inspired to explore more art forms and to appreciate art as a rich resource for transformation, healing, and renewal.

PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS

Worship & Music Conference

compassion • kindness • humility • meekness • patience •

June 15-20

&

June 22-27, 2025

presbymusic.org/conference

SECOND ANNUAL

Presbyterian Association of Musicians
Mid-South Region
PRESBYMUSIC.ORG/REGIONS

SEPTEMBER 12-13

FESTIVAL OF CHOIRS

Join us for fellowship and song.
Bring home new anthems to share!

presbymusic.org/regions/mid-south-region

MORRISTOWN, TENNESSEE
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Call to Worship

Volume 58.4
Shared Space

PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS

PDS 21162-24-004
calltoworshipjournal.org