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Call to Worship



Volume 59.2
In Life and in Death

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Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Volume 59.2
In Life and in Death



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Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

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Call to Worship

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Errata

The previous issue of *Call to Worship* (59.1), the Lectionary Companion for 2025–2026, Year A, included weekly suggestions for vocal solos in the Season after Pentecost by Jeanine Wagner. We appreciate her contributions throughout the year and apologize for the omission of the vocal solo suggestions for Sundays from Trinity Sunday through the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 12, printed here. We appreciate your graciousness regarding our error.

These suggestions are included in the online edition of volume 59.1, found at calltoworshipjournal.org/lectionary-companion-59-1/, and in the PDF version of the issue.

Please reference the Key to Abbreviations beginning on page 4 and Jeanine Wagner's introduction on page 10 of volume 59.1 for this content's supporting materials.

May 31, 2026 **Trinity Sunday**
 "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace," Mark Hayes,
 Sheet Music Now, high/medium/low (M)
 "This Little Light of Mine," *Song and Spirituals* by
 Jacqueline Hairston, Jacqueline Hairston, Classical
 Vocal Reprints, high/medium/low (MA)
 "Sing to the Lord a New Song," *Psalm Settings of*
Craig Courtney, Craig Courtney, BP, opt hn (M)

June 7, 2026 **Second Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 5**
 "Walk Together Children," *The Deep River Collection*,
 Moses Hogan, HAL, high/low (ME)
 "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee," *The Church Soloist:
 Eight Sacred Songs*, Eric Thiman, Presto Music,
 medium (M)
 "There Is a Balm in Gilead," Hale Smith, Halsco
 Music, 2 equal voices duet (M)

June 14, 2026 **Third Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 6**
 "You and I Can Tell the World," Jacqueline Hairston,
 JH Productions, medium (MA)
 "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," *The Sacred
 Collection*, arr. Richard Walters, HAL, high/
 medium/low (MA)

June 21, 2026 **Fourth Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 7**
 "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian in My Heart," Maria
 Thompson Corley, available from the composer,
 medium (MA)
 "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," *Songs of Comfort and
 Hope*, Mark Hayes, LOR, medium high (E)
 "God of the Deep," *Songs for the Journey*, Dan Forrest,
 BP, high/medium/low (ME)

June 28, 2026 **Fifth Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 8**
 "Come, Ye Blessed," John Prindle Scott, GSH, high/
 medium/low (A)
 "All My Trials, Lord," from *The Promised Land*,
 Gwyneth Walker, gwynethwalker.com, medium
 high (MA)
 "Church Without Walls," *Forever God*, Pepper
 Choplin, LOR, medium (M)

July 5, 2026 **Sixth Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 9**
 "Come Home," Craig Courtney, BP, high/medium/
 low (E)
 "America the Beautiful," arr. Ruth Elaine Schram,
 BRI, duet (E)
 "He's Got the Whole World in His Hand," *In His
 Hand, Seven Spirituals*, arr. Margaret Bonds, TPR,
 high (MA)

July 12, 2026 **Seventh Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 10**
 "My Master Hath a Garden," *The Church Soloist: Eight
 Sacred Songs*, Eric Thiman, Presto Music, medium
 (M)
 "Ain't-A Dat Good News!" **Spiritual Art Song
 Collection**, Charles Lloyd Jr., Warner Bros.,
 medium high (M)
 "Jesus, My Morning Song," *A Time for Song: Solos for
 Prayer and Devotion*, Brad Nix, SHAW, medium (E)

July 19, 2026 **Eighth Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 11**
 "God Is a God," Wendell P. Whalum, Marvel,
 medium (M)
 "He Keeps Me Singing," *He Keeps Me Singing*, Mary
 McDonald, LOR, medium high (M)
 "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord," *44 Art Songs
 and Spirituals*, Florence Price, Classical Vocal
 Reprints, high/ medium (M)

July 26, 2026 **Ninth Sunday after
Pentecost/Proper 12**
 "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me," *Spiritual Art Song
 Collection*, Charles Lloyd Jr., Warner Bros., high/
 medium (M)
 "Nearer, My God, to Thee," arr. Tom Trenney, MSM,
 high/medium (M)
 "The God of Love My Shepherd Is," *The Church
 Soloist: Eight Sacred Songs*, Eric Thiman, NOV,
 medium (M)

Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

Many articles in this issue recognize the personal significance of the line referenced in its title, taken from the first line of A Brief Statement of Faith, “In life and in death we belong to God.” Cynthia Campbell considers its meaning, lineage, and significance, and her role on the committee to draft the confession gives her insight that is a gift to this issue’s conversation. Campbell asks, “When all is said and done, what do you hang on to?” Liturgy columnist Elizabeth Shannon Stokes shares, “To be perfectly frank, it’s the only thing I’m sure I believe all the time.” Several others suggest that these words can hold them and their communities in faith amid the most difficult times.

Death has a way of toppling any certainties that keep us in our daily tasks, of poking holes in that boundary between personal and professional life, especially for those who are professional caregivers and ministers. The assurance that in life and in death we belong to God seems to do the same, going with us in whatever role we find ourselves. I give thanks for the vulnerability of the contributors to this issue, as many share reflections about the ways their personal losses have influenced their leadership with those who are dying and their communities. Following their lead, I introduce this issue with my own personal reflections.

As I write this, my four-year-old daughter is playing with clay at a table across the room. Either she is so aware of her surroundings that she knows the topic of this issue or its echoes are showing up everywhere for me. She hums “Baby Shark” while poking holes in her rapidly disintegrating piece of clay, then pauses, looks at me, and asks, “Will you be with me when I die?”

It should be no surprise that death is on her mind, though American culture strives with all its might to convince us all that death is not on the list of approved, family-friendly conversation topics. Media for both children and adults surrounds us with violence and a sense of impending doom. Children are wise and observant; they know that death is in the air.

Already my four-year-old has been to her great-grandfather’s and great-aunt’s funerals, tugging at my skirt at each as I offered a prayer of commendation at their graves. She and I both know the sensation of walking on the absurd turf-like fabric material used by many funeral homes to cover evidence that a grave has been dug. The feeling of walking on the uneven ground without being able to see it is so emblematic of the cultural forces that hope to sanitize death. Death is not on the list of approved, family-friendly conversation topics, after all, but shouldn’t we know the color of that local earth where we bury our beloved ones? Kimberley Wadlington raises some of these questions as well in her analysis of two books about green burials by Kent Bureson and Beth Hoeltke.

The cultural, medical, and funerary practices we have come to assume in the United States often keep death at arm’s length and reinforce a kind of dying inconsistent with early Christian understandings of death. Richard Deibert recognizes this so beautifully in his contribution to this issue. He gives scriptural analysis, investigates the ways of thinking that have formed a Western biomedical understanding of death, and offers guidance on preparing the body and soul for dying in the midst of it. I am grateful for articles that guide us in the particular practice of planning and leading funerals. Carla Jones Brown guides us in thinking about funeral preaching.

With sensitivity and wisdom, she discusses the role of clergy in a funeral event, reflects on the language used for the proclamation of the Word in these occasions, and calls preachers to a particular kind of presiding in these sacred spaces. Keion Mekhi Jackson gives a history of Black sacred music that includes both lament and hope in a powerful testimony about the gifts of this history to the church in times of loss and at the difficult occasions.

Patrick Lane accompanies us in thinking about the life cycle of communities as he considers the meaning of resurrection for church institutions that are said to be in decline. He defines resurrection as more than a return to what was, suggesting possibilities for leadership that both validates and heals scarcity mindsets.

Artistic practice has a way of giving language to this conversation when words may be difficult. Jill Carattini, a guest curator and contributor to this issue, has curated a group exhibition as The Work of Our Hands section for this edition. She considers a vision for engaging visual art that includes listening to artists of many perspectives and learning from the practices of artists, who often gather in diverse groups, listen, and share with authenticity, curiosity, and wonder.

Derrick McQueen shares a reflection of a powerful event he attended, the West Village Chorale's winter concert held at Judson Memorial Church in New York City, titled *Requiem*. The piece

was a conversation between Gabriel Fauré's 1888 work, *Requiem in D Minor*, and Joel Thompson's 2014 work, *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*. The piece and McQueen's review of it both consider the conversation between concepts in sacred music and human life, between worship and work for justice.

"Will you be with me when I die?" The question rings in my ears.

I think of the painful and powerful work of Ashley-Anne Masters, whose article in this issue recognizes the importance of practicing honesty with children when speaking about loss and dying.

After a moment of hesitation, I say, "While we are living or while we are dying, God's love is always with us, and we are together in God's love." Something about the conversation holds me in wonder even as it breaks my heart. In a culture so fixated on violence, avoidant of aging, and disembodied in death, there is a countercultural energy in speaking about death candidly and speaking words of love into the abyss.

Have we become convinced we don't want to talk about it, just as we have come to assume the fake plastic turf will keep us safe from the earth turned up around us? To speak of death is to be held in mystery, to trust love amid pain. May the articles in this issue convince you that you are not alone in dying and give you support as you hear those in your community ask, "Will you be with me when I die?"

—Sally Ann McKinsey, Editor



This work began as an initial act of engaging memories of home by carving an image into a copper plate, followed by a repeated retracing of the plate lines, reflecting an internal digging further into the memory. At various points in the material process, I printed an edition, each proof of the plate a stage of remembering.

The more I built up the layers of the image, both on the plate and in my mind, the less clear it was, the darker the image of home became, and the more physically challenging it was to carve the plate. The wrestling with memories was simultaneously more labored.

Experimenting with the order created different emotions. Laying them finally out as a cycle, prints 1-7 followed by 7-1, the effect of moving from one direction and then back again, felt truer to my emotional engagement with the process. As I made the work, I realized I didn't want to destroy the image of home, but to come to an understanding.

Anna Yearwood
Memory & Understanding
 Fabriano Rosapina paper, water-based ink, copper plate, dry-point etching.
 Partial view of series originally displayed in cycle: prints 1-7 followed by 7-1
 14 prints 6 x 8.5 in.
 2017

Call to Worship

Feature Articles

“In Life and in Death We Belong to God”: A Brief Statement of Faith

Cynthia M. Campbell

Introduction

In the church where I worship, the congregation sings a song as the children come down to the front of the sanctuary for the “time with children.” One of the songs says: “I belong. You belong. We belong to God.” We are encouraged to use the ASL motions as we sing. I wonder what we hear when we say, “I belong. You belong. We belong”? What kind of belonging is this? What do you belong to?

When the verb is used in the active tense, it generally means that I am a part of something. “I belong to a fitness club. I’m a member of Rotary or an alumni association.” Being a member of something means that, at some point, I signed up and paid my dues. Membership is, in this sense, transactional: I choose to belong; I accept certain obligations, but I also expect and receive rewards and privileges. And because membership is something I have chosen, I can terminate it at any time.

When *belong* is used in the passive, however, it can mean something different. “That car belongs to me.” I own it. “That’s my umbrella—not yours.” In this sense, *belonging* implies possession. The speaker in this case has a particular, and perhaps proprietary, relationship with something or even someone. A sense of fierce independence is pervasive in American culture, which places special value on individual agency. Historically, Americans like to create organizations, associations, clubs, and congregations and have relished the freedom to leave them when they no longer meet their needs. But I wonder if that is what *belonging* means when we think about it in our relationship with God.

What does it mean to belong to God?

An Affirmation of Faith for Today

In 1991, the General Assembly of the PC(USA) completed the process of adopting A Brief Statement of Faith. The occasion for this newest confession was the reunion of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church U.S., the so-called “northern” and “southern” streams of Presbyterianism that divided in 1861 in the run-up to the Civil War. As part of the plan of reunion, it was decided that the reunited denomination would have a revised *Book of Confessions* (based on the one created by the UPCUSA when the Confession of 1967 was accepted) and that a new confession would be written. In 1984, the year after reunion, Moderator J. Randolph Taylor appointed a committee of twenty-one persons representing the breadth of the newly formed denomination.

The committee spent four years drafting the statement, followed by a year of church-wide study. The next draft was presented to the General Assembly in 1989 and then sent to a committee of fifteen for final recommendation. That committee reviewed all the comments received, made a number of revisions, and recommended the final document to the 1990 General Assembly. It was overwhelmingly approved and sent on to the presbyteries for their consideration and approval, after which the Brief Statement was officially added to the *Book of Confessions* in 1991.

The drafting committee made a number of foundational decisions that shaped their work. First, they wanted to write a statement that could be used both for teaching and in worship. Second, they wanted a statement that was *brief* enough to

Cynthia Campbell is a former president of McCormick Theological Seminary and served on the Special Committee to draft A Brief Statement of Faith.

be recited in worship as a statement of faith. Third, since this statement was going to be placed alongside ten other creeds, confessions, and catechisms, the committee determined that they would not try to cover every topic or doctrine expressed in the other statements. Rather, they sought to present what they saw as the core of Reformed Christian faith in light of the challenges of the day. Fourth, they wanted the language of the statement to resonate as much as possible with Scripture and be relatively free of technical theological language. Fifth, when they decided to structure the statement around the persons of the Trinity, the version they used is one many recognize as a benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:13). Placing the story of Jesus at the beginning reminds us that he is our “window onto the Trinity.”

Finally, they wrote an opening sentence that has its roots both in Scripture and in a previous confession, while also speaking directly into some of the most significant challenges of life today. This sentence has found its way into the life and liturgy of the church, most notably in the liturgies used around the time of death. It is a sentence with deep resonance and speaks as strongly today as it did more than thirty years ago: *In life and in death we belong to God*.

In Life and in Death

This is a sentence with a long history and a powerful lineage. Within the *Book of Confessions*, it harkens back to the first question in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. . . . Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him (*Book of Confessions*, 4.001).

Catechisms are ancient teaching tools revived during the Reformation as a way to spread new theological insights. This catechism is named for the ancient university town of Heidelberg, where it was written. In the mid-sixteenth century, religious conflict was not simply between Catholics

and Protestants. Fierce debates went on between Lutheran and Calvinist (or what came to be “Reformed”) Christians. In an attempt to end (or at least calm) the conflict, Frederick the Elector, ruler of the region, commissioned two scholars from Heidelberg to write a catechism. It was completed in 1562. While it did not solve the controversies, the Heidelberg Catechism has remained a significant tool for teaching and preaching in many of the Reformed churches in Europe, as well as the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church.

In the midst of fundamental theological disputes, this document does not lead with doctrine. It leads with a very personal, existential question: When all is said and done, what do you hang onto? When faced with all that living and dying brings, what do you have to stand on? And who, if anyone, stands with you? It’s an ancient but also a very modern question, one to which we can all relate. Perhaps not every day, but sooner or later, every one of us comes to the point where this is the question. In the face of life and death, my own, the deaths of those dearest to me, the deaths of people far away but whose stories stream across the news: in the face of all that, what do I have to hold on to? What gives me comfort, confidence, and hope?

The larger answer is, of course, Jesus Christ. But what is striking is the way the answer is expressed as a relationship of belonging. It is not an abstract theological affirmation; it is a confession of personal identity. Christ is the Savior of all, and he has made me his own: I *belong* to God in Jesus Christ.

Heidelberg does not stand on its own, of course. Behind it are the words of the apostle Paul:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom. 14:7–9).

As is often the case, these deeply theological words seem almost inserted into an argument Paul is making about something else entirely. The final chapters of Romans (12–15, specifically) are the “so what” following the chapters in which Paul lays out his theological vision. Now, he turns to how redeemed people are to live, specifically how they are to live in community with one another.

The community of Christians in Rome was, like so many others, made up of people from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. As in Corinth and Galatia, this made for conflicts around the question of what laws or practices from Jewish tradition were to be observed in Christian communities. In Romans 14, Paul addresses the issue of whether to eat meat that has not been slaughtered appropriately (or has been first part of an offering in a pagan temple and then sold). Paul clearly feels that the old rules (what today would be called “kosher” preparation) no longer apply. But he warns those who share his view not to judge those who think otherwise:

Those who eat must not judge those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? (Rom. 14:3-4).

The theme of this chapter of Romans is how Christians are to deal with differences of conscience (and differences of opinion) in Christian community. We are not to judge, and we are not to insist on our practice in any way that would put the conscience of another believer in jeopardy: “If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love” (14:15). Why? For Paul, the theological principle that underlies what looks like an ethical argument is that “we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.” Because we each individually and all of us collectively belong to God, we belong to one another and thus have obligations of compassion and care for one another. Christian community is envisioned as the place where we learn how to treat ourselves and others with compassion and respect. Then it is our task to carry those practices into our daily lives, our communities, our culture, fulfilling Christ’s commission to be salt of the earth and light of the world.

This idea that our fundamental identity is as people who belong to God did not originate with Paul. It is deeply rooted in the faith of Israel, going all the way back to the Exodus story and the covenant God makes with Israel: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7). Prophets used this vision to urge Israel to return to God and to provide reassurance in the midst when things were at their worst: “But now thus says the

LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isa. 43:1). It finds frequent expression in the psalms, nowhere more eloquently than in Psalm 100: “Know that the LORD is God, who made us, to whom we belong. We are God’s people, the sheep of God’s flock” (Ps. 100:3, *The Ecumenical Grail Psalter*).

The theme continues in the Gospels: “You did not choose me but I chose you,” Jesus says (John 15:16). Unlike other religious teachers of the time whom students sought out, Jesus chooses disciples, saying, “Come, follow me.” We commemorate this in baptism when we say: “Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Because God is eternal, so is God’s relationship with us. This belonging, which is at the heart of our identity as those claimed by God in baptism, does not end with the end of our life in this world. “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” In life and in death, in all our living and in our dying, we belong to God. What lies beyond death we cannot describe exactly or explain completely. But the promises of God sealed in the resurrection of Jesus give us confidence to affirm that “neither death, nor life, . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). This is the hope we proclaim in the face of death and in the presence of loss of any kind. It is this alone that gives us courage to live fully.

Living a Life of Belonging

Two members of the drafting committee, William Placher and David Willis-Watkins, write this in their commentary on the Brief Statement:

The opening words of the introduction signal one of the important themes of the whole statement: “In life and in death. . . .” A faith offering hope that stops short at death isn’t good enough. It would not only fail to respond to our fears about what lies beyond death, it would distort what needs to be confessed about life here and now.¹

Each of us, sooner or later, comes face to face with our own mortality and with the deaths of those closest to us. Christian faith proclaims that

death is not the end. This is a “comfort,” that is, an affirmation of God’s great mercy and providential care for all of us.

Death confronts us in other ways, however. We see it in wars that rage around the world and mass shootings closer to home; in the faces of children condemned to die because they lack access to food and clean water; in the persistence of poverty compounded by racism and political oppression; and, in the words of the Brief Statement, the death we threaten “to the planet entrusted to our care.” Only a God who is capable of giving us hope in the face of these kinds of death is worthy of our worship, service, and devotion.

This idea of God’s providential care is a hallmark of Reformed Christianity and has enabled countless people to live with confidence, courage, and incredible freedom. Building on Romans 14:7, John Calvin wrote this:

We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for [God] and die for [God]. We are God’s: let [God’s] wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward [God] as our only lawful goal (*Institutes*, 3.7.1).

It has been my experience that those who are grounded in this conviction have a certain shape to their lives. When you trust that God is utterly trustworthy, then you approach life, and all that it brings of joy and sorrow, adventure and tragedy, with confidence. This is not the “self-confidence” of a self-made individual, but a deep sense that all will be well. Trusting that God is trustworthy, that God makes promises and keeps them, that God’s name is love: that is what makes it possible to endure anything.

God is not only stronger than death; God is stronger than the forces of violence, injustice, oppression, and exploitation. Being convinced of that is a source of incredible freedom. This is what we see, I think, when we look at those who resisted Hitler, who worked and marched for voting rights in the United States, and who toppled the apartheid regime in South Africa. Some were Christians; some

were not. But all of these, and so many others in so many other struggles for justice, did so because their confidence in something (Someone) larger had replaced their fear.

We Trust

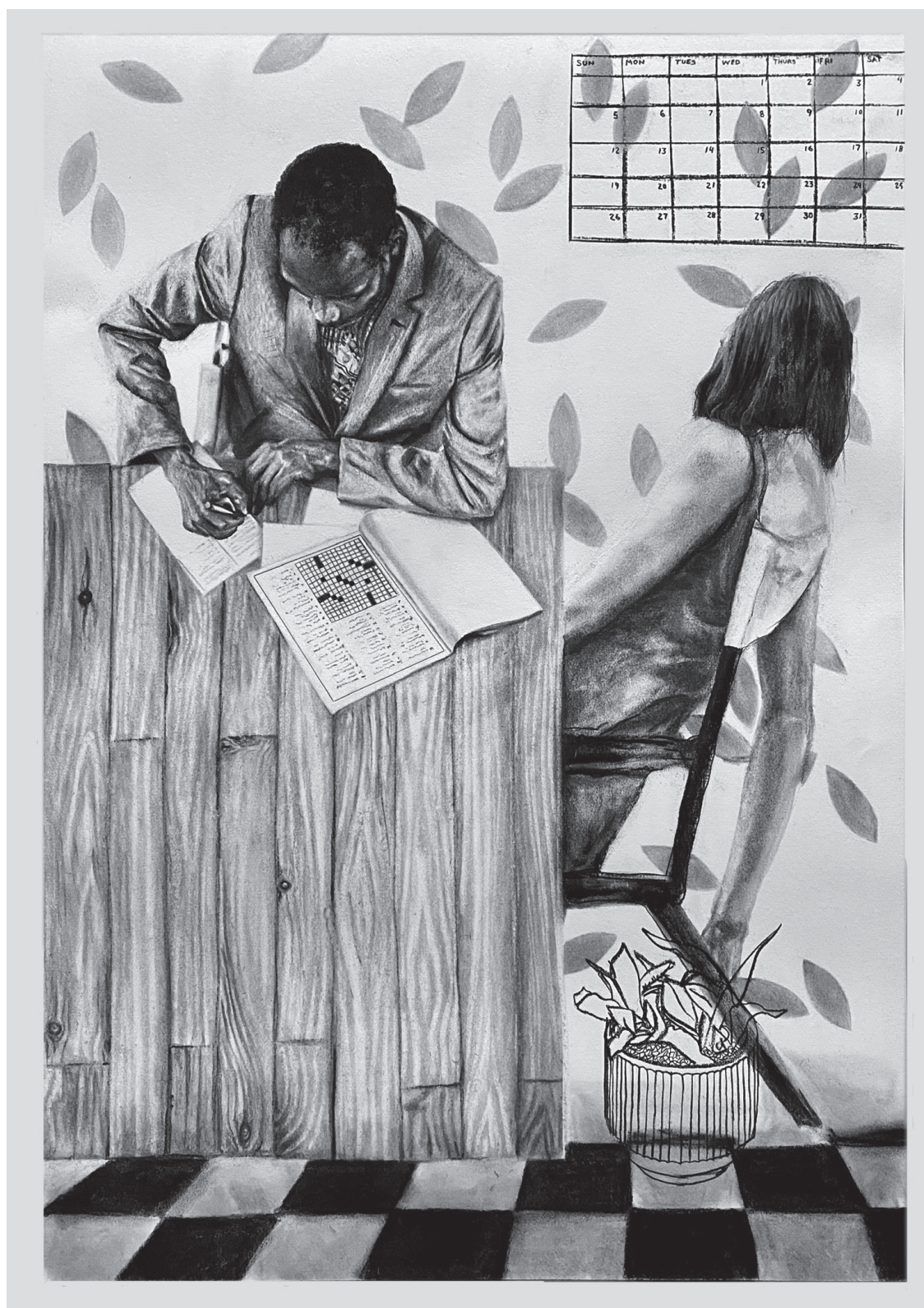
One of the other foundational decisions made by the drafting committee was that they would not use the word *believe*. In our contemporary context, that word generally means something intellectual: I think that’s right, so I believe it. As such, it has the potential to make us think that being a Christian means “believing” certain propositions to be true. This can then lead to the idea that if I believe the right things, regardless of anything else, I will be “saved.”

In light of this confusion, the drafters returned to the root meaning of believe which is “trust,” as in “I believe in you. I trust you.” Trust is about relationship, and that is really what faith is about. “We trust in the one, triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.” Trust is not abstract assent; it is a way of life. Trust is how we walk forward even if the journey is hard and the road dangerous. Trust is willingness to welcome strangers and meet God in everyone we encounter. Trust is looking back on life and seeing the hand of God when we couldn’t see it at the time. Trust is coming to the end and entrusting ourselves to the One whose love for us endures all things.

“I belong, you belong, we belong to God.” The song we sing is so important for children to learn and internalize. But it is just as important for the adults who are singing along. Especially when the world seems fragile or dangerous, when trust in social institutions is declining, when the planet we call home is threatened by the way we treat it, when fear and anger seem to be just beneath the surface in many conversations—in the face, of all of these things we need to know that they are not the only things that are true. There is more: in life and in death, in the bookends of our lives, we are not alone. We are called by name. We belong to God.

Note

1. William C. Placher and David Willis-Walker, *Belonging to God: A Commentary on A Brief Statement of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 15.



Craig Hawkins
Table No. 2
 charcoal on paper
 22 x 30 in.
 2025

The table is a boundary marker; bridge or barrier, bringing in, keeping out. This work marks the beginning of a series exploring tables as spaces of invitation and disconnection, shared identity and social status, conflict and hope.

Will Your Dying Be Holy?

Richard Deibert

Preface

This article aims to prepare you for a graceful end of life on this sweet, troubled planet. No matter how the door of your “one wild and precious life”¹ closes, whether by accident, terminal illness, cognitive decline, or withering age, every inching step toward readiness will pay a hundredfold for you and your beloved. *Please begin now.*

I am writing specifically for worshipping Christians, and the article will unfold in four parts:

- I. The Current Definition of “Good Death” in the United States
- II. The Church’s New Testament Gospel of Human Mortality
- III. Preparing Your Body for Holy Dying
- IV. Preparing Your Soul for Holy Dying²

I begin emphasizing how radically the landscape of death in the United States has shifted over the last fifty years. How we die; how not to die; how we fail to die; where we die; why we die; how to manage our dying; how to manage our dead bodies; and most recently, *whether* we’ll die.³ Here is the essence of this radical shift: *Your death no longer belongs to you.* The most intimate, transcendent, memorable, and holy moment of human life, the only event you perfectly share with the whole of humanity, no longer personally belongs to you.⁴

How you will die has been stolen and is now primarily the purview of those who do not deeply know you or care about you. We in the Western church stood silent and watched this burglary of our most precious treasure. Modern medicine “hides death with technology and dissolves death in discourses,” writes physician-philosopher Jeffrey P.

Bishop. “In short, medicine seeks to remove death’s sting from the human community.”⁵ Bishop is worth hearing at length:

The important problem in the medical world is how to manipulate the body or the psyche in order to get the effects that we desire. Bodies have no purpose or meaning in themselves, except insofar as we direct those bodies according to our desires. . . . [The body] stands before us as a manipulable object.⁶

Owning the way we die is both the essence and culmination of our Christian witness, and if you want to own your death again, you must start pursuing your death now; you must stay strong on the trail; you must fight through countless obstacles until you secure this pearl of great price: a death that glorifies our Lord Jesus Christ and elevates the spirit of Christ’s church. This is what I will call “holy dying.”

I am a hospice and palliative care physician and a Presbyterian minister of the Word and Sacrament with a New Testament PhD on the apostle Paul’s theology of human mortality. As a pastor-physician-New Testament theologian, I have been privileged to shepherd countless men, women, and a handful of children, as well as my mother, father, and only brother, through their final days in this world. I have come to believe that there is no more powerful or longer-lasting testimony a worshipping Christian can make to Jesus Christ than to choose holy dying. Yes, choose.

Anglo-Catholic convert T. S. Eliot famously wrote:

And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.⁷

Richard Deibert is a hospice and palliative care physician, PC(USA) minister, and author of a New Testament PhD (Cambridge) on Paul’s theology of death, “Second Corinthians and Paul’s Gospel of Human Mortality.”

Just as the four Gospels write backwards from their encounter with an embodied Jesus risen from the dead and just as the early church writes Christian life backwards from its confident martyrdom, affluent Western Christians (those whose death no longer personally belongs to them) must learn again to write their lives backwards by recovering the way they die. How we make an end to our earthly life—and “make” it we almost always can—will be our most powerful proclamation of the gospel in this fleeting life.

I urge you to battle through the obsessive immediacy and unthinking pragmatism of this here-and-now culture. Begin planning the concrete details of how you will die. Take even the smallest step as soon as you can. In a worshiping Christian life, we start from our end, for our end will illumine our lived Christianity.

I. The Current Definition of “Good Death” in the United States

Roughly 18 percent (sixty million people) of the total U.S. population are adults aged sixty-five or older. Ninety-nine percent of these adults are enrolled in Medicare, and half of them die while taking advantage of the 1982 Medicare Hospice Benefit.⁸ Therefore, how we die as hospice patients has become a *de facto* cultural standard for the “best” pattern of dying in the United States. And the gold standard for this “best dying” is what has come to be known as the “good death.”

Each of the 5,861 hospices in the United States,⁹ some nonprofit and some for-profit, is federally mandated to collaborate as a team with a patient and family for the goal of a good death. Indeed, every hospice case receives a post-mortem review by their “interdisciplinary group” (IDG) that focuses on this single question: Did this patient have a good death? If so, what made the death good? If not, why was the death not good, and what can hospice do to make it better next time?¹⁰

So laser-focused is hospice on this question that “good death” has become a *terminus technicus* in hospice and palliative medicine, a technical term that all practitioners of the art are presumed to know. After all, who does not want their death to be “good”? However, not only is the notion of “good death” a subjective determination, it is also relative to each dying patient. We who practice palliative medicine presume that we have the knowledge, medication,

tools, and support services to achieve a relatively good death in almost any situation. We believe we can make death “good” in the compassionate withdrawal of life support from a teenage motorcycle victim, just as we can for a ninety-seven-year-old grandmother who stops eating and comfortably drifts into unresponsiveness. And while the components of a good death vary both subjectively and contextually, there is consensus in the end-of-life community that the three qualitative measures of comfort, meaning/dignity, and relational integrity, not the quantitative measure of time alive, are definitive.

Two recent end-of-life medical literature reviews support these three qualitative measures as essential to a “good” human death (taking into account, of course, the variables of age, life circumstances, disease, religion, finances, and culture). The individual findings of these two reviews can be categorized under these three measures: comfort (pain and symptom control, quality of life); meaning/dignity (life completion, closure, preparation, religiosity-spirituality, recognition as a person); relational integrity (strong emotional relationship with oneself, family presence, giving to others).¹¹

Sounds “good,” doesn’t it?

But are these worthy categories of universal human well-being enough? Are comfort, meaning/dignity, and relational integrity sufficient measures for the death of a worshiping Christian? If it is true for us as believers that “the end is where we start from,” does secular medicine’s “good death” carry sufficient proclamatory power for Christians who encounter their risen Lord in weekly Word and Sacrament?

What is it that the church has always believed about the dying, death, and value of bodies in the light of Jesus’ resurrection? And if we are worshiping consistently enough to believe that Jesus truly “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light” (2 Tim. 1:10), do we not have a whole lot more to say as we lie dying than a standard “good death” can offer? Can we truly rest content to let Christ’s exultant triumph over death

be reduced to symptom control (comfort), personal patient preference (meaning/dignity¹²), and bidding farewell to significant others (relational integrity)?

Is it enough—is it even *Christian*—to stand on the sidelines as hospice and palliative care subsumes the extraordinary witness of church and New Testament? Is it enough to let the supreme glory of

Christian dying be stolen out from under our own deathbed?¹³

Of course not!

How can our death proclaim the glory of the Son of God in a way that snatches death from medicine's clutches and redefines dying not just as good but as holy? How can we take back our own death?

First, understand and live into the church's good news of human mortality in the New Testament. Second, begin preparing your body for holy dying. Third, begin preparing your soul for holy dying. Three things.

II. The Church's New Testament Gospel of Human Mortality

Christianity was born a Jewish sect amidst a Greco-Roman culture of death. In first-century Roman Palestine, the average life expectancy at birth was twenty-five to thirty years due to high infant, child, and adolescent mortality, high maternal mortality, infectious disease, and malnutrition. Even among the better-protected elite (of whom not many were Christian), "of 100 live births, 25–30 would typically die before reaching age 1; a further 15–20 before age 5." In some areas, as many as 60 percent died before reaching age 10.¹⁴ In addition, for early Jewish Christians under the thumb of Roman military occupation, the specter of violence overshadowed daily life. Death lurked everywhere; if not by Roman crackdowns, then by revolutionary Jewish uprisings; if not by sectarian intra-Jewish rivalry, then by rising apocalyptic expectation.¹⁵

The primary nonviolent way Greco-Roman society dealt with death's ubiquity was philosophy, the quest for wisdom. So, when faced with the approach of death, Socrates (c. 470–399 BC) replies, "In fact . . . the true philosophers practice dying, and death is less terrible to them than to any other men." Practicing dying, for Plato (c. 427–347 BC), however, involves a hostile dualism of soul battling body, specifically, the philosophical quest for "release and separation of the soul from the body."¹⁶

And for the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (c. AD 50–135), remembering death recalibrates the mind: "Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible, be daily before your eyes, but death chiefly; and you will never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything."¹⁷ The impact of this "therapy" by philosophy was pervasive and enduring. "You are a little soul carrying around a corpse, as Epictetus used to say," recalls Stoic emperor

Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180).¹⁸ First-century Greco-Roman culture scorned the corruptible human body and sought at every turn to "decontaminate" the soul.

On the other hand, such contempt for the body never sat well with Judaism, despite the vast success of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) to transform the known world into a unified Hellenistic empire, planting Greek culture, language, and customs in every known city. Although thoroughly Hellenized, the Second Temple Judaism¹⁹ of Jesus' day largely retained its ancient reverence for the God-ensouled human body (Gen. 2:7) and could never fully accommodate this pagan discomfort with embodiment.

Forged both by distaste for the Greeks' dualism of soul versus body and admiration for its own righteous Jewish martyrs, the Judaism of first-century Palestine therefore found itself stretched between a theology of place for the dead (Sheol) and a theology of resurrection for the dead, albeit nascent. N. T. Wright summarizes:

In so far as we can generalize, the regular Jewish hope in the period we are studying was for some kind of bodily resurrection, of all or some of the dead, sometime in the future, in which those who were to be raised would be rewarded or punished appropriately. This belief was held, of course, over against the idea that the dead were simply dead, and would remain so for ever.²⁰

Into this turbulent culture of death, Jesus Christ the Son of God becomes flesh and dwells among us, on Palestinian soil in an observant Jewish family, until he dies a brutal but fully human death. Immediately thereafter, Christianity surges across the Roman Empire with its strange gospel of death's destruction.

It is impossible to overstate early Christianity's sudden, radical departure from both its Jewish origin and Greco-Roman milieu in its approach to the menacing dominion of death.

Jewish, but no longer bound by Hebraic Law; Hellenized, but not Greco-Roman; the earliest Jewish church began to talk and write about its ongoing encounter with the risen Messiah Jesus in its worship, as it bartered in the marketplace, and as its saints died their bodily deaths and departed this world. Thus, the New Testament gradually "happened," story by story, letter by letter, in the radiant light of Christ's resurrection. And with time

the New Testament became the worshiping church's faith writ large.

The New Testament does not *contain* the church's faith; the New Testament *is* the church's faith. And it is a faith-in-motion: sprouted from the soil of Palestinian Judaism, scattered across the Hellenized Jewish Diaspora, and nourished by the Old Testament's witness to the one LORD Yahweh's steadfast love in life and in death.

But it would be a mistake to view the church's faith as streaming with undisrupted continuity from Israel's faith, New Testament from Old Testament, Christianity from Judaism, all one seamless sequence. No, it is more accurate to speak paradoxically of Christianity *including* Judaism while at the same time rapidly growing *discontinuous* with it. Indeed, the apostle Paul's earliest written Christian witness is best described as a perspective of "inclusive discontinuity." That is, the apostle "sees God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ in *continuity* with the salvation history of Israel, but at the same time in dramatic *discontinuity* with Israel's messianic hope." While Paul passionately reads Jesus Christ within the arc of God's salvation of the world through the Jews, "the defeat of death for creation by the physical resurrection of Jesus," for Paul, "so far *transcends* Israel's messianic hope as to appear discontinuous with it."²¹

We dwell here on Christ's shattering defeat of death because it is what turns human dying inside out and creates the possibility for you and me to die a truly "Christian" death. In other words, Christ's victory over death turns even the gold standard of "good death" upside down for worshiping Christians and fills both Paul's and our dying with radically new potential. By the paradoxical grace of Jesus' physical death and resurrection, our physical death has been "ontologically transfigured,"²² so much so that "by resurrecting Jesus' body, God has made death the way in which life now works in the body."²³ Dwell on that sentence a moment.

The church's New Testament faith asserts that worshiping Christians can only live fully by dying.²⁴ This is the extraordinary proclamatory power of death for worshiping Christians that is completely lost to secular medicine.

If physical death has not been ontologically transfigured by Christ, how could Saint Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 50–110) possibly have been so emboldened on his captive journey to martyrdom in Rome to write what may be the most profound

testimony to the radical reconfiguration of dying in Christian history:

Now at last I am *beginning to be a disciple*. . . .
Fire and cross and battles with wild beasts,
mutilation, mangling, wrenching of bones, the
hacking of limbs, the crushing of my whole
body, cruel tortures of the devil—let these
come upon me, only let me reach Jesus Christ
. . . for when I arrive *there I will be a human being*
. . . for though I am still alive, I am passionately
in love with death as I write to you.²⁵

This ontological transfiguration of death is precisely what Saint Athanasius (c. AD 296–373) views as the reality empowering Christian martyrs to "trample on [death] as on *something dead* . . . [to] tread it underfoot as *nothing*. . . . Even children hasten thus to die, and not men only, but women train themselves by bodily discipline to meet [death] [and] mock at it now as a *dead thing robbed of all its strength*."²⁶

Such is the church's counterintuitive, paradoxical good news of Christ's inversion of human mortality. Such is the gospel of holy dying that has been stolen from us by secular Western medicine. There is no greater challenge before the church than to recover this glorious gift.

Let us now turn to practical matters of body and soul. As we do, let me be clear about a matter of such conceptual importance it is axiomatic, in any Christian discussion, of what it means to be a human being. Neither the Old or New Testament nor Israel or the church supports a dualism between body and soul that is essentially antagonistic. Nor do they support the materialistic "monism" of modern Western science, in which body and soul are conceived as a single "substance" in which soul emanates evolutionarily from biological matter. Human body and soul—however construed—are God's bipartite creation, entirely good and completely cooperative.

Moreover, Judaism and Christianity both distinguish this bipartite human animal as a unique and intimate mirroring of its Creator by the theological words "image" and "likeness"²⁷ in Genesis 1:26: "Let us make humankind in our *image*, according to our *likeness*" (emphasis added). Divinity is the mold in which the human animal is specially fashioned.

Christianity then takes this one step further, radically advancing what "image" and "likeness" mean, not only for the creature human but for God

the Creator. Christianity's unique gift to the earth via the incarnation, and singular contribution to the history of religion, is the ontological primacy of "personhood." Christianity reveals that nature coheres in person. Whatever is naturally constituent to human being holds together—receives its harmony and unity—through one's personhood. Just as the two natures of humanity and divinity in the Incarnate Son cohere in Jesus' singular person, so the two "natures" of body and soul hold together harmoniously in our singular human person.

Above all, personhood does not confuse or change or divide or separate or annul the bipartite distinction of body and soul. Personhood unites them in a perfect harmony of communion. For we are the image of the Image of the invisible God,²⁸ and our body and soul reflect the unity of Christ's humanity and divinity. Like Jesus Christ, who is known in two natures that have come together into one person,²⁹ each of us is known in a particular body and soul that have come together into our one person.³⁰

Thus, the separate treatment of body and soul that follows is merely for practical matters that require tangible documents. In no way does this paper support an ontological dualism of body and soul that is adversarial. The reign of sin that sets body at war against soul, dividing our person, has been definitively vanquished by the incarnation. And it is in the wholistic freedom of this victory that worshipping Christians are called to live and die.

III. Preparing Your Body for Holy Dying

By "preparing your body" I mean visible, tangible decisions that will affect the way your body is treated at the end of life, the paperwork that prepares our body to die holy.

Because Western culture is the heir of ancient Latin jurisprudence, we view and organize our world legally. Law defines and defends our social order and governs our communal affairs, including our great sectors of health care, education, government, business, recreation, city, neighborhood, arts, family, religion, and . . . death. The law defines our liberty to die and defends the exercise of this liberty, within limits. It is here that we run into mounds of paperwork.

Dear reader, if you do nothing in the twenty-four hours after reading this article other than scratch a longhand draft of any one item of the following paperwork, this article will have served you well:

- A. Create a Last Will and Testament.
- B. Create Advance Directives for Health Care.
- C. Understand the "Do not resuscitate" order.
- D. Understand food and fluids at the end of life.
- E. Understand artificial hydration and nutrition.
- F. Understand a "Do not hospitalize" order.
- G. Create an ethical will.

Before proceeding, let the church hear the gospel:

Worshipping Christians are *no longer slaves to the fear of death* (see Heb. 2:14–15).

Do not underestimate the power of these targeted ethical gifts! A simple paper with words or object of significance can channel sacramental, life-creating memories and not only change lives here and now but also change lives for generations to come in ways unforeseen and unimaginable. Just as the church hands down its holy tradition to future generations, an ethical will hands down your personal holy tradition.

Just imagine being chosen by your beloved grandmother to receive, guard, and pass on any of the following as her personal legacy: a selected or original poem in her own hand, a beloved book she personally inscribed, a playlist of old songs picked out for you, a faded favorite handwritten recipe, a piece of cheap or heirloom jewelry you had seen many times around her neck, a personal letter articulating her view of the world and her hope for you and your children, a simple list of the values by which she tried to live, one of her proud houseplants, a voice recording or video of her calling you by name saying "I love you," an icon or piece of art with one sentence explaining what she felt when she stood before it, her surviving small dog that companioned her and brought much joy, and so forth, and so on, and on. Ethical wills are easy; the options are endless; you already have some ideas; they can be changed, embellished, or discarded anytime. Do not procrastinate. Get started!

It is imperative that you communicate the details of all this paperwork, which we are calling "preparing your body," with your significant others, especially with the agents you are choosing to act on your behalf. Let them know where to find the documents or give them copies. Continue discussing your decisions, listening to the Holy Spirit, and

adjusting as you are guided. This honest, vulnerable sharing about matters of your body and embodied life will confer incalculable dignity upon those you love. In doing so, you will be consecrating them and sanctifying your own dying. You will be showing the world that you are no longer a slave to the fear of death.

Let us now make a final turn to the preparation of our soul.

IV. Preparing Your Soul for Holy Dying

We have identified the primary problem facing worshipping Christians as the loss of our personal death to medicine's totalizing scientific "triumph" over death. We have asserted that for worshipping Christians there is no more powerful witness to Christ's glory in the church than dying in holiness. We have distilled the church's New Testament gospel as God's real defeat of death and transfiguration of our "last enemy" into a life-giving miracle. And we have reviewed the contemporary legal and medical tools required to "make space" for our bodies to die in holiness. Our final move as worshipping Christians is the disciplined preparation of our souls. What follows is a list of suggested disciplines to facilitate Christian dying, a kind of Eastern Orthodox-flavored Art of Dying (*Ars Moriendi*) for Western Protestants.

Throughout this paper, my assumed reader is the "worshipping Christian."³¹ By this, I mean a person who is trusting Jesus Christ to care for them in life, in death, and in eternity, and whose personal trust is being disciplined by weekly exposure to corporate worship in Word and Sacrament. Above all disciplines of our soul's preparation for death, this weekly life of Word and Sacrament is foremost. There is no more powerful preparation for holy dying than our weekly, full-body encounter with the risen Lord. It is the lush soil in which all other soulful disciplines are rooted and fed. I recognize that most congregations celebrate the Lord's Supper less frequently than weekly, but I do not accept it, and neither should you. Historically, Word and Sacrament in our Reformed tradition has been the minimum standard for what must happen on the Lord's Day for Christian people: Scripture read and preached and the Eucharist celebrated. From that first unplanned sit-down of Cleopas and his partner with Jesus at table, it was Word and Sacrament, always together, a heavenly symbiosis opening our eyes and feeding our hearts' burning desire for the earth's risen Lord (Luke 24:13-35). The 2018 *Book of*

Common Worship (BCW) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is unequivocal that Word and Sacrament are the "heart and lungs" of weekly corporate worship: "The norm of Christian worship is to celebrate the Lord's Supper on each Lord's Day."³²

Here are four more essential disciplines for your soul:

- A. Daily Scripture reading with a sacramental mind
- B. A daily Rule of Prayer
- C. Funeral, obituary, and post-mortem planning
- D. Practicing your death every day

And here, with the communion of the saints, every one of whom testify that the veil between heaven and earth is silken indeed, it is most fitting to end this journey into Christian death. Not only do we march here with a great company of living Christian heroes on their way through death to the new Jerusalem, we also march before the faces of a countless cloud of witnesses who "were tortured . . . suffered mocking and flogging . . . chains and imprisonment . . . stoned to death . . . sawn in two . . . killed by the sword . . . destitute, persecuted, and tormented" (Heb. 11:32-12:3), a mighty choir singing as one that we have nothing to fear, for the gates of hell have been trampled and refashioned into the gates of eternity. Listen to them:

"We have seen the Lord!"

Notes

1. Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," in *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 60, line 19.
2. Throughout this paper, I prefer the term "holy dying" rather than "holy death," to convey our conviction that death is a temporal reality that will be eradicated from creation. John of Patmos could not be more emphatic: "Death will not exist any longer!" (Rev. 21:4, my translation). See Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 27: "Death is a liar, trying to conceal the sanctity of humanity under the disguise of devastation . . . death itself is not holy."
3. See the dated but still classic book by Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death Over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books: A Division of Random House, 2008), who coined the term "invisible death" to

- describe the dramatic removal of death from the public eye in the twentieth century. For the United States, see Institute of Medicine (U.S.), Committee on Approaching Death: Addressing Key End-of-Life Issues, *Dying in America: Improving Quality and Honoring Individual Preferences Near the End of Life* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), which reveals the fragmentation and poor coordination of care for the dying, the intensive medicalization of dying and its economic burden, the increasing burden on caregivers, and the emergence of hospice and palliative medicine.
4. Perhaps the ultimate form of this theft occurs in the modern Intensive Care Unit (ICU). See "Diary of an Intensive-care Nurse," *New York Post*, 2012, <https://nypost.com/2012/12/09/diary-of-an-intensive-care-nurse/> for a harrowing depiction of life and death in the ICU.
 5. Jeffrey Paul Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying*, Notre Dame Studies in Medical Ethics (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 17. I urge readers to engage Bishop's analysis of Western medicine's theft of death.
 6. Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse*, 21.
 7. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*, V, lines 2–3.
 8. I continue to be flabbergasted at the ignorance and inaccurate knowledge of both patients and physicians regarding this free federal benefit that they have owned as U.S. taxpayers since 1982. Because the details of this Medicare-Medicaid benefit are modified on a regular basis, see the following up-to-date websites for accurate, friendly overviews of the Hospice Benefit: "National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization," <https://www.nhpc.org/>; Hospice Foundation of America, <https://hospicefoundation.org/>.
 9. "Hospice Enrollments," Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, accessed April 27, 2025, <https://data.cms.gov/provider-characteristics/hospitals-and-other-facilities/hospice-enrollments>.
 10. The modern hospice "movement" emerged in the United Kingdom in the mid-1950s through the work of Cicely Saunders (1918–2005), widely regarded as its "Mother." A nurse, social worker, and physician, Saunders was attuned to the multidimensional nature of human suffering and developed the foundational concept of "total pain" underlying all hospice care. Total pain is the recognition that four dimensions of human personhood always complicate suffering in terminal illness, none of which can be neglected without great cost.
 11. Emily A. Meier et al., "Defining a Good Death (Successful Dying): Literature Review and a Call for Research and Public Dialogue," *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 24, no. 4 (2016); Alicia Krikorian, Camilo Maldonado, and Tania Pastrana, "Patient's Perspectives on the Notion of a Good Death: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 59, no. 1 (2020).
 12. Thomas Long alerts us to the misunderstanding and consequent misuse of the word "dignity." He urges us not to conflate dignity with sacredness: "We should be careful about swapping terms. Seeing human beings as sacred is not exactly the same as saying that human life has dignity. . . . Dignity is an achievement . . . and therefore it can be lost. Sacredness is a divine gift, and it can never be taken away." Long, *Accompany Them with Singing*, 26.
 13. Bishop, *The Anticipatory Corpse*, 275–278. Bishop's critique of what hospice and palliative care is becoming in the United States is disturbing: "A good death is one that is managed in all its facets by those whose expertise defines a good death. Holistic and comprehensive care, achieved by virtue of the deployment of expertise in all facets of human life . . . becomes totalizing care, indeed, totalitarian care."
 14. Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), especially chapter 2, pp. 69–116.
 15. Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 37.
 16. Plato, "Phaedo," *Plato in Twelve Volumes: With an English Translation*, trans. Harold North Fowler, ed. Edward Capps, Loeb Classical Library (London, Cambridge: W. Heinemann; Harvard University Press, 1930), Phaedo, 67d–68a.
 17. Epictetus, *The Works of Epictetus. Consisting of His Discourses, in Four Books, The Enchiridion, and Fragments*, ed. and trans. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1890), Enchiridion, chapter 21.
 18. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays, Modern Library (New York: Modern Library, 2002), Book 4.41.
 19. The Judaism most relevant to Christian origins is known as "Second Temple Judaism," the period between the construction of the second temple in Jerusalem in 516 BC and its destruction in AD 70.
 20. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 85.
 21. Richard I. Deibert, "Paul, Saint," in *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, ed. George Thomas Kurian (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub. Ltd., 2011), emphasis added. "Inclusive discontinuity" describes the relationship of Paul's gospel to the faith he once so passionately shared with his people Israel.
 22. The word "ontology"—that which is truly real—is used here to convey a real change in the nature of biological death.
 23. Richard I. Deibert, *Second Corinthians and Paul's*

Gospel of Human Mortality: How Paul's Experience of Death Authorizes His Apostolic Authority in Corinth, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2 Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 214.

24. John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 143, emphasis added: "Christian life in this world is a continual practice of death, or rather, of *life in death*, taking up the Cross daily and laying down their life for others, considering themselves dead to this world, but alive in Christ Jesus."
25. Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 231–33 (sections 5–7), emphasis added. John Behr, "Life and Death in the Age of Martyrdom," in *The Role of Death in Life: A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Relationship Between Life and Death*, ed. John Behr and Conor Cunningham (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 80.
26. Athanasius, *The Incarnation of the Word of God: Being the Treatise of St. Athanasius De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, trans. Penelope Lawson, 2003 new ed., revised ed., ed. C. S. Lewis (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1944), p. 57 (chapter V, "The Resurrection," section 27), emphasis added.
27. Genesis 1:27: and in the Hebrew; εἰκὼν and ὁμοίωσις in the Greek Septuagint.
28. The direct reference here is the Christ hymn in Colossians 1:15–20. But this ontological relation of Father and Son receives witness across the New Testament: Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 1:1–3; John 1:1–18, among many others; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 4:4–6; Philippians 2:6–11; John 14:9; Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:47–49; Ephesians 1:23; 4:13; Revelation 1:13–18; 22:3–4; 1 Peter 1:20 and others.
29. See the definition of Christ's person agreed upon by the unified church at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in AD 451: Christ is one person with two distinct, unconfused, and inseparable natures, human and divine.
30. Deibert, *Second Corinthians*, 227: "Neither body nor soul has prior ontological status; each derives from and is contingent upon personhood. Neither body nor soul is independent of the other, nor is either completely dependent upon the other; their relationship is synergistic and their synergy is dependent upon personhood. In this way, the human person can be said to be more of an ontological duality than a dualism."
31. Intriguingly, there is accruing evidence that the tired disclaimer "I'm spiritual but not religious" does not bode well for one's mental health. See the British study Michael King et al., "Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health: Results from a National Study of English Households," *The British Journal of Psychiatry: The Journal of Mental Science* 202 (Nov. 22, 2012). Also, see J. R. Vittengl, "A Lonely Search?: Risk for Depression When Spirituality Exceeds Religiosity," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 206, no. 5 (May 2018).
32. The BCW pays tribute to the faithful recovery of weekly Word and Sacrament by our Presbyterian service books: "The 1970 *Worshipbook* . . . presented a service of Word and Sacrament as the norm for the Lord's Day" and "the 1993 *Book of Common Worship* . . . maintained and strengthened the Word and Sacrament pattern for the Service for the Lord's Day." *Book of Common Worship*, ed. Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 25, xxix.

Funeral Preaching: Holding Memory and Promise, Grief and Hope

Carla Jones Brown

Between the time that I was invited to write this piece and the submission date, several significant death-related events occurred. One was the death and global grieving of Pope Francis. Another was a request from a former congregant to provide a simple graveside service for her stepfather. Finally, on the eve of the submission due date, I received a call with the news that a beloved member of my former congregation had passed away. Her final wishes indicated that she wanted me to serve as the officiant and deliver her eulogy. Thus, this article was not written with academic distance. It comes alongside my observations of my grief and accompanies me as I prepare to walk with each of these families and also with the global community that grieves the loss of Pope Francis. Grief is a living, breathing, and taxing entity, and as such, our words to the grieving must acknowledge that entity and speak to a hope that also lives, breathes, and has the power to sustain us.

In the PC(USA), our A Brief Statement of Faith begins with these words, “In life and death, we belong to God,” and concludes on this note, “With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We say with confidence what we believe, but in the midst of grief, it can be hard to feel convinced this is true. It is the job of the pastor, preacher, or eulogist to recognize that this is not true because we believe it, but because God has promised it. We who proclaim these words must often find a way to convey this message to those for whom the notion is unfamiliar, foreign, or impossible to conceive. When we approach the task of preparing the words for a eulogy or funeral sermon, we must make decisions

about how to honor the deceased and the promises of God.

In his poem “Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud,” sixteenth-century poet John Donne challenges Death to “be not proud, for some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.”¹ I wonder if many clergy often want to challenge Death to be not inconvenient. Death does not tend to arrive at a time conducive to our church or personal calendars. Death comes when it will, and we are called to care for those who are grieving. Funeral sermons and eulogies are not one-size-fits-all, so how does a person meet the unique challenges of the occasion, often on short notice? What do we say to those whose lives have been forever changed by death and grief? How do we preach good news to those who may not be able to hear anything beyond the sound of tears rolling down their cheeks? Is it even possible? If so, how? How do we share a word of hope while also managing our grief? These questions are valuable as we search for the right words for the occasion.

While I do not recall being assigned a funeral sermon or eulogy in my seminary preaching course, I do recall the first funeral that I officiated. The funeral was for a young man who died unexpectedly. His family had already seen a lot of loss that year, and their grief was thick. The service was held at a funeral home, so there was no home-court advantage of a church sanctuary. His friends and family lined the Philadelphia sidewalk, wearing T-shirts with his photo on the front and the words “Rest in Peace” on the back. The words on the shirts gave some clue about the theology of the gathered group. There were no Scripture references, but there was a claim that death did not have the last word

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What more needed to be said to make sense of this fragile moment?
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with a church? How dare I stand there, not having known their beloved,
and try to speak words of comfort to them?

and peace was available to the deceased. This claim, emblazoned on a T-shirt in spray-paint script, was the bridge that connected us. What more needed to be said to make sense of this fragile moment? What would I say to these young people who might not have had any relationship with a church? How dare I stand there, not having known their beloved, and try to speak words of comfort to them?

These nervous questions are a good, if uneasy, place to start. My role on that day was to provide a presence and to lift not only this young man's life story, but also to present hope to those who grieved him. Before settling into the differences between sermons, funeral sermons, and eulogies, it may be useful to consider purpose and presence. Our purpose and our presence will be informed by our theology of death and dying. If we are unable to allow grief and hope to coexist, our sermon or eulogy may reflect an unrealistic sense of happiness or celebration. A funeral is not an ideal place to argue theology of heaven and hell and the final destination of the deceased, but some in attendance may come to argue that very point, and if we are unclear about our purpose and how we manage our presence, we may be drawn into a losing battle. Whether it is labeled a funeral, a memorial, or a celebration of life does not matter. What matters is that death has come to call, and living beings are left to find a new normal. Our presence and our words will be written into the story of their new normal.

As the clergy person with the privilege of delivering a sermon, our purpose is clear. Comb the Scriptures for an appropriate text that offers hope to the living and perhaps includes some connective tissue from the life of the deceased. It may be helpful to remember that our job is to provide a safe space for those who grieve. It is not the job of the preacher to "fix" anything. The gathered community is not broken. They may be heartbroken, but death is not a problem for us to solve. It is a part of the life cycle that we are privileged to share with those in our communities. Our words, actions, and physical presence all create an environment where it is safe

to feel the pains of grief as a normal human process and not something to stifle or suppress.

Before we open our mouths to speak a word, our presence includes how we remember the deceased and how we minister to those who are living. A funeral sermon need not preach someone into heaven or hell—a Reformed approach recognizes that this is not our job. The sermon may honor the deceased while also acknowledging the feelings of the living. These are the ones who need to hear the good news. These are the ones whose ears are stopped up with grief and may not hear brilliant turns of phrase. If they are congregants who hear your sermons on a regular basis, they don't need that finesse on such a difficult day. They need a simple reminder of the love and care that God and the gathered community can provide. In the case of the sermon for the young man I referenced earlier, those who gathered had not heard my preaching, and only the sister of the deceased knew me. I learned from the meeting with the family to hear stories and important details about the life of the deceased that they expected a eulogy that centered the life of their loved one and not a sermon that centered the life of Jesus, since not everyone coming to the service was a Christian.

After visiting with the family and building a bit of trust with them, I had a decision to make. Would I be faithful to their request to talk more about their loved one, or would I remain faithful to my call to preach the gospel? This is a question that every person must answer for themselves. I find the answer when I remember our purpose to provide a safe space to grieve and to offer hope. I also find the answer when I consider my presence. I am not a tall person, so what I lack in stature I make up for with words and personality. As the officiant, I was able to establish myself as the go-to person for our time together, and when the time came for the sermon, I was able to bridge the gap between sermon and eulogy. Others had come to share their memories of their beloved, and as one who was not part of the family, I was able to name the power of their

testimonies and remind them that I am acquainted with the God found in the Christian Scriptures. Using the Romans passage referenced in A Brief Statement of Faith, I was able to offer them a love that is indestructible, for all of us. I was able to demonstrate the ways that God brings us together in the best and worst of times, and though this was among the worst for them, I was able to point to the power in their communal fortitude by naming other times that they were able to help each other get through. The sermon did not provide any easy answers. I did not attempt to answer questions that I was not qualified to answer. I was able to give voice and validation to the questions that they may have held but were afraid to ask. It was important to me to demonstrate that this is the moment to ask those questions, not of a frail human being in a clergy collar but of a God who is big enough to take the questions and the heat of our anger and grief. Even if we do not get an answer to our question, the love of God accompanies us if we want to receive it.

Purpose and presence served me well on that day. I did not come to be the church lady wearing heaven and hell on my arm like an accessory for my outfit. I did not come to be the one with all the answers. I came to that funeral home to be a companion on the grief journey. I came in my “proper” black suit, separating me from the friends and family in their T-shirts. I came to the moment with a bundle of nerves in my belly and more questions than answers in my sermon manuscript. I allowed the tributes of others to serve as the eulogy, lifting the life and legacy of the deceased. I offered a core part of my faith, rooted in Scripture, with an occasional nod to the deceased as the bridge between my life of faith and the lives of the hearers.

Eulogy, Sermon, Homily, or Remarks

Having shared an example from personal experience with funeral preaching, I'd like to explore some practical distinctions between different ways one might be called upon to speak at a funeral service. Understanding these distinctions is essential for clergy as we prepare to meet the specific needs of families and faith communities during times of loss. The terms *eulogy*, *sermon*, *homily*, and *remarks* are often used interchangeably, but each carries different expectations and serves different purposes within the funeral context.

It is important to remain aware of the time that one has been offered and to honor it. While it may

be appropriate to preach for seventeen to twenty minutes on a Sunday in the context of worship, that may not be possible at a funeral, whether in a church or a funeral home. If asked to provide a homily, Pope Francis recommended keeping it between eight and ten minutes² because anything longer is a “disaster.” Pope Francis explained his rationale within the context of a Catholic mass, but I believe the logic remains solid in Reformed worship as well. What is the goal? The funeral homily is not the ideal place to unpack complicated theology but rather is an opportunity to lift the hope of the gospel for those who grieve. Carving out space in the service for a homily suggests that the person planning the service intends to have a moment reserved for a word from Scripture. Our challenge is to meet this moment not with our best illustration or wittiest one-liner, but with something that the hearers can hold on to even with tear-filled eyes and broken hearts.

The Twenty-third Psalm is familiar even to those whose lives are not intertwined with the life of the church. This familiarity and the loving care found in the text make it useful for a homily.

When offering a homily, it may be wise to choose a text that is familiar or that has been read earlier in the service. In services where the Old Testament and New Testament readings are often chosen ahead of time, the clergy will have time to consider using one of them. The Twenty-third Psalm is familiar even to those whose lives are not intertwined with the life of the church. This familiarity and the loving care found in the text make it useful for a homily. One need not know the background of the writer of the psalm to receive the generosity and tenderness of the Shepherd. Sharing that tenderness and highlighting the love of God can be accomplished well in eight to ten minutes.

Some traditions expect a full Sunday-length sermon within the context of the funeral service. These settings usually include music selections and prayers that support the energy of such a service. These may be labeled as a celebration of life and often celebrate the life of one whose life was deeply connected to the life of the church. These can be tricky because while there is room for celebrating

the promise of the resurrection and celebrating a life well lived, this focus on celebration can easily overshadow or steal grief from the family and friends who have come to pay their respects. There is room for the preacher to name the grief and to offer to those gathered that though Psalm 30 reminds us that weeping may endure for a night, the night may last longer for some of us than for others. The preacher may want to name the delicate balancing act of knowing that joy comes in the morning while the weeping endures. There is no rush to get to the joy. There is comfort in knowing that when the time comes, the joy will be waiting for us. The challenge for the preacher is to find a way to hold space for both without robbing the weepers of their grief or suppressing the joy of those for whom morning has come. If a preacher is given the grace of a longer time frame and has allotted time for a sermon and not a brief homily, they may be able to work out that tension well and hold space for all who gather.

When I was a child, I always wondered about the difference between remarks, the eulogy, the obituary, and the funeral sermon. Sometimes, they overlapped and that left me confused. The *obituary* is the biographical sketch that appears in the printed funeral program. It is prepared by the family and may include references that can connect the person's life to the preacher's homily or sermon. A *eulogy* is typically a tribute to the person's life. It is important to share these distinctions with the family when planning a service so that expectations can be met. The eulogy need not be delivered by a clergyperson, but it can be. There are also moments when a person is asked to bring remarks, and in their remarks, they eulogize the person instead. Sometimes, the designated eulogist will take the opportunity to overstep boundaries or share stories that may feel inappropriate, and this is where clergy presence is a gift to the gathered community. In these moments, those of us charged with embodying the good news may reference the words already spoken by those who preceded us on the program. It may be useful to characterize the remarks that celebrated the person's life as a series of eulogies, leaving room for the preacher to lift the word of God, because so many have already spoken so well of the deceased. We may have to make a split-second decision about whether levity or sobriety is best in the moment, and we may get it right or we may get it wrong. Both offer opportunities for reflection on our work. It is helpful to have notes on transitions along with

our sermon notes. The sermonic moment is not set aside for the clergy to combat the platitudes that may have been offered during the time of remarks, but there is an opportunity to present a theology that is helpful and not harmful to the hearers.

When, as clergy, one is asked to make remarks, it is useful to simply fulfil the request. While it may be wise to keep a sermon in one's pocket in case of emergency, it is unwise to take the opportunity provided for remarks and to turn it into a sermonic moment. The purpose of the funeral service is to provide a safe space for those who grieve. When the podium or pulpit turns into a competitive battleground, the space is no longer safe for anyone. If asked to make remarks, preparation of a homily is not necessary. Scripture may be part of one's prepared remarks, but the focus is on remembering the deceased, not preaching Christ crucified. It may be appropriate to give a nod to the homilist or preacher as the one who will bring the good news and then share a ninety-second anecdote about the deceased, extend condolences to the family, and return to one's seat.

What to Do When It's Difficult?

For the bereaved, it is always difficult. For the clergyperson, finding the right words may be complicated by the circumstances of the death. Officiating the funeral of a beloved member of a church community whose faith was always on display may be easier than that of an infant or a young person who dies by suicide or violence. Does the good news still hold true in those circumstances? What if the deceased was someone whose life did not serve as a witness to the good news of the gospel? What do we say in those circumstances?

In these particularly challenging situations, consider these practical approaches:

- First, acknowledge the reality of the pain without attempting to explain it away. When death feels untimely or tragic, simple statements such as "This loss is profound. We need not pretend it isn't devastating" validate the grief without theologizing the tragedy.
- Second, focus on God's presence in suffering rather than the reasons for suffering. When officiating for an infant's funeral, drawing on Psalm 139's imagery of God knowing us in the womb can speak to God's intimate

care without suggesting divine causation of tragedy. Similarly, in cases of death by suicide, emphasizing that nothing can “separate us from the love of God” (Rom. 8:38-39) speaks hope without judgment.

- Third, prepare for your own emotional response. When the circumstances are particularly difficult, arrange for pastoral care for yourself before and after the service. A brief conversation with a colleague or therapist can help process the emotional weight these services carry.
- Fourth, when family wishes conflict with your theological understanding, find a gracious middle ground. If asked to avoid “religious talk,” you might say, “While I respect your desire to avoid religious talk, my presence as a clergy person represents something about hope that extends beyond this moment. May I briefly speak to that hope in a way that honors your loved one without imposing my beliefs?” It is of primary importance that we remember our purpose and presence. With or without a collar, stole, or robe, we are still witnesses to the good news and the resurrection. We may not share the theology of the deceased or their family, but we can offer the best of God’s love and grace without condemning anyone else’s beliefs. We can hold space for the questions that have no good answers but need to be voiced.

And Finally . . .

In the end, funeral preaching calls us to a delicate balance—holding grief and hope, memory and promise, lament and comfort in the same sacred space. As we stand before those whose hearts are broken, we offer not simple answers but faithful presence. Our words, whether sermon, eulogy, homily, or remarks, serve best when they create space for authentic grief while gently pointing to the God of hope and love who accompanies us through our loneliest hours. In this holy moment, we embody the truth that in life and in death, we belong to God—and we share that space of belonging with those who gather. This is the gift we offer as clergy: not to disregard grief but to illuminate it with the light of grace, allowing those who mourn to feel both the weight of their loss and the promise that they do not carry it alone.

Notes

1. John Donne, “Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud,” www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44107/holy-sonnets-death-be-not-proud/.
2. Justin McLellan, “Long Homilies Are ‘a Disaster,’ Keep It under 10 Minutes, Pope Says,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 23, 2023, www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/long-homilies-are-disaster-keep-it-under-10-minutes-pope-says/.

Perhaps the World Ends Here: Art and Table

Jill Carattini

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.” So begins one of Joy Harjo’s most notable poems.¹ Its title borrowed for the name of the exhibition in this issue, signals clearly that there will be more than living that happens at this table. Yet somehow also, held on these opposite legs, the beginnings and endings are all part of the meal we must eat to live.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow.
We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

In word and image, the former poet laureate constructs, presents, and invites us to a table, seating us as guests alongside tensions and between categories we don’t often place together, like company we try to keep apart at dinner parties. She has prepared a room and an invitation full of possibilities for us. We sit down with her at the table, bringing our own stories to share, passing our own images of past and present.

What Harjo creates with metaphor and hospitality, artists do instinctively. They place tables in our midst, building legs out of notions that upend the sturdy categories many use to make sense of the world, showing us how often we are content to dine with the imaginations of reductionists. They offer us meeting spaces to sit with contrasts, to sit with ourselves, to sit with others, a central space to

reimagine together. The tables they create can be at once centrifugal and centripetal, broadening and narrowing, making the mundane strange, inviting matters of life and the matters of death to sit down and share a cup of coffee.

These tables have become a guiding symbol for me, my own legs planted in distinct spaces. I am a minister of Word and Sacrament. I am also a curator. In each setting, the gift of the table is the gift of *more*.

In a world that offers steady rations of cynicism and outrage, conflated morsels of truth served along inhospitable divides, the table is a space that nourishes with hopeful correctives, feeding weary imaginations with the suggestion that there is both room and reason to counter-imagine. Resisting tendencies to reduce and flatten visions of life, artists invite us to look again, to commune with the notion that there might be more to see—indeed, that there might *always* be more to see.

The eucharistic table surely feeds us with similar promise. That Christ left us with a meal to remember him is truly as layered as the work of an artist, for the Eucharist is an invitation to return again and again to a faith with aesthetic sensibilities, a faith that resists reductive divisions of body and spirit, the kingdom of heaven and the reality of earth. Jesus was always eating at tables that disrupted settled theologies and social stratifications; the human condition was not flattened or dismissed at his tables but on full display. There is always more to taste and see at the eucharistic table because Christ himself is the host. His broken and resurrected body is placed in our hands is inexhaustible beauty, incomprehensible mystery, a gift for sorrowing creatures. There is space at this table for every sorrow, every tension, and every song in life and in death.

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Art at its best slows down racing minds and preoccupied bodies,
leaving viewers more present, engaging us in dialogue with ourselves, with the object,
with the artist, with what the artist has found in the process of making,
and sometimes with a mysterious other.

The gift of tables is the gift of *more*. I am convinced that our role as the church, particularly in an age of diminishing imaginations, is to be ambassadors of this abundant hospitality of Christ. In this, any table we share that opens us to mystery, invites communion with friends and strangers of many times and places, offers safety or the possibility of wholeness, re-members what is broken, or re-stories what might need a better story or song, is indeed a table that offers something more real than what lies outside in the dark. To advocate for artists is to advocate for such tables.

The eight artists whose work accompanies the pages of this journal edition bring further substance and color to my point. Their work invites us to sit and linger on the tensions between life and death, senses attuned with uncommon curiosity in the company of so much more than we brought into this space.

While the immense themes among these artists—grief and story, memory and origin, absence and presence—certainly counter temptations to flatten conceptions of our humanity, it is worth noting that many of the works in this exhibit also happen to be massive in form. Matthew Doll's *Chorus* and Antonio Darden's *S Tenebris* tower as tables crying out to the masses, holding the love and loss of centuries in present songs meant to be shared. Mary Hallam Pearse's *Full Bloom*, Pearse and Peragine's collaborative *Steered by Falling Stars*, and the emerging figures of Harry Ally's paintings are all larger-than-human explorations of the human condition.

While individual works are rich with layers of meaning, something emerges from the exhibition as a whole that resembles the surprising conversations that may happen around a table. The company is profound where two or more are gathered. Intentional and surprising connections between the work of different artists demonstrate the capacity of art to generate new dimensions of meaning.

For instance, flowers, real and preserved, plastic and artificial, discarded, unearthed, and decaying, appear in more than a few of the works. The

prophet Isaiah's description of our lives as fading flora comes to mind. Human experience becomes a layered wilderness, beautiful and perilous, with each intersecting vine. Mary Hallam Pearse's suspended and substantial work *Full Bloom* creates flowers from lead, recognizing flowers as markers of mourning and devotion, fillers of voids, and declarations of love while considering the dark and troubling history of lead as a material.

In *Steered by Falling Stars*, Pearse and Joseph Peragine collaborate to reference both figurative and literal themes. A seven-foot skull, once installed to look out over the city of Atlanta, is crafted entirely from discarded plastic flowers gathered from cemeteries across Georgia and from corsages and boutonnieres, discarded markers of both mourning and merriment.

Antonio Darden's *S Tenebris* is a searing monument of personal grief. The invitation to join him in it immediately feels as immense as the shrouded sculpture that fills the room. *S Tenebris* is a life-size recreation of the Chevrolet S 10 pickup truck the artist was given after the sudden passing of his father, which happened just six months after a Georgia state patrol officer made a decision that took his brother's life. "There is a grief that comes and goes," writes Darden. "There is also the kind that just sits on your chest and compresses your sternum. Sometimes we go to dark places." *S Tenebris* places us at a table with the grief-stricken artist himself. Layers of social and political injustice are not lost in this space; the silence is far from empty. But in shrouded silence we sit, attuned to our common flesh and blood.

Artist Lanecia Rouse works toward a similar hope, offering her grief as a story that opens others up to engaging their own. There is no word in the English language to describe the woman who has lost a child, no word to mark the identity held in that grief. Yet Rouse continues to delve into the semantic gaps with an identity that pushes against the notions of presence and absence. Her work takes form in collages of fabric and paint, discarded and found words. Her identity as the mother of an absent

child, the presence of a daughter lost, and stories told and untold, are all held in the balance. In so doing, Rouse offers a meeting space remarkably akin to the mystery Christ offers at the table of the Eucharist, his broken body a gift that re-members and re-stories, his absence a real and nurturing presence, his table mercifully able to hold both.

Similar theological chords resonate in the work of Harry Ally, despite his friendly insistence of non-religious existentialism. When I first asked Ally about his decades of work as a figurative artist, he admitted that the question he holds over each work again and again is both personal and unoriginal. "I am always asking," he said, "is there someone there or is there no one?" Harry's figures are unearthed, a labored search into the unknown with pigments and paint, tar and fabric, bonding agents and clays dug from Georgia soil. Limbs materialize (or de-materialize) like fading, sacred flora in a decaying world of hearts and bodies. Yet his figures do not appear before us with a tentative or mocking existence; each one is a presence that seems to come alongside our own, giving a sense of a shared storyline, a figure with whom we might ask the questions we are loath to ask alone: Who am I? Where did we come from? Where are we going?

Like Ally, Anna Yearwood employs the labored work of excavation in her own pursuit of origin and meaning. *Memory & Understanding*, a performative exploration of memories of home, began as an initial act of carving an image of her childhood home into a copper plate, followed by a repeated retracing of the plate lines and an internal digging further and further into the memories it held. At various points in the material process, an edition was printed, each proof marking a stage of remembrance. With each subsequent excavation, the more physically challenging it became to carve the plate, the more labored the remembering became. The carved lines began to converge in a way that marred and nearly disappeared the home. In the process of creating the work, Yearwood realized she didn't want to destroy the image, but to come to an understanding. In near ashes of memory, wrestling with the lines between creating and destroying, Yearwood herself was startled within her own artistic process, and new images and—memories—of home were recreated.

God promises to bring us to tables in the presence of our enemies, mercifully; at times the enemy is us. But we are far from alone. Art at its best slows down racing minds and preoccupied

bodies, leaving viewers more present, engaging us in dialogue with ourselves, with the object, with the artist, with what the artist has found in the process of making—and sometimes with a mysterious other. The harried heart is far too willing to cooperate with its own death. We must, as Mary Oliver says, refuse all cooperation. The work of each of these artists leaves us with the suspicion of real presence at the tables they have set, a presence that evokes in us a similar cry for resistance.

Craig Hawkins explores questions of that shared space at actual tables, holding tensions within the layered symbol itself—icon of reconciliation, utilitarian surface, barrier, or bridge. The presence and purpose of the table shapes the space we share as much as the people who join us at the table and the objects we bring to it. Something is always shared at table. Hawkins's work is a longing for a shared wholeness, despite the complicated pieces we bring.

The work of Matthew Doll compounds that prayer. The artist describes tensions at the very surface of the painting which become a meeting point, a table created in synthesis and compression. Despite a diverse range of subject matter, Doll considers each of the works included in this exhibit as landscapes—"landscapes that are prayers which hold open the lines of communication across wastelands, across what we simply cannot know, across spaces I often cannot reach, people I cannot touch."

"We can reach out, though," he concludes.

What Doll means by this, in fact, can only be accounted for by the table. For Doll and for each of the artists in this exhibition, the table is a place that can and should hold wholeness even as it can and should hold our many layers of grief, histories of injustice, human wounds, and absences so great they reveal themselves as presences. At the table, stories can be re-told, a more beautiful song learned, bodies lost and broken re-membered, and life made new even in death.

Doll's *Holy Family* exists in such a legacy. It is a recasting of a medieval fresco that tells the story of a Jewish boy who receives the Eucharist, a story intending to show the eucharistic table as the site of miracle. The boy is thrown into the furnace by his enraged father only to be found alive, unharmed and embraced, by his mother. Holding the tragic reality of recurring persecution and suffering across history, Doll brings even the fresco's artist to the table. "I would love to imagine that even the original artist

understood that the family embracing their child was the point and not the utility of the miracle.” The center of the story, the center of *all* stories, in Doll’s retelling, becomes the embrace, the architecture of refuge for this child—as much as for all of us. Doll sets a vast table, setting everything that is good about our human condition alongside everything that is not quite there yet. Its title, *Holy Family*, sets this prayer which holds open the lines of communication across wastelands within the refuge of Trinitarian love and declarations of our belovedness. It is *this* communion that is the site of miracle.

May the church be such a refuge and the table a place of that very embrace.

And may the artists who build tables among us be nourished by our advocacy for their work. Art is indeed a needed form of resistance, but it is a hospitable resistance. Art creates space at tables we haven’t considered, suggests meals we haven’t believed we were hungry for, and offers the possibility of communing, if only for a moment, with the people and parts of ourselves we have kept in the dark. At these tables, we find the gift of more and a glimpse of the giver.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, after we have learned to laugh and weep with every sense of what it means to be human, eating and drinking in the uncontainable love and hospitality



Antonio Darden
S Tenebris
MDF, plywood, car cover
61 x 185 x 65 in.
2023

S Tenebris exists in the lineage of grief. It is a re-creation of my father’s southern style race truck he left me, a 1984 Chevrolet S-10 (with a 383 Stroker, if you are asking). This relic I now store under a chalky covering in my studio with no anticipation of an unveiling, a spirit in suspension.

Perhaps the World Ends Here: A Group Exhibition

About the Artists

Harry Ally is a figurative artist whose work is an existential search for an abstract presence. Retired after more than thirty years as a professor of drawing and painting, he holds the title of professor emeritus at Valdosta State University in Georgia.

web: harryally.com

instagram: [@allyartstudios](https://www.instagram.com/allyartstudios)

Antonio Darden is a multidisciplinary conceptual artist whose work is reflective of his multiracial background. He currently lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia.

web: antoniodarden.com

instagram: [@theantoniodarden](https://www.instagram.com/theantoniodarden)

Matthew Doll is a painter whose work is informed by the charged spaces between experience and memory. These spaces have allowed the work to co-exist within territories inscribed through conflict and marked by intersecting histories. He is based in Orvieto, Italy, where he serves as program director for the Orvieto semester program at Gordon College.

web: matthew-doll.squarespace.com

Craig Hawkins is an artist whose work pays homage to the markers of human identity. His work gives visual weight to spiritual narratives, grounding transcendent ideas in the physicality of material and design. He is professor of art at Valdosta State University.

web: craighawkinsart.com

instagram: [@craighawkinsart](https://www.instagram.com/craighawkinsart)

Mary Hallam Pearse is a multidisciplinary artist interested in how jewelry has functioned historically as a marker of status, class, wealth, and a record of human experience. She is professor of art in the jewelry and metalwork area at The Lamar Dodd School of Art in Athens, Georgia.

instagram: [@maryhallam](https://www.instagram.com/maryhallam)

Joseph Peragine is an artist and educator whose multidisciplinary work delves into the complexities of everyday existence, both its inception and its conclusion. Joseph is presently the director of the Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia.

web: josephperagine.com

Lanecia Rouse is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice is rooted in a contemplative and improvisational approach, exploring the possibilities of mixed-media collage, photography, and painting to reflect the textured complexities of the human experience, the stories we are born into, those we claim as our own, and those we create with our lives. Lanecia is based in Richmond, Virginia, and Houston, Texas.

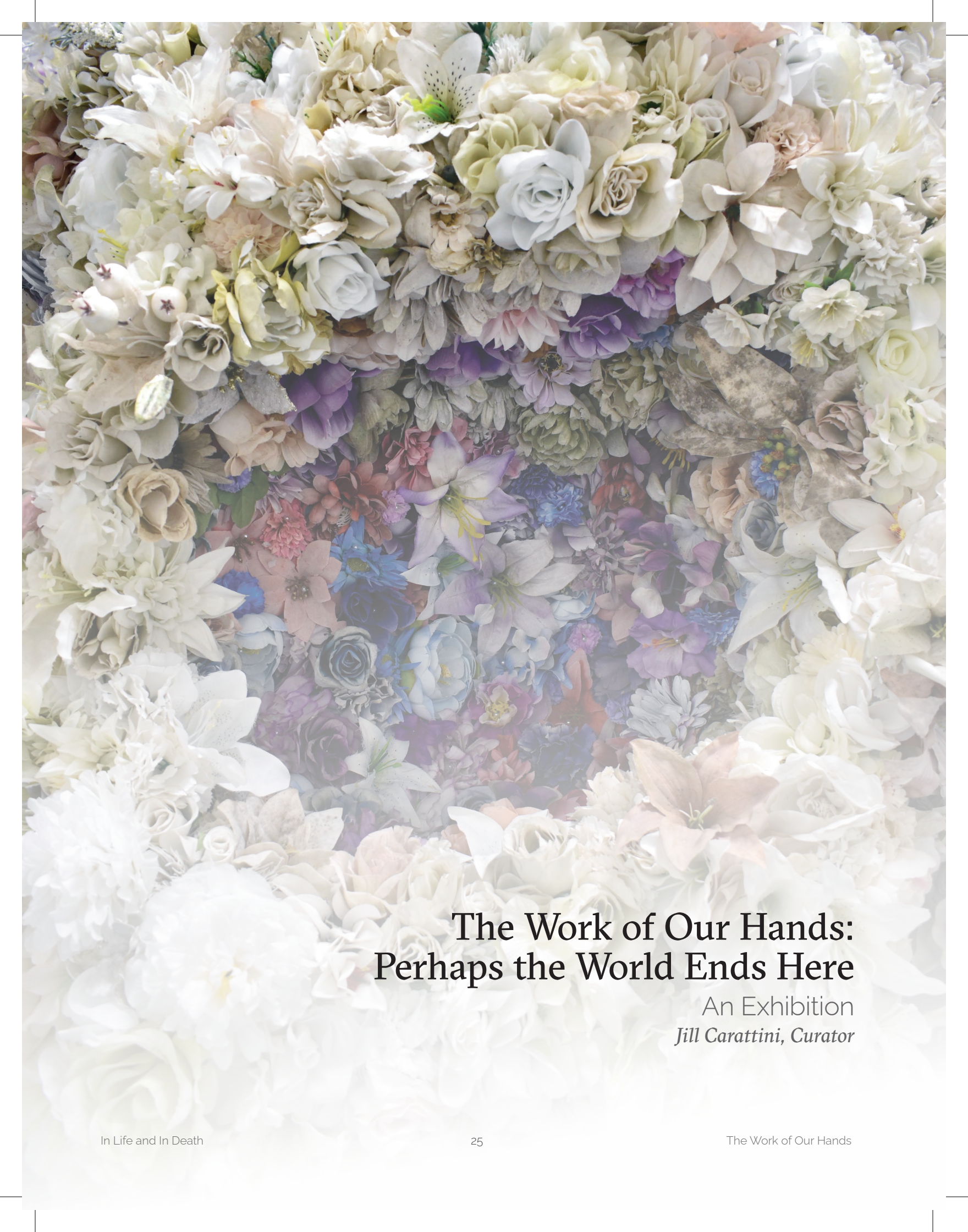
web: laneciarouse.co

instagram: [@lanartstudio](https://www.instagram.com/lanartstudio)

Anna Yearwood is an American artist based in Britain whose work explores conceptions of hospitality and dwelling, the concept of home, a sense of place, and belonging. Anna lives in Oxford and works from her studio located on a farm in nearby Buckinghamshire.

web: annayearwood.com

instagram: [@annayearwoodart](https://www.instagram.com/annayearwoodart)



The Work of Our Hands: Perhaps the World Ends Here

An Exhibition
Jill Carattini, Curator



Mary Hallam Pearse and Joseph Peragine
Steered by Falling Stars
 discarded artificial flowers collected from cemeteries and corsage pins
 84 x 36 x 36 in.
 2024

Drawing on overlapping themes in their work, Pearse and Peragine explore the fragility of life, concepts of death and decadence, pleasure and fear, love and loss in this temporary, site-specific installation. *Steered by Falling Stars* was crafted from plastic flowers of discarded corsages and graveyard flowers from cemeteries across Georgia.



Harry Ally
Figure #82
 charcoal, pastel, acrylic on paper
 72 x 48 in.
 2010

The creative act connects me to the past, to a timeless tradition in art that has always been a primary concern for humanity: the expression of existence. When I begin the process of making art I am always asking: Is there someone there or is there no one?



Harry Ally
Torso with Flowers
 mixed media on canvas
 60 x 42 in.
 2023

My work is an existential search for an abstract presence, an intuitive search into the unknown with pigments and paint, tar and fabric, bonding agents and clays dug from Georgia soil—from these materials, figurative images are unearthed. In this work I found a singular figure alone and staring defiantly at the viewer in an existential moment.



Lanecia Rouse

Ours

mother's dress, baby's breath, daughter's birth and funeral dress,
grandma's house gown, house siding, family photo and frame

84 x 48 x 6 in.

2022

Becoming the sacred ground from which other work emerged, this installation marked the beginning of my journey through "mothers' gardens" and the tender archaeology of re-memory. It bears witness to the matriarchal lineage that flows through my veins, including the women before me and the little girl I lost too soon.



Mary Hallam Pearse
Full Bloom
lead, steel
60 x 36 x 36 in.
2023

Full Bloom examines how the material lead and the symbolic nature of flowers express the paradoxical link between the world brought to us by our senses, our desires, and death. The accumulation of matter plays a role in shaping the work while simultaneously conveying the emptiness of over-consumption and merging themes of mortality and the human condition.



Matthew Doll
Chorus
 acrylic on panel
 86 x 99 in.
 2019

Sometimes a painting is a lamentation—a protest, a call—to answer. It is always some form of meditation and prayer. Sometimes a painting is one that tries to hold the love and loss of centuries and form it into a song that is a hymn meant to be sung, meant to be shared.

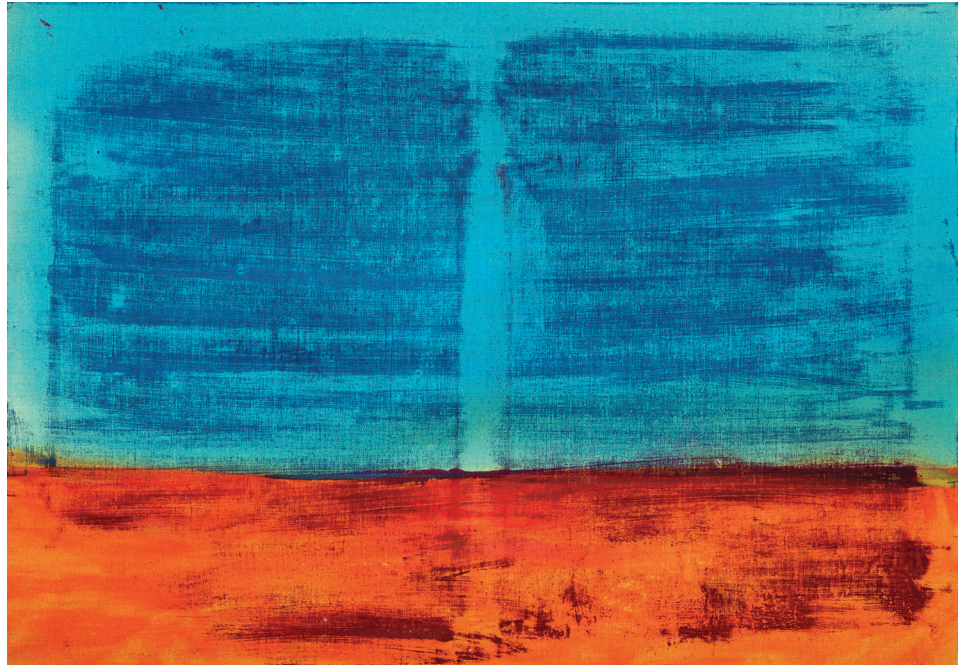
Matthew Doll
Holy Family
 acrylic on panel
 44 x 50 in.
 2019

This painting recasts a medieval fresco and story of a Jewish boy who receives the Eucharist and is thrown into the furnace by his father only to be found by his mother unharmed and embraced. I would love to imagine that the original artist understood that the family embracing their child was the point and not the utility of the miracle. I wanted to make the embrace of the family the center of the story, a refuge amidst the recurring persecutions throughout history. And whereas the church should be a refuge, and the table a place of communion, we know that this has not always been the case.



Matthew Doll
Midbar
 acrylic on panel
 40 x 27.5 in.
 2019

Midbar is the Hebrew word for wilderness—the place of great silence and transformation. *Midbar* also contains the meaning of the verb “to speak.” The midbar is the place of exodus, temptation, and revelation; it is where the Torah was given. In the wilderness there is always risk. But within that risk, there is meaning.



Lanecia Rouse
Oh, Dear One
 acrylic, paper, found photography, string, brick
 22.5 x 12.5 in.
 2021

“Come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to kill me/ and has failed.” In the company of Lucille Clifton’s poetry, I spent a year exploring notions of resilience and the myriad ways humans choose to lean into life—on a bridge between those everyday realities that have the power to destroy us and the somethings that beckon us to keep going.



Joseph Peragine
A Vast Calm
 acrylic on canvas
 42 x 48 in.
 2023

In an ongoing series called *After the Hunt*, dreamy abstract landscapes hide animals in boggy labyrinths among banks of flowers. Themes of life and death hover over the waters, an element vital to all life, but also sometimes obscuring our awareness of our inherent interconnectedness with nature.



Joseph Peragine
Spring Hoax 47
 mixed media
 20 x 16 in.
 2023

Conceived during the pandemic, *Spring Hoax* was a series of work drawing from a range of influences, blending elements of Vanitas and Day of the Dead imagery. Stark reminders of life's impermanence and the fleeting nature of material wealth join a sense of celebration and remembrance, emphasizing the connection between life and death.

Lament and Hope in Black Sacred Music: The Soundtrack of Suffering and Liberation

Keion Mekhi Jackson

Black sacred music has always been a vessel for both lament and hope. It is the sound of a people who have endured centuries of suffering and yet have never relinquished their pursuit of freedom. From the sorrow songs of enslaved Africans to the modern anthems of gospel choirs, Black music in the church is both an acknowledgment of pain and an insistence on joy. Nowhere is this more evident than in the music of Black funerals, where mourning and celebration exist in a holy tension. This article explores the theological and historical depth of lament and hope in Black sacred music, particularly in the context of death and remembrance.

Lament is an essential component of Black Christianity. In a society that has inflicted immense suffering on Black people, the ability to cry out to God—both individually and communally—has been a necessary spiritual practice. Biblical lament, as seen in the Psalms and the book of Lamentations, provides a model for this kind of expression: a profound, unfiltered outpouring of grief and protest against injustice. However, lament in Black worship does not end in despair. It moves toward hope, affirming that God is present even in suffering and that liberation is not just an eschatological promise but a lived reality that must be pursued in the here and now.

The intergenerational nature of Black sacred music also reinforces the continuity of hope across time. Songs passed down from grandmothers to grandchildren carry not only melodies but memories—of pain endured, faith preserved, and joy reclaimed. This transmission is not merely cultural; it is theological. In singing the same songs their ancestors sang, Black communities engage

in a liturgy of remembrance and resistance. Each repetition becomes a reaffirmation that the God who delivered before will deliver again. The music binds generations together in a sacred covenant rooted in the faith that the arc of the moral universe, though long, does bend toward justice, inspiring us with the resilience of these communities.

This inheritance of sacred sound becomes especially vital in moments of collective grief—such as the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, George Floyd, and countless others whose names have become laments in their own right. In these moments, the church often becomes a sanctuary for mourning, and the music—old and new—becomes the balm that soothes wounded spirits.

Songs like James Cleveland's "Peace Be Still" or more recent offerings like "Take Me to the King" by Tamela Mann speak not only to personal sorrow but to national trauma. They create room for tears and trembling, for holy rage and quiet surrender, holding space for emotions that words alone cannot express.

Moreover, the role of the Black musician—choir directors, soloists, organists, and composers—is that of a theologian in sound. These artists do more than perform; they interpret and proclaim.

Through improvisation, modulation, and crescendo, they guide worshipers through the complex emotional landscape of Black life. A well-placed key change or a sustained moan from the choir can sometimes speak more directly to the Spirit than a sermon ever could. In this way, the Black church musician becomes a prophet, shaping not only the sound but also the spirit of communal faith and resistance.

Keion Jackson is a renowned preacher, choral director, and liturgical theologian whose ministry gently weaves worship and justice into a shared sacred calling.

Ultimately, the power of Black sacred music lies in its refusal to be confined to either lament or hope. Instead, it insists on both—insists that we can grieve deeply and still believe fiercely. This refusal to choose is the genius and the gift of our tradition: it meets us in our sorrow but refuses to leave us there. It lifts us just enough to keep going. In a world that too often demands silence or submission, Black sacred music gives us a voice—one that wails and whispers, that shouts and sings, that remembers and dreams. It is, in the truest sense, the sound of our survival and the soundtrack of our liberation.

God is not a distant observer but is intimately involved in the struggle for justice, co-suffering with humanity while also working toward transformation.

Process Theology, with its emphasis on God's dynamic engagement with creation, aligns with this understanding of lament and hope. God is not a distant observer but is intimately involved in the struggle for justice, co-suffering with humanity while also working toward transformation. This theological lens helps explain why Black sacred music does not remain in lament but pushes forward into hope, believing in the possibility of change and divine intervention.

The cross has long been a source of theological reflection in Black Christianity. While much of Christian soteriology emphasizes Christ's suffering as atonement for sin, Black theology sees the crucifixion as a symbol of both oppression and liberation. Jesus was a marginalized figure, executed by the state, much like countless Black people who have suffered at the hands of systemic violence. Yet, his death was not the end. The resurrection became a metaphor for Black survival, resistance, and hope.

For enslaved Africans, the story of Jesus' crucifixion resonated deeply. They saw in Christ's suffering a reflection of their own. The idea that God became flesh and suffered with the oppressed made Jesus a savior and a companion in their affliction. This theology fueled the creation of spirituals like "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"—songs that simultaneously expressed lament over suffering and hope in God's ultimate justice.

This understanding of the cross shaped Black liturgical practices, particularly in the observance

of Holy Week and Good Friday. These services, rich with sorrowful hymns and reenactments of Christ's passion, became moments of deep communal lament. Yet, just as crucial were the celebrations of Easter Sunday, which affirmed that oppression never has the final word. This rhythmic interchange is not liturgy for liturgy's sake, but an authentic communal affirmation of hope. Suffering and resurrection remain at the heart of Black worship, influencing everything from the structure of Sunday services to the climactic energy of sermons that begin in reflection and end in triumphant proclamation.

The impact of Christ's death and resurrection also manifests in the use of call-and-response in Black worship. The preacher's cry of "He died!" is met with the congregation's response of "But early Sunday morning!" This rhythmic interchange is not simply liturgical; it is a communal affirmation of hope. It is a reminder that suffering is real, but so is resurrection, not just as a theological concept but as a historical and present reality for Black people fighting against oppression.

Moreover, the concept of liberation through Christ's suffering is reflected in the way Black churches use the altar call as a moment of transformation. The altar call is not merely about personal salvation but a communal affirmation that God is still working in the midst of suffering. Songs like "Come Ye Disconsolate" and "Oh, How I Love Jesus" reinforce this sense of divine presence amid pain, offering a sacred space where both grief and healing are held together.

Black funerals are unique spaces where grief and celebration intertwine. Unlike the stoic, somber traditions of European funerary practices, Black homegoing services recognize death as a passage rather than an end. The music of these services reflects this duality. Songs like "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" by Thomas Dorsey capture the deep pain of loss while also expressing trust in God's guidance. Similarly, "I'll Fly Away" offers a vision of release from earthly suffering, transforming grief into an anticipatory joy.

In the communal act of singing, mourners are not left alone in their grief. Instead, they are carried by the voices around them, echoing a collective history of endurance. This corporate aspect of lament and hope mirrors the way Black people have survived systemic oppression—not in isolation but through shared faith and struggle. The funeral, then, is not just a farewell to the deceased but a reaffirmation of life and resilience

Hymns and anthems, combined with the emotional and improvisational depth of spirituals, formed what would later evolve into gospel music. In worship, the sorrow of slavery was not forgotten but transformed into communal expressions of hope and power.

for those who remain. This sacred tradition of lament and hope evolved significantly during the postbellum period, the years following the Civil War (1865–1900), when newly emancipated African Americans began to reshape their cultural and spiritual identity. While the sorrow songs of slavery remained foundational, new musical expressions emerged—rooted in both African traditions and the evolving realities of Black life in Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. The spirituals, once sung in hush harbors and cotton fields, were carried into freedom with fresh urgency. Groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers brought these songs to concert halls in the United States and Europe, elevating the spiritual from a folk form of survival to a symbol of resilience and sacred testimony.

During this time, Black church music flourished, becoming the heartbeat of a community reclaiming its humanity. Hymns and anthems, combined with the emotional and improvisational depth of spirituals, formed what would later evolve into gospel music. In worship, the sorrow of slavery was not forgotten but transformed into communal expressions of hope and power. Yet not all Black musical expressions in the postbellum period were sacred in the traditional sense. Many Black performers began to navigate the contested world of minstrelsy and vaudeville. Despite the racist origins of these genres, Black artists reclaimed the stage with authenticity and subtle subversion, laying the groundwork for future genres like blues and jazz. These secular forms were not devoid of spiritual meaning—they, too, expressed the complexity of Black life: sorrow, humor, endurance, and desire. The proto-blues that emerged from field hollers and work songs spoke to the daily struggles of African Americans, while the more classically influenced works of Black composers in historically Black institutions, such as Howard University and Hampton Institute, reflected a deep engagement with European forms without abandoning African American sensibilities.

This dynamic creativity affirmed what Black sacred music has consistently demonstrated: that lament and hope are not confined to the genre but

are core elements of the Black experience. Whether in the church, the concert hall, or the juke joint, music became a language of survival and a path toward liberation.

The cross has long been a source of theological reflection in Black Christianity. Gospel music has long been a vehicle for both lament and hope. Emerging from the spirituals of enslaved Africans and influenced by blues and jazz, gospel music has maintained its ability to speak to both suffering and triumph. Songs like “We Shall Overcome” became anthems of the Civil Rights Movement, carrying both the weight of oppression and the promise of victory. In more contemporary gospel music, artists like Kirk Franklin and Tasha Cobbs Leonard continue to engage with themes of struggle and hope, blending traditional sounds with new expressions that resonate with modern audiences. The works of Richard Smallwood, Uduak Smith, and Moses Hogan further exemplify this interplay of lament and hope. Smallwood’s “Total Praise” is an anthem of unwavering faith in God despite trials, resonating deeply with congregations in moments of loss and transition. Uduak Smith’s compositions weave traditional gospel elements with classical undertones, creating deeply moving pieces that bring a unique depth to worship. Moses Hogan’s arrangements of spirituals, such as “Deep River” and “My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord,” connect the historical sorrow of Black suffering with an enduring faith in divine deliverance.

Even amidst ongoing racial injustice, gospel music remains an expression of prophetic hope. It does not ignore the pain but insists that a better world is possible. This duality is crucial for understanding how Black sacred music functions as both a spiritual and social force. It is not merely art; it is activism, theology, and community wrapped in sound. Lament and hope are not opposites in Black sacred music; they are partners in the ongoing journey toward liberation. Whether in the sorrow songs of slavery, the funeral hymns of grief, or the gospel anthems of today, Black music continues

to articulate both the pain of the present and the promise of a better future. It is a reminder that, even in the valley of the shadow of death, God walks with us, and our voices—lifted in song—become both a cry of lament and a declaration of hope. In this way, Black sacred music remains the soundtrack of survival, resistance, and ultimate freedom.

In recent decades, the evolution of sacred music into contemporary Christian and urban gospel forms has opened new spaces for articulating lament and hope in modern vernaculars. Artists like Yolanda Adams, Jonathan McReynolds, and Maverick City Music have pushed the boundaries of Black sacred expression, blending traditional gospel with soul, hip-hop, and R&B. Their work reflects the complexities of millennial and Gen Z spirituality—where faith is still central, but doubt, mental health, and societal injustice are more openly confronted. In this space, songs become confessions, not only of divine glory but of human fragility. Lament is no longer hidden in metaphor but named aloud, and yet, even in this raw honesty, hope remains a stubborn presence.

This newer soundscape does not dilute the tradition—it expands it. When Tasha Cobbs Leonard sings “You Know My Name,” she proclaims a personal intimacy with the divine that resonates with the ancestral longing for recognition in a world that often renders Black life invisible. When Kirk Franklin declares, “Smile—even though it hurts, I smile,” he is not dismissing pain but offering a theology of perseverance. These contemporary

anthems embody what womanist theologian Emilie Townes calls “the fantastic hegemonic imagination,” subverting dominant narratives and reimagining new, life-affirming realities. Through syncopated rhythms and soaring runs, Black sacred music continues to say, in a thousand different ways, *we are still here*.

Technology and social media have also played a transformative role in how Black sacred music circulates lament and hope. Viral choir performances, live-streamed homegoing services, and TikTok remixes of gospel hooks serve as both spiritual nourishment and cultural witness. These platforms allow the message of Black sacred music to cross denominational, generational, and even national boundaries. Whether in a storefront church or on a global stage, the music bears witness to a God who is not bound by buildings or liturgies but who dwells in every cry for justice and every song of praise.

In this ever-expanding archive of sacred sound, Black music does not simply reflect the past—it imagines the future. It dares to envision a world where joy is not a luxury but a birthright, where liberation is not deferred but unfolding. As long as there is breath in our bodies and rhythm in our souls, we will keep singing. Because to sing is to survive. To sing is to resist. To sing is to remember, to mourn, to testify, and to believe. And in the sacred tradition of our people, that song—rising from the depths of sorrow and soaring toward the heights of hope—will never be silenced.

Natural Burial and the Christian Story: A Review of Two Books by Dr. Kent Burreson and Dr. Beth Hoeltke

Death, Heaven, Resurrection, and the New Creation

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024

*Lay Me in God's Good Earth: A Christian
Approach to Death and Burial*

St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2019

Reviewed by Kimberley Wadlington

Did you know

. . . you can use dryer lint to make an urn for human cremains and purchase a bookcase that readily converts into a coffin?

. . . you can bury a human body at sea without a permit if you alert the EPA within thirty days of burial and follow applicable EPA guidelines? (*Lay Me in God's Good Earth*, pp. 37, 204)

. . . each of us will die and before death we can make choices for burial that honor creation and enable the telling of the Christian story?

These “fun facts” about burial allude to natural burial, a small but growing movement in the United States. Natural burial is burial of the human body with as little interference in the natural state of the body as possible. Rather than seeking to preserve a body for as long as possible after burial, it is the decision to introduce as few impediments to the natural process of decomposition as possible. According to the website of the Green Burial Council, “that means no embalming, no liners or vaults, and using biodegradable containers, whether caskets, shrouds or nothing at all”¹ in the process of burying bodies. Natural burial is the “ultimate act of environmental volunteerism,”² says funeral director Elizabeth Fournier, affectionately known as The Green Reaper for her advocacy of natural

burial. In addition to being an environmentally sound practice, natural burial, of all possible burial practices, tells the Christian story of death and resurrection most clearly. (*Lay Me*, pp. 24–25) This is the argument made in this pair of books by Dr. Kent Burreson and Dr. Beth Hoeltke.

Both books arose from their shared desire to consider “how Christians should bury their dead in ways faithful to a biblical and creedal confession.” (*Death, Heaven, Resurrection*, p. 6) Before writing about burial practices, they realized the need to reflect on death and dying, especially considering the Christian story and the knowledge that our culture typically avoids talking about death and denies its reality. In their first book, *Death, Heaven, Resurrection, and the New Creation*, they provide the Christian with a framework for thinking and talking about death that doesn't deny the pain of death but rather places death within God's story of new creation in Christ and the kingdom of God. In the second book, *Lay Me in God's Good Earth: A Christian Approach to Death and Burial*, Burreson and Hoeltke write about natural burial and encourage the practice not only as a way to be good stewards of creation but also because they believe the practice is consistent with an identity as people who anticipate the resurrection of the body, an anticipation “that flows from the story of God the Creator.” (*Lay Me*, p. 21)

Kim Wadlington lives in Ohio with her husband, Derek, and is currently doing Transitional Ministry in Scioto Valley Presbytery.

There is much to appreciate in these books. Because their primary argument is a theological one, I will first examine *Death, Heaven, Resurrection, and the New Creation*. Intended to be a Bible study, it offers six sessions that the authors suggest facilitate “a discussion of death, placing it in the context of God’s creation of the body and God’s resurrection of the body in His Son, Jesus Christ.” (*Death, Heaven*, p. 6) Each chapter weaves together and builds upon four major themes. For each of these themes, the authors offer practical implications for the lives of Christians. The book is laden with supporting biblical references and many questions to ponder.

Before thinking about death and resurrection, the authors introduce “The Gift of the Body” (*Death, Heaven*, p. 7), offering a biblical understanding of creation. They affirm the Hebrew view of the body: that God created humans out of the earth, that spirit is breathed into us by our creator, and that body and spirit are one. As such, they reject the dominant philosophical understanding of the body as a container for the spirit. We are always body and spirit and can only relate to God and God’s creation as such. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 11–13) False assumptions that the body and spirit can be separated from one another lead to debasing our bodies in life and ignoring the bodies of the dead. (*Death, Heaven*, p. 8) In keeping with the Apostles’ Creed, they insist that, like Christ, and through Christ, we will also be raised as a spiritual *body*, not an unembodied spirit. (*Death, Heaven*, p. 15) They also discuss the individual and corporate consequences of the “fallen body” and the effects of the body’s captivity to sin while affirming that Christ restores our humanity through the entire trajectory of his life from incarnation to his second coming. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 17–32) Practically, this means we are responsible for preparing our bodies for death and resurrection by taking on ascetic disciplines that help us let go of the ways we cling to this bodily life and focus our hope on the resurrected body and the life to come. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 36–37)

In chapter 2, titled “Your Death, Your Dying,” the authors seek to render conversation about death less frightening and more commonplace by sharing personal experiences of the death of loved ones and discussing the act of dying from both a medical and spiritual perspective. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 44–55) They take a lengthy excursion into the idea of the soul, challenging cultural understandings of the soul and the soul’s residence in heaven after death. They

acknowledge the complexity of the biblical witness to the soul in both the Old and New Testaments and that Jesus himself talks about the soul. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 55–66) Ultimately, they conclude, “biblical texts talk often about a soul, but nowhere is it clearly defined. Maybe it is the image or likeness of God, or maybe it is something indescribable by humans; but it is clear that God created his creatures from the dust of the ground and the breath of life” (*Death, Heaven*, p. 64) and that we will be raised bodily into the new creation with Christ’s second coming.

Insisting on the unity of body and spirit and that the dead will be raised in the new creation raises questions about what happens to the person who has died in the time in between death and the new creation. (*Death, Heaven*, p. 67) This question has practical pastoral care implications, as it is challenging to be present in comforting but theologically sound ways as we respond to the questions of people whose loved ones have died. Many ask, “Where is my loved one now?” and, to the author’s point, wrestling with these significant questions must be a part of Christian conversation and study before the time of death.

Chapter 3, “Facing the New Reality of Death: Finding the New Normal,” discusses the grief of those who suffer the death of a loved one. The bulk of the chapter includes generous sharing of personal stories of grief in the face of death. Through those stories the authors address some of the most tragic types of death we grieve. They offer insight about “what not to say” to someone grieving the death of a loved one and about “what those who are grieving want you to know.” (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 100, 102) This chapter will better equip any person in the church who offers care and sympathy to the grieving.

Moving from the hurt we carry in grief to the hope we have in Christ, the authors address resurrection in “Your Victory—The Body’s Resurrection,” chapter 4. They begin by examining the nature of Jesus’ bodily resurrection and the hope we have for our own bodily resurrection. As they develop this proclamation of the Christian story, the authors also discuss the ways that modern culture has come to view death as “merely a problem to be addressed” and in *addressing* death rather than facing death we have developed ways to try to avoid death and to separate ourselves from death. Continuing to offer the practical implications of their theology, the authors end this chapter with a call to live as those who die with hope by facing mortality squarely,

by living this life fully and without despair, and by practicing “virtues that lead us to a holy and peaceful death,” upon which they elaborate. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 112, 139)

In chapter 5, “Recasting Heaven: The New Creation,” the authors begin building their understanding of New Creation and offer a biblical view of heaven which they assert is more hopeful than current cultural understandings. (*Death, Heaven*, p. 145) Admitting the mysterious nature of heaven, the authors discuss biblical metaphors and provide passages that give insight into what heaven is and is not. Ultimately, as the chapter title suggests, they recast heaven as the new creation, inviting the reader to consider the biblical image of God’s eternal kingdom, the rule and reign of God come fully on earth, as analogous to heaven and a present-day reality in Jesus. (*Death, Heaven*, p. 163) Elaborating on Colossians 3:1–3 and Paul’s understanding that, dying and rising in baptism, our life is hidden in Christ, they offer the idea that heaven is hidden in the very world around us but also waiting to be made new with Christ’s second coming. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 149–151)

Practically, they caution the reader to stay focused on Jesus, for where Jesus is, there is the reality of heaven, and in his second coming this earth we inhabit will be freed of sin and perfected as part of the new creation in Christ. As such, we are called to remember that “earth matters, our bodies matter, all of creation matters” because all will be a part of heaven, God’s redeemed and renewed creation. Additionally, given the present-day reality of God’s kingdom and the invitation to begin living eternal life—life with Christ—today, the authors insist that it is our responsibility to learn from Jesus’ life and parables now to prepare ourselves for heaven’s present and future reality. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 166, 151, 157)

Chapter 6, “Bodily Life in God’s Heavenly Creation,” gives the fullest sense of their understanding of the biblical view of resurrection and its meaning for human beings. In that vision, all believers in Christ will live in perfect communion with God and one another in God’s kingdom on the new earth. We will relate to God, one another, and to all creation with resurrected bodies. As such we will participate in God’s rule and will be able to work with God to perfectly manage creation. The love that is from God, which also conforms to Jesus himself, will pervade all our interactions with creation and one another.

Because that love conforms to Jesus himself, it is a cross-shaped love, a self-giving love. (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 169–173) Everything we know in this life, every thought, every action, every human system, and every cultural form will be “re-created and renewed to function in love,” reflecting Christ’s own self-emptying love. In light of this understanding, the authors conclude their discussion of death, stating that “[Christian] longing is not just to conquer death but rather to live forever in communion with the Source of life . . . with the One who is life itself: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (*Death, Heaven*, 175, 178) This hopeful vision offers meaning and direction for this life and joyful anticipation for resurrection life in the new creation.

Having developed their theological understanding of death and resurrection in the Christian story, the authors turn to thinking about burial practices that tell that story best, offering *Lay Me in God’s Good Earth: A Christian Approach to Death and Burial* for Christians and non-Christians alike. This book begins with a brief overview of the Christian story told in detail in the first book. The authors then make the connection between the Christian story and natural burial, proclaiming:

When we place our bodies into the ground at death in natural ways—in ways that respect the honor accorded to our bodies as God created them and that reflect their origins from the earth that belongs to God—we confess this story of God’s Kingdom. We confess that God created our bodies from the earth. We confess that he is the creator of all things, even of our lives. We proclaim that his story is one of re-creating all things through the life, death, resurrection, and second coming of his Son in the power of the Spirit. (*Lay Me*, p. 12)

Because God created all things and will redeem and restore all things, including our bodies and the earth, we naturally entrust our bodies to God and God’s good earth in death, affirming our faith and caring for creation.

Throughout, the authors make their case convincingly. Detailing many possible burial practices and places, Christian funeral practices, practices for accompanying the dying, and practices of caring for dead bodies, they continually describe how specific practices connect, or don’t connect,

to the Christian story and how they support, or don't support, stewardship of the environment. In addition to green practices, they invite the reader to consider natural burial broadly, considering at-home care for the dying and the dead to be part of natural burial. The authors hope that a revitalization of these practices will enable us to become a society that once again faces death in wholistic ways. The book is encouraging, filled with valuable insight regarding different practices, and includes many references from other books and national organizations devoted to natural burial.

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To reflect on our funeral practices and how the funeral service tells not only the story of the deceased but more importantly God's story, the reader can turn to chapters 3 and 4, "Remembering the Dead in Hope" and "Knowing the Way Home." In these, the authors share the history of burial practices in the United States and how we arrived at this time when the dead bodies of our loved ones are almost exclusively turned over to professionals for care. They discuss funeral practices and the significance of having the body of the deceased present at the service. (*Lay Me*, pp. 52, 68, 59) In doing so, they encourage "living by the imagination of the third article of the Apostles' Creed," which affirms "the communion of the living and the dead" and invites the church to remember "its own identity as those who live with those who have died and who will live again." (*Lay Me*, p. 62) Contrary to popular sentiment that funerals are for the living, the authors insist funerals are "for the dead" because without the dead, there would be no occasion for gathering. When we affirm that funerals are for the dead, and when the dead are present at their funerals, we can "recognize the judgment of death . . . [and] tell the gospel of God that is our only deliverance from the jaws of death." (*Lay Me*, p. 76)

In chapter 5 and 6, "Caring for the Body of our Dead" and "Dying with Hope," the authors reflect on caring for the dying and the bodies of our deceased loved ones. Firmly rooted in their theology of hope, they encourage a return to carrying out both these

tasks at home rather than entrusting them to the caregiving and funeral industries. Acknowledging the challenge of caring for the dying, the authors look at available options to aid in accompanying our loved ones in death. These include hospice care, palliative care, death doulas and midwives, home funeral plans, and guidance for deciding when to forgo medical treatment rather than fight to the end. They speak to the dying by offering insight about how to live one's final days and to caregivers by offering information about what to expect from those who are dying at different stages of the dying process. (*Lay Me*, pp. 90, 117-124, 126-132)

Once death has occurred, they encourage graciously caring for the bodies of the dead ourselves to begin the grieving process and contribute to our witness of hope in the resurrection of the body. (*Lay Me*, pp. 90-92) To assist in doing so, the authors detail the aspects of care needed. They teach how to close the eyes permanently, how to wash and dress (or shroud) the body properly, and how to preserve the body at home until a service and burial. They offer suggestions for anointing and for generally making this final time with our loved ones meaningful and holy. Always with an eye toward burial in the most natural way possible, they talk about materials that can be used in green cemeteries and detail the significant impact of the embalming process on the environment. (*Lay Me*, pp. 96-113)

The authors close the book with a chapter entitled "The Particularities of Death," sharing advice for making conversation about death and dying more commonplace. They discuss how our fear, denial, lack of vulnerability and interdependence, and our many euphemisms for death make it harder to discuss death and dying. Echoing portions of their first book, they offer insight into the art of dying well and the spirituality of death, concluding that death is "a spiritual process of letting go of this world and looking forward to the world to come . . . [and that] the deathbed is a culmination of Christian life." (*Lay Me*, pp. 137-148, 151) Appendices at the end include a comprehensive burial planning guide, a list of state boards and funeral licensing agencies, and further reading.

Each of these books stands well alone. Taken together, they offer a full account of the biblical promise of resurrection made by God through Jesus Christ and of the ways we can, as good stewards of God's earth, tell the Christian story through our death and burial.

I offer two considerations for readers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other Reformed traditions. Burreson and Hoeltke are part of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), and Reformed readers will recognize some theological differences. First, our *Book of Order* offers that “[while both] Lutherans and Reformed claim the saving power of God’s grace as the center of their faith and life [and] believe that salvation depends on God’s grace alone and not on human cooperation . . . the doctrine of predestination has been one of the issues separating the two traditions.”³ In other words, while both Lutheran and Reformed perspectives recognize salvation by grace through faith, these authors emphasize the role of faith from Luther’s doctrine, while Reformed Christians typically emphasize the role of grace, following John Calvin. The authors’ strong emphasis on faith, signified by baptism, as a factor in salvation permeates their theology and is especially prevalent in *Death, Heaven, Resurrection, and the New Creation*.

Approaching that book, Reformed readers will want to discuss the authors’ statements regarding salvation. For instance, in chapter 4 the authors discuss God’s final judgment and assert, “Those who fail to believe in the Triune God and reject His gracious Word are separated from God and God’s kingdom and reside in that place of separation, hell.” (*Death, Heaven*, p. 132) In chapter 5 they state, “For those who trust in Christ, heaven will be their eternal home. For those who trust in themselves, hell will be their eternal home.” Thinking about hope in uncertain situations, particularly the death of children through miscarriage or stillbirth, the authors do hope “in the story of the resurrecting God” but also stress that “the promise of baptism can’t be spoken.” (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 150, 131) These statements and others like them give a glimpse of the differing theological emphases of our traditions regarding salvation.

The authors’ view is indicative of the Athanasian Creed, which the LCMS affirms as one of the three ecumenical creeds. It opens, “Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally.”⁴ While other Reformed traditions accept the Athanasian Creed, the PC(USA) has never included it in its *Book of Confessions*. Instead, PC(USA) readers may want to turn to chapter X of The Second Helvetic Confession, which states, “God has elected us out of

grace. From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ.” And though it also states, “Those who were outside Christ were rejected,” it encourages, based on grace, that “we are to have good hope for all . . . and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate.”⁵

Other twentieth-century theologians provide possibilities for thinking about judgment, salvation, and hell differently.

Other twentieth-century theologians provide possibilities for thinking about judgment, salvation, and hell differently. In *A Grammar of Christian Faith*, theologian Joseph R. Jones argues that “in *Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, God takes the judged consequences of sin upon God’s own triune Life*. The righteousness and justice of God is that of redemption and renewal.”⁶ Therefore, as he wrestles with the question of “ultimate destiny,” even though he concedes many biblical passages point to dual destiny, saved and unsaved, he also asserts, “There are . . . other passages and grammars that point to a non-dualist ultimate destiny for human beings. They are embedded in passages about atonement and reconciliation, justification by grace through faith, the ultimacy of God’s free and gracious and unmerited love.” This leads Jones to posit a third alternative, “universal ultimate destiny,” in which “Christians look to an *absolute future* in which God brings all sinful humans and the whole creation to eternal fulfillment in God’s own eternal life. Hence, hell—as the place of absolute separation from God—is an impossible possibility and is therefore empty of occupants.”⁷

For an interesting and lively discussion, readers might turn to chapters 7 and 19 of Shirley Guthrie’s *Christian Doctrine* respectively titled “What Does God Want with Us? The Doctrine of Predestination” and “What’s Going to Happen to Us? The Doctrine of Christian Hope for the Future.”⁸ In discussing predestination, Guthrie holds together God’s love and judgment in part by citing section 10.5 of the *Declaration of Faith*, which states, “Constrained by God’s love in Christ, we have good hope for all people, not exempting the most unlikely from the promises. Judgment belongs to God and not to us. We are sure that God’s future for every person will

be both merciful and just.” In the latter chapter, Guthrie states,

The misunderstanding is that heaven is the reward for being good and hell the punishment for being bad—like an eternal lollipop or eternal spanking promised good or bad children. According to Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, the truth is just the opposite: *Heaven is for sinners and hell is for ‘good’ people.*⁹

He bases his argument on Jesus’ words of gracious invitation issued to people counted among the sinners and Jesus’ sternest warnings issued to religious leaders and the “church-going people of his day.”¹⁰ Guthrie’s work provides interesting nuance to the views of Burreson and Hoeltke and those who posit a more universal understanding of salvation like Jones.

The second consideration worth noting concerns the LCMS reading of the Bible with a literal historical approach. Their statement on creation in the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932) is still held and states in part, “We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Gen. 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word, and in six days. We reject every doctrine which denies or limits the work of creation as taught in Scripture.”¹¹ This literal historical approach affects how the authors understand creation and how they envision the new creation, flattening their interpretation regarding both. Even as they envision that the earth, like our bodies, will be perfected in the new creation, and write that the words *reconcile*, *renew*, *redeem*, *recover*, *regenerate*, and *resurrect* are all apt descriptions of what will happen with the new creation, they also insist, “each of these words begins with the prefix *re-*, suggesting a return to that which was originally created.” Later in the text, they describe the new creation again saying, “All believers in Christ will live on the new earth with God in Christ dwelling with us. Sound familiar? It’s the restoration of paradise (Genesis 2:8).” (*Death, Heaven*, pp. 163–164, 170)

Why is this troubling? A literal reading of Genesis has lent theological weight to patriarchal societies for millennia. LCMS doctrine prohibits women from serving in its highest positions, based in part on its reading of 1 Timothy 2:11–15,¹² whose

author points directly to Genesis saying, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” While Burreson and Hoeltke do not say anything about the structure of relationships in this return to the paradise of Genesis beyond the affirmation that human beings, being filled with God’s love, will relate to God and to one another perfectly (*Death, Heaven*, p. 187), neither does their literal reading of Genesis, interspersed throughout the book, give hope for a truly new way of relating to one another in the new creation.

But the Bible also tells us that when God does something new, it is truly new and often quite surprising to human beings.

But the Bible also tells us that when God does something new, it is truly *new* and often quite surprising to human beings. When promising the exiles in Babylon a *re-turn* to their home, God says, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isa. 43:18–19). Since according to the authors, “God’s great endeavor is to make true humans out of His creatures” (*Death, Heaven*, p. 22) with Jesus the perfect pattern for both men and women, and since in our resurrected bodies, “God will dwell in us, and so will the fullness of God’s unrelenting love,” (*Death, Heaven*, p. 183) surely we can hope for more than acceptance of a hierarchical relationship to one another in the future? As they study this book, Reformed readers will at least want to note this literal approach to Scripture and perhaps imagine together a vision of the new creation informed by the ways Jesus saw and honored women and all humans even as he himself lived within a patriarchal hierarchical society.

It has been a privilege to read and wrestle with these two books. Burreson and Hoeltke offer a compelling vision for natural burial, a detailed explanation of how to approach the many aspects of natural burial, and a clear understanding of how natural burial tells the Christian story. They generously share many stories of death and dying from their own lives. Those stories, which highlight the fruit of conversations about death, undergird

their insistence that we, the church, must become more comfortable in having and leading those conversations.

Notes

1. "Green Burial Defined," Green Burial Council Website, Green Burial Council, accessed on April 21, 2025, www.greenburialcouncil.org/greenburialdefined.html.
2. Elizabeth Fournier, "Going Green: Your Last Heroic Act of Volunteerism," TEDx Talk, Salem, NC, 2019, 15:42, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KGXyuGzmGw&t=88s/.
3. *Book of Order*, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 2 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, PC(USA), 2019), B-7.
4. "The Three Ecumenical or Universal Creeds," The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, accessed on April 21, 2025, https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/three-ecumenical-creeds?_gl=1*_1bok5nt*_ga*MTEoNTE3NTM4NS4xNzQ1MDkzNzIx*_ga_Zo184DBP2L*MTcoNTI2Njk4MC4oLjAuMTcoNTI2Njk4MC4wLjAuMA/.
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6. Joseph R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, vol. 2 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 720; italics in the original.
7. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith*, pp. 717, 711, 715.
8. Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 118, 373.
9. Guthrie, pp. 134, 396.
10. Guthrie, p. 396.
11. "Doctrinal Positions of the LCMS," The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, accessed on April 21, 2025, <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/doctrine/brief-statement-of-lcms-doctrinal-position#:~:text=Return%20to%20topics-,Of%20Creation,creation%20as%20taught%20in%20Scripture/>.
12. "FAQs about Worship & Congregational Life," The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, accessed on April 21, 2025, <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/worship-and-congregational-life#women-ministers>.

Belonging to Each Other: Supporting Young People in the Midst of Loss

Ashley-Anne Masters

We declare in A Brief Statement of Faith, “In life and in death we belong to God.” In life, in death, and in every moment between, until our baptisms are complete, we also belong to each other. To support each other and to grieve together as a community is a faithful way to fulfill our baptismal vows to one another.

Death is inevitable for all of us, yet we cling to the promise that death will never have the final word. As Easter people, we hope against hope in the power of the resurrection, and we pray for stones to be rolled away from the tombs of our lives. Amid our own grief, may we have the courage to be as vulnerable and authentic as possible when speaking to children and young people about the sting of death. May we be appropriately honest about the disorientation of trauma, the weight of an alarming medical diagnosis, and the lifelong work of healthy grieving.

I hope that this article offers helpful guidance as you accompany children and young people in grief. If I have learned anything in my career as a hospital chaplain and campus minister, it is that we will all say the wrong thing at times. Even those of us who are considered experts sometimes leave the bedside of a dying beloved child of God and immediately wish we had said something differently. Supporting children and young people through grief is not about perfection. Rather, it is about truth telling, consistency, and presence.

None of us knows why bad things happen to good people. And none of us knows exactly what happens when we die. What we do profess is that God is God, God is love, and God’s is the first heart to break when something terrible happens. We recognize that God knows the excruciating pain

of the death of a child. We trust God to comfort us in our grief, and we trust the Spirit to give us comforting words to speak to each other when our own words fall short.

Talking with Children about Death and Grief

While it may feel daunting to consider discussing death and grief with children, often they are already somewhat familiar with death as a concept, even if they do not truly comprehend it. Events of death are included in many shows and movies made for children: *The Lion King*, *Bambi*, *The Fox and the Hound*, *Up*, *Frozen*, *Finding Nemo*, *Toy Story 3*, and many other shows and cartoons.

Some children may have heard about death for the first time because a friend or teacher had a death in their immediate family. Others may have heard about someone dying during the announcements or prayers of the people in a worship service. Or they may have heard about death from news sources or podcasts while in the car with a family member or caregiver. Death is part of life, and it is important to model that death is painful at any age. Death can be scary, and we can validate this feeling while also teaching children God’s promise that death is not the end of our stories in God’s kin-dom.

Through transparent conversations about death and grief, we have the opportunity to offer children lifelong tools and resources to best express their feelings to family members, friends, counselors, and to God. We have the opportunity to normalize that all feelings are valid. We have the opportunity to teach them that while there are different stages of grief, grief is fluid, not linear. Perhaps most

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importantly, we have the privilege of modeling that anger is part of grief.

When I was a teenager, I learned one of the most liberating grief lessons when my mom was diagnosed with Stage IV breast cancer. I was scared she was going to die and very angry that God did not immediately cure her cancer when I begged God to heal her. One of the times I was having a teenage angst rant about cancer, Mom told me it was alright to be angry because God can handle our anger. It was the permission I needed to practice lament. I found such empathetic power in reading the laments of others in Scripture, poetry, and song. The freedom to be angry and the permission to lament are lifelong gifts that continue to buoy me in my grief journeys as an adult. We are never too young to learn healthy outlets for anger.

The freedom to be angry and the permission to lament are lifelong gifts that continue to buoy me in my grief journeys as an adult. We are never too young to learn healthy outlets for anger.

During conversations with children about death and grief, it is important to share as much data as is age appropriate. It is necessary to use a vernacular they will understand while remaining as truthful as possible. Depending on the circumstances of an immediate family member's death, hospital or Hospice chaplains, social workers, and child life specialists are incredible resources to help a family navigate death and grief.

Last year, I attended the memorial service of a young mother who died by suicide. I was in awe of the insistence of her siblings that the reality of her mental illness be included in the service alongside countless memories of her kindness and her many talents as a musician. They included a hauntingly beautiful liturgy about suicide. All children present, including her own, witnessed adults telling them the truth and weeping from their shattered hearts in a house of worship. While there is much none of us will ever understand, years from now her child and her nieces and nephews will not have to wonder why adults did not tell them the truth at the time. The family consulted many resources before telling the children in her life and relied on clergy to help them develop language for the service. It was one of

the most beautiful and authentic services of witness to the resurrection I have ever seen.

While the circumstances of each death are unique, one caution remains: It is imperative to use the words "They died" instead of "They went to sleep." As a clinical chaplain, I worked with many families who, out of compassion, tried to ease the pain and trauma of the news by telling children their loved one went to sleep. Some of those children were then afraid to go to sleep or were afraid when others went to sleep. The same is true when pets die, as it is common to hear language like "put to sleep" or "put down," yet children often interpret this literally. Similarly, it is also important to avoid language like "We lost your Mimi." I worked with a family who used this language about the death of a grandparent, and the child responded, "We have to go find her!" As painful as it is to name the finality of death, using accurate, honest language can help children process it. It is understandable for anyone to feel fear in the face of death, but children should not be afraid that their loved ones may die while playing hide-and-seek or going to sleep.

Be assured that you are never alone as you seek the appropriate vernacular for speaking with children about death and grief. The pastors, educators, medical staff, teachers, and counselors in your midst are invaluable resources to support you. Most importantly, caregivers and parents, remember that while others may be considered experts in grief education, you know your child. Always trust your God-given intuition.

Discussing Death and Grief with Young People

As a campus minister, one of the most profound conversations I have had with college students occurred at a gathering to process the event of a shooting at a nearby university. All of us had been on lockdown earlier that day and had texted at least one person during that time. Some texted their parents. Two texted lifelong best friends. I texted students who are my friends' children. A colleague received a text from their spouse saying they were safely hidden under their office desk. During our processing of the event, it became evident that it was not the first time many of us had texted with someone while in lockdown during a violent event. It was not the first time we had been scared for the safety of others and not the first time we gathered to debrief a traumatic event. It was not the last time, either. During that

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conversation I recognized the familiarity the students had with these kinds of events.

Near the close of our gathering, a student asked me if I knew what to do in the event of a campus lockdown. I admitted that as a child and young person, I never experienced a lockdown drill because Columbine was the only school shooting I knew of when I was their age. Students offered to show me best practices in the event of a lockdown. “We have done lockdown drills forever,” they said. “We need to be sure you are safe since you are older than us.”

While I am indeed older than my students, I am only one generation removed, and their world looks nothing like my world did at their age. I was their age on September 11, 2001. They were born into a post-September-11th world, and they have spent their young lives all too familiar with the threat of violence. They do not know a world without school or mass shootings. My current first-year students are the same age as the victims of the Sandy Hook shooting would be if they were alive today.

As they explained what I should do during a lockdown, one reminded me to always keep my phone charged and have a portable charger ready. While this is excellent practical advice, it points to a feeling that violence and trauma is an ever-present threat. I found myself wishing for a world where they never had to acquire this practical knowledge and never had to teach older generations about it. I grieve that this is their reality, and I am in awe of their compassion for others in spite of it. They care deeply that others know how to stay safe as they prepare themselves to text “I love you” to their people during lockdowns. They care deeply that one day there will be no preventable deaths by guns.

They know far too well what it is like to live with grief. For in addition to growing up amid mass shootings, some also know the fatigue of living with mental illnesses, the disorientation of their parents’ divorce, the pain of bullying, the fear of being authentic about their sexuality, the weight of cancer, the pain of food and housing insecurity, and the chaos of the COVID pandemic. They know grief, pain, fear, and uncertainty.¹

Church communities, youth programs, and campus ministries have a responsibility to be the beloved community for young people and to help them hold space for anything too daunting to process on their own. Thankfully, as a whole, Gen Z did not inherit a stigma around mental health issues as previous generations did. In my experience, students have been quick to seek help, even if their guardians or parents may not fully support going to therapy. They often reach out to counselors on campus or ask me for referrals to counselors I trust based on their specific concerns. I have found mental health professionals, social workers, and counselors to be invaluable colleagues in supporting the young people entrusted to our care. As the saying goes, it does indeed “take a village” at all ages and developmental stages.

A few years ago, many students in my campus community faced significant mental health challenges. Several students’ struggles with mental illness on campus tragically ended in death by suicide, and it was gut-wrenching to watch students grieve their peers. They shared how scary it was to walk past police presence and caution tape at their dorm. Students were aware of other deaths by suicide, but many had never seen a crime scene in their immediate environment.

We had multiple options for processing these events in our student center during that time. One night we listened to the *Dear Evan Hansen* soundtrack² as everyone hunkered down together. Our campus ministry group attended the Broadway play when it was touring near us. It is a coming-of-age story about a teenager who lives with anxiety and depression. The experience of the play gave us a shared vernacular to speak together about death by suicide through the lens of the play’s plot, and many shared it with friends who struggle with depression, anxiety, or are victims of bullying. It is an incredible work of art and a powerful way to engage in heavy conversations.

It is vital to model authentic grief and vulnerable processing with teens and college-aged students. It matters that we approach young people with faithful presence and make space for them to gather

When appropriate, we can share our own grief as a way to provide empathy and support.

to grieve as a community, no matter how raw or messy it is. It matters that they know their faith communities can handle their questions and fears. It matters that they know how to lament, that they do not feel alone when they pray “How long, O Lord?” and ask God “Why?” When appropriate, we can share our own grief as a way to provide empathy and support. Several students in our group have experienced the death of a parent, and we have started what we call Dead Parent Club, in which we share meals on the anniversary of a parent’s death, on a parent’s birthday, or on the harder days. While we were all different ages when we buried a parent, empathy transcends generations and we share in common the ache of missing them.

It is also important to remind young people again and again that they are never alone and are so very loved. It matters that they have adults they may text or call in any situation. At the beginning of each school year, I ask students to make a list of five adults they know they could contact anytime for anything. I encourage them to remember and utilize that list when they feel overwhelmed and alone.

If you are considering how to hold and create space for young people to grieve, I hope the following may be helpful to you.

At debrief gatherings after traumatic events, I offer sheets of newsprint with various prompts for short-answer responses and a variety of supplies for writing or making art, including sidewalk chalk, paints, canvas, candles, kinetic sand, coloring books, markers, prayer journals, and dissolvable paper. I have invited students to write confessions or laments on dissolvable paper and place them in a bowl of water as we watch them disintegrate. Sometimes we write or draw something that represents what makes us angry, then build a bonfire outside and throw the paper into the flames. Rituals like these can be quite therapeutic and powerful. It also grants me the opportunity to listen and discern what the most helpful next steps may be.

When there are student deaths on campus, our ecumenical campus faith leaders group responds by being present outside our gathering space or somewhere on campus with notes of encouragement and snacks. We are consistently surprised by students’ responses to our act of hospitality. Recently, a

student said, “You are really just here to be nice and boost morale? That is a thing people do?” Another said, “You are just offering love because things seem terrible?” We have the privilege of witnessing firsthand the significant power of showing up and being present when the community is in pain. It feels more vital than ever. While I hope our practices of holding space are helpful, you know the needs of your own context and community. Ultimately, my best advice is to collaborate with others who are committed to consistently showing up for love, health, peace, and hope.

Including Children and Young People in Funeral Planning and Rituals

These are ideas families have found to be meaningful. I encourage you to utilize and adapt them as necessary based on age appropriateness, given what is best for your loved ones and your community.

Invite children and youth to draw a picture or write a letter to their loved one to be buried with them. Often children wish to bury a pet with a favorite toy. In cases of the death of a sibling, often children find it meaningful to choose a stuffed animal or favorite object to be buried with them. For graveside services, the funeral home staff will be able to assist you by placing anything you give them with the deceased. In cases where there is a viewing of an open casket, children may find it helpful to see their drawing, letter, or object with the deceased. If the deceased is cremated, funeral home staff will be able to assist you by placing a drawing, letter, or small object in the columbarium space with the cremains.

Invite children and youth to help choose photos that will be on display at the funeral or gatherings. While you choose photos together, ask them what they love about certain photos or what they remember about that memory with their loved one.

Invite children and youth to share ideas for Scriptures, poems, and music to be included at the service or associated gatherings. Often it is best to have a private conversation about this before the officiant meets with the family to create the order of worship and generate information for the bulletin. Whether or not they wish to participate, they will have the memory of being included.

Invite children and youth into the conversation about favorite colors or something unique that their loved one would have liked to see everyone wearing at their memorial service. I recently attended the funeral of a young parent in their thirties who died suddenly. In the obituary, the family requested that everyone wear Crocs, bright colors, and their favorite hat since he would have loved to see that.

I officiated the memorial service of a teenager who died from cancer, and she made sure to give her mom and me specific instructions as to funeral attire, music, and how she wanted the funeral home to be decorated. She was an artist and requested that her art be displayed alongside photos of her friends on both sides of the hallway that led to the viewing room for her casket.

One time a grandchild wanted to wear his favorite baseball jersey and bring a baseball and glove with him to the service, because his grandfather taught him how to play and regularly took him to games. In all of these cases, it was beautiful to see how the community grieved together in a way that felt very authentic to those who died. Additionally, the inclusion of such elements may offer respectful levity amid the more formal components of services and gatherings.

Invite children and youth to be present at as much as they would like during the visitation, funeral and graveside services. Give them information ahead of time as to what they may expect to see, hear, and do. Try to prepare them for it as much as possible, especially if there will be an open casket. Then, give them the choice to be as present as they feel they can be. With young children, it is helpful to have a designated adult who is able to leave with them if they do not wish to stay at the service any longer. With youth, it is often helpful to encourage them to sit together with friends if it is the funeral for a peer or plan a gathering for peers after the service at a place that was important to the deceased.

Invite children and youth to join when you visit the columbarium, gravesite, or other designated place of remembrance. Invite them to bring something with them such as a plant, card, flowers, or meaningful object to leave there for a time. If the deceased is cremated, it is possible to save some of the ashes before burying the majority of

the cremains. I have found it quite meaningful to scatter very small amounts of my mom's ashes in places she loved. I also have pieces of jewelry an artist created using a tiny amount of ashes. I did not even consider the jewelry concept until ten years after she died; thus, I am very grateful to have a small amount of her ashes. Grief changes, and ways to remember her continue to reveal themselves. Children and youth may wish to do something they find meaningful with the ashes of a sibling, parent, pet, or grandparent years later, and they will likely appreciate having that option.

Invite children and youth to help make or choose their loved one's favorite food for the reception or repast. This is especially meaningful when the deceased is another child, parent, or grandparent. There is an intimacy in knowing the favorite foods of our loved ones, and it is a very tangible way to remember them that is appropriate for all generations. Often this will lead to rituals as grief progresses and changes. You may choose to always have their grandmother's favorite dessert on her birthday each year or order their dad's favorite meal each year on the anniversary of his death. Taste and smell are strong physiological responses to memories, so favorite foods are often very powerful grief practices and rituals.

Invite children and youth to share what they loved about the deceased over a family meal or while taking a walk. Throughout the time frame between a loved one dying and a service, including them in organic ways is meaningful for them and serves as a helpful tool to gauge how they are processing the loved one's death. As is often the case with young children especially, some of the most profound expressions of love and grief will occur in the car, over dinner on a Tuesday, or in questions at bedtime. Remember to regularly invite them to speak about their loved one as a way to keep their memory alive and reiterate that grief is an ongoing process.

Notes

1. I recommend *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).
2. Ben. Platt et al., *Dear Evan Hansen* (original motion picture soundtrack), Universal Studios, 2021.

Congregational Life Cycles: From Scarcity to Opportunity

Patrick Lane

We can be honest, right? Countless articles with titles like “Fifteen Signs of a Dying Church and How to Revitalize Your Ministry”¹ tell us about how the church is dying. Most of the time these articles seek to raise the levels of fear and anxiety in ourselves and our pews. In my experience, one relatable detail can cause you to fall down the rabbit hole of doom and gloom about your church, and that is the point. These articles do not just make us aware of the situation (we are already aware), they increase our fears about tomorrow and elicit an emotional response out of us. Anxieties rise as we keep clicking and reading. I recognize the irony; this is yet another article about the reality of church death. But my aim is not to produce anxiety. Rather, I pray this will be a message of hope and renewal. Perhaps this message will simply allow you to acknowledge that you are not alone in the current landscape of the church and then will move you forward in God’s way.

For the last four years I have been serving a rural church in Culpeper County, Virginia, with less than a hundred active members. Yet we cling to an outdated roster that inflates membership numbers for a variety of reasons. “We don’t want to hurt their feelings by removing them.” “What’s the harm in just leaving them on?” “Their last name is a cornerstone in this congregation’s history.” Yet, I have not met many of these individuals in my tenure. This is where I see the fear of scarcity infecting the church, with a pervasive sense that there is not and will never be enough. Clinging to their names retains the possibility that they will come back one day and bring with them the way things were, when the church was full.

I would love to tell you that I’m immune to this scarcity mindset and perception about numbers, that I can put my own feelings of numbers-based-ego

aside. But when there are more people in the choir than in the pews, it is hard to deny those feelings. In the midst of fears over financial security and longevity, it is hard to look at my line in the church’s operating budget, which makes up over 50 percent. It is hard to walk past empty Christian education rooms throughout the week and on Sundays. It is hard to escape the fear of scarcity. Many readers know this fear, too, the fear of *not enough*. Maybe you, too, have moved from *glass-half-empty* thinking to *half-empty and will never be re-filled*, let alone *runneth over*. It is easy to convince ourselves that there is not enough money, time, people, activities, or resources as the fear of tomorrow clouds the light of today.

When a scarcity mindset takes over our minds and hearts, we may find ourselves at a particular stage of our church’s life cycle. A church’s life cycle is rather simple. It is founded, it grows, it experiences what the community considers its “golden age,” followed by experiences of what the community may consider as “decline,” and then it either reforms to meet a changing context or it dies. If a church is able to revitalize and reform, it will start the cycle again near the “growth” phase. The scarcity mindset, while possible at any point, becomes its most contagious as decline begins and can infect the whole system (the body of the church) with a fear that there is not enough to sustain the institution. The desire for the “golden age” drives this infected system as the lack of something(s) is elevated to higher and higher levels of priority. Infection makes its way through the body, picking up momentum as it passes from one part to the next, increasing the perceived rate of decline. The hardest part of a life cycle to wrestle with is often the reality of death. Even institutions that have lasted for hundreds of years face this natural cycle, and we need to be open to accepting it.

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But there is hope in the face of death, for we are a people of faith who proclaim resurrection. If our mortal bodies are infected, healing is often possible. In our churches the same is true, though healing may not happen how we imagine it to or look the way we might expect. Infections of scarcity thinking in the midst of decline may be regular occurrences in a church's life cycle. They may be triggered by a beloved pastor moving out of the pulpit or the death of the congregation's matriarch. Maybe all the kids have moved away and don't return to the pews or "replenish" the Sunday school rooms with their own children. Scarcity may manifest itself in many, many ways.

No matter what you identify as insufficient in your context, a scarcity mindset is rooted in fear and clouds our vision for tomorrow with the doom and gloom of impending calamity. Scarcity thinking keeps us from seeing the opportunities for new life. Christ shows us that life includes scarcity: not enough food for the masses, not enough love and care for others. But Jesus bore the scarcity of our world, even to the point of dying, and shows us God's power over death, possibilities for life made new. We see that five loaves and two fish can feed thousands, public crucifixion and entombment cannot keep God from making things new, and we work to move forward in the midst of our scarcities.

It is so easy to see what is not there when we care deeply about the church. I find that when I lament about what is lacking, there comes a point when I must admit that the worrying and whining will not change anything unless I allow the honesty to help me see new possibilities. In Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes," the emperor is tricked into wearing nothing, and the whole kingdom is afraid to admit this obvious truth aloud. We can either pretend we see clothes that aren't there or we can admit the reality. Hopefully, we are honest enough to avoid finding ourselves naked in a parade (!), but to practice this kind of honesty, we must put the pride and ego of the golden age aside and open our eyes to what is true today. In doing so, we might be surprised by the opportunities that this honesty can reveal.

No matter how worried or caught up in the scarcity you may be, know that you have assets and opportunities for real renewal surrounding you. I took a helpful certificate class called Community Engagement and Ministry through Austin Theological Seminary's Lifelong Learning program,

which showed us how to identify the assets that exist in our contexts that can move us through times of scarcity in our churches and communities. The lessons from that class have come to mind time and again as I write of scarcities and opportunities. I also find these lessons in the story of the feeding of the thousands, when the disciples see the scarcity around them. "Where are we going to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" (Matt. 15:33). The disciples acknowledge the reality of their context: there is not enough bread on hand, there is not money to buy more, and there may not be enough disciples to carry all the food to the people. The scarcity mindset has infected the followers of Jesus. But for Christ, it is a chance to show the opportunities scarcity can present. When the disciples and crowds set their minds to what isn't, Jesus shows them what can be done with what is. Christ breaks through a desperate situation to show what can be done amid scarcity.

The scarcity mindset has infected the followers of Jesus. But for Christ, it is a chance to show the opportunities scarcity can present.

It is hard and vulnerable work, but when this work is done with faith in God, we can encounter the Spirit in it. Changing mindsets and accepting such changes can be difficult in the best of times, and, as the "fifteen ways" articles all want us to know, we are not in the best of times. Yet even in the worst of times, even when the Messiah seems to be dead and gone, God's power and creation of life gives us strength and hope to see an opportunity, a call, even in the midst of scarcity. Allowing the old thing to die can make space for something new (Isa. 43:19).

As the cycle of life continues in your context, you will be faced with decline. Now or in the future, there will be both real and perceived scarcity, and you will have to choose how to proceed. When faced with this choice, I encourage you to do the hard work of shifting your mind to see not just scarcity but assets and opportunities. Scarcity thinking is very real, and it is important for us to recognize what we truly lack. But we cannot let scarcity become a cage that traps us into thinking that if empty pews are all we see, we must cling to what was, unable to move on without fear of being without. The good news

is that this scarcity, when acknowledged, offers the opportunity for renewal and opens a way through the clouds of fear and anxiety with new possibilities.

In your context, you may find yourself at a place in the life cycle that requires honesty about death. Some congregations partner together to mutually benefit one another and bring about new ministry where death was all that was seen before. It might be hardest to admit when it is time to enter figurative hospice care as a congregation, celebrate, and honor ministry done in the name of Christ so that the life cycle concludes in peace. It is important to remember that this conversation is highly contextual, and your situation is going to be unique. But we are an Easter people. The building may attract a new community. The people may worship with a new community of faith. Rebirth is part of who we are as those who profess that in Christ's death and resurrection we have hope and new life, even when we face death.

Scarcity is not artificial and does not simply disappear because of a lack of faith. It is very real. Often, struggles with church attendance and finances reflect realities of the world outside the walls of church. Rural areas are decreasing in population and economic diversity. Urban areas are becoming less affordable and more crowded. Admitting these dynamics can allow us to see the opportunity to fill a need and provide newness of life.

Everyone has an opinion, whether they keep it quiet or speak it out loud, about the "correct" way for the church to operate as it cycles through life. Each of us can likely find something lacking in any church we step into, whether it is the lack of a certain kind of programming, the speed of the music, or banners that were removed. Many factors influence our perspective, including our background, life experience, age, and experience in the church. Often what we don't like is based on a comparison we make with whatever we found to be a gold standard that nothing else could beat. Of course, this comparison only shows us scarcity all around.

If I compare our thirteen-member choir to the 360-member Mormon Tabernacle Choir, my church's music program appears to be suffering from severe scarcity, and I'm guaranteed to have a negative outlook. If I use the PC(USA)'s 2023 statistical report to compare my church's mission spending, just over \$16,000, to the mission spending of another church in our presbytery, which was reported to be \$106,000 (amazing!), then my church is severely lacking in our mission giving. Yet, these

comparisons are futile. We could not even fit 360 choir members into our sanctuary, and \$106,000 is nearly 70 percent of our budget. When our scarcity mindsets only drive us to "look at them over there," we become blind to the good work we have to do here and the Spirit's movement in our midst.

The question becomes, when we
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of that scarcity?

The question becomes, when we fall into the cages of a scarcity mindset, how do we remove the paralyzing fear of that scarcity? I propose that we simply accept it. Accept that the pews where the Joneses sat are empty and likely will remain so, because the Joneses are no longer around. The kids were raised, left home, didn't return, and the Joneses eventually passed on, a story that has been seen across all churches, large or small. As Disney's *The Lion King* so memorably puts it, "It's the circle of life." I encourage you to accept what is beyond your control. Income isn't keeping up with expenses any longer, but what can be done with the income we have, our meager fish and loaves? When we put aside budgetary expectations from the past and consider what we have instead, we may be renewed by a God who is always doing new things.

Perhaps now that the Joneses are not here, no one sits on the right side of the sanctuary. How could that space be something more? Maybe this is the opportunity you needed to create more accessible seating, add rocking chairs for parents, or make a pray-ground that allows children to participate more fully in worship. This might be a way to honor the gifts that the Joneses offered to the congregation for so many years. If income isn't what it used to be, can the budget be adjusted to better fit the needs of both the congregation and the surrounding community? These are just a few obvious examples. When we acknowledge and accept our limitations, we allow space to create something new from what we thought was dying.

I'd like to share a story I learned in a course I took at Austin Theological Seminary in Community Engagement and Ministry.² It is an ancient parable of disputed origin and unknown authorship.

A woman had two large pots; each hung on the ends of a pole, which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walk from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what the cracked pot perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream. “I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house.”

The old woman smiled. “Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.”

The cracked pot did not hold the same amount of water as the other pot, a hard reality of scarcity that the pot wrestled with for years. But when the pot finally acknowledged what it thought was its failure and spoke about it, its limitation was shown to be a gift. The cracked pot shared its water differently than the other pot did, giving water to bring forth life around it. The pot finally understood this after acknowledging its reality, which was key to allowing it to see the good, the opportunity, in its perceived flaw.

When the women journeyed to the tomb on that first Easter morning, they were already dealing with loss and a scarcity mindset following the death of Jesus. Their anxiety and fear only grew as the reality set in of a rolled-away stone and an empty tomb. Depending on which Gospel message you are reading, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, Joanna, and the other women

experience a mix of awe (Mark 16), fear (Matt. 28), and perplexity (Luke 24). They run to tell the story that what had been there is no longer. Something is missing, and this is an opportunity to go and be part of a new thing. They meet resistance when they acknowledge the new life that came from a bare cross and empty tomb. Peter and the disciples have to see it for themselves before they are willing to follow the words of Christ to meet the risen Messiah in Galilee. Whether you are seeking to acknowledge scarcity—like a Mary—or still struggling to accept certain realities—like a Peter—together we place our faith in the proclamation that what was dead can have new life through the power of God.

We’re still being honest, right? No one was present at the moment of resurrection. No one saw Jesus start breathing again, and no one removed the linens from his body. The resurrection is part of the mystery of God. People only saw the results, the victory of the barren cross and the empty tomb. They saw the resurrected Christ appear to them on the road (Luke 24), on the seashore (John 21), and through locked doors (John 21). In a “dying church,” we must lean into the mystery of faith amid fear just as we lean into the mystery of life in the midst of death. The life cycle is not about trying to get back to yesterday’s golden age, to the days when the pews were always full and people clamored to get their kid into vacation Bible school. Comments like these mark a sense of loss, and this loss has left scars. But these feelings do not mean that God calls us back to those days. The good news of the resurrection is the hope of renewal and rebirth despite the scars we see. It is also good news that resurrection is not about achieving the outcome we desire but about receiving God’s call to newness, even if this does not look how we expected it would.

The resurrection story teaches
us that death is part of the life cycle,
but it is not the end.

The resurrection story teaches us that death is part of the life cycle, but it is not the end. Our Easter proclamations move us forward through death with faith to seek what God is doing now in our cycle of life. The church may not look the same, sound the same, or feel the same as it did in the golden age, but the same Spirit still moves within and around

us. Resurrection means that God has the final word. If the tomb is empty and flowers grow thanks to cracks in old pots, then something new can rise from what we thought was dead.

May we have faith enough to do the hard work of naming our scarcities, giving thanks for what once was, and learning that God is not done with us, with our churches, or with the world. Faith sees the cracks that bring beauty. It names the scarcity and still trusts in resurrection. In his book *Reckoning with History*, William Yoo writes, “For there is beauty and brokenness as well as abundance and scarcity all around us.”³ God has blessed us with the good and difficult mess of our ministries, and in Christ our faith doesn’t just dream of revival but leans on the God whose power resurrects and brings forth new life. In the unknown we take faithful, difficult steps to find life. So look and acknowledge the

scarcity around you. See the cracked pots. Then, see the flowers blooming and know: you are not alone. Others are walking this journey, and the Spirit shall guide us all, for in Christ, even the end is never the end, as we recognize the opportunities *within* our scarcities, as we proclaim, the old life may fade away but a new life shall begin (2 Cor. 5:17).

Notes

1. Matt Strelecki, “Fifteen Signs of a Dying Church and How to Revitalize Your Ministry,” Vanco website, <https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving/blog/signs-of-a-dying-church/>.
2. Source: Amy Moritz, February 27, 2010, acquired from Jean Handley, Turning Point Partners; author unknown.
3. Dr. William Yoo, *Reckoning with History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2025), 206.

Call to Worship

Ideas

Joyful Voices: Ideas for Engaging Children in Worship and Music

Dillon Swanson

Music ministers, educators, and pastors hold the sacred responsibility of fostering worship that reflects the full body of Christ, including our youngest members. From a Reformed perspective, children are not future participants in the church; they are present and active members of the covenant community. Therefore, engaging them in worship is not optional—it is essential.

From one ministry desk to another, I share ideas with the hope that something here might inspire you to more fully include children in the worship life of your congregation.

I often return to three guiding questions in worship planning and evaluation that help encourage discernment, challenge vanity or cultural pressures, and focus on formation and inclusion. These questions can be applied to any element of worship that seeks to engage children and youth. They have helped me to build sustainable and meaningful opportunities for children and youth:

1. Am I practicing intention with this opportunity?
2. Does this opportunity expand liturgical participation?
3. Does this opportunity foster the possibility for an intergenerational experience?

Intentional Musical Involvement

Including children in musical leadership regularly—not just on special Sundays—communicates that their gifts are welcomed and needed. As part of our children's choir and worship education curriculum, we use a “hymn of the month” that they learn alongside their anthems. This hymn often appears in worship soon after they learn it, and I love watching

their faces light up when they recognize it and say, “I know this song!” These small moments reinforce worship participation and encourage a sense of belonging.

For our youngest children (pre-K through first grade), I especially love teaching call-and-response hymns. These are accessible, memorable, and allow the children to function as leaders as the congregation joyfully responds to their voices.

Expanding Liturgical Participation

Worship leadership can go far beyond music. Children can serve as greeters and acolytes and lead portions of the liturgy. Consider incorporating children into worship on a more regular basis beyond the occasional special service or Children's Sabbath. Regular presence builds familiarity and confidence over time.

One of my favorite practices at Raleigh Court is part of our baptism liturgy. When a child or infant is baptized, the children of the church gather on the chancel steps to witness the sacrament. They don't just observe; they participate by making promises to be a friend and leader to the newly baptized. It is a front-row seat to one of our most sacred acts and a formative moment for all involved.

Fostering Intergenerational Experiences

Intentional intergenerational moments strengthen the entire congregation. At Raleigh Court, we involve families in greeter ministries, seasonal liturgical leadership (such as lighting the Advent wreath), and more.

From a musical standpoint, I schedule three Sundays a year for intergenerational anthems, when children's, youth, and adult choirs sing together:

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the third Sunday of Advent, Palm Sunday, and Music Ministry Sunday. While some repertoire is composed specifically for multigenerational ensembles, I often create my own arrangements using standard anthems with flexible voicings, imagination, and pastoral sensitivity.

These shared experiences build bridges between generations and demonstrate that worshiping God is for everyone, together.

Summertime Opportunities for Formation

Summer is often a quieter time for church programs, but I've found it to be fertile ground for experimentation and formation. Without regular choir rehearsals, I can meet with children and youth—often those learning instruments at school—to form small ensembles or solo offerings for worship. These offerings are a beautiful way to nurture confidence and give young musicians space to grow as worship leaders.

Another favorite summer tradition involves inviting children to be my “sidekick” on Sunday mornings. Each week, a child (second grade or older) joins me in the choir loft or at the organ console to experience what I do. Each experience is tailored to the child's gifts and interests: a piano student might play the Westminster Chimes, while a younger child might activate the zimbelstern during the Doxology. This idea was adapted from a colleague and has become a treasured time of mentoring and joy.

From Observing to Worshiping

As ministry leaders, our work is not just about excellence—it is about formation. Worship is not a show children attend but a sacred space they belong to and help lead. When children are invited not as observers but as worshipers, we plant seeds for a lifelong relationship with God and with the church.

Let us continue to ask ourselves: Are we being intentional? Are we expanding liturgical roles? Are we nurturing intergenerational connections?

In doing so, we make room for every voice—especially the small and joyful ones—to be heard in praise.



Children's Music Ministry, Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Kentucky

We Belong to God: An Improvised Affirmation of Faith

David Gambrell

Born out of an intergenerational exercise in improvisation, “We Belong to God” (see page 56) has become a beloved heart song for the people of Highland Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

It happened at a Wednesday evening children’s choir rehearsal, when church activities were just beginning to resume in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Martha Makela, coordinator of children’s music ministry and director of the Hallelujah Choir, remembers that three or four elementary-aged students were present that night, with as many adult mentors as children in the room.

Drawing on her training in the Orff Schulwerk approach to music education, Makela prepared xylophones with a simple C major pentatonic (five-note) scale. She invited the children to make up a set of five tones—starting wherever they chose, going high or low, repeating notes or adding rests. One child picked out a melody and the rest of the group played it back. It was a catchy tune. Makela had written the five-syllable phrase “we belong to God” in her planner, so she encouraged the group to sing those words to the newly created melody. It felt right. She exclaimed, “You just wrote a song!”

They decided to sing the five-note phrase twice, since church songs often feature a little repetition. That felt right too, but the song didn’t seem finished. Makela observed that songs often end on the lowest note of the scale, so they added a descending line to the melody. Then one of the adult mentors, an octogenarian, had the idea of conjugating the key phrase: “I belong, you belong, we belong to God.” And the song was complete.

Makela believes in making space for improvisation, creativity, and play in children’s music ministry—opportunities that can be scarce in other aspects of children’s educational experience. “When I do my best teaching,” she muses, “I make sure that each child has a chance to play around and be creative. It’s harder work because it looks messy. There’s always a little bit of chaos before the calm.”

Orff instruments, such as xylophones, glockenspiels, and unpitched percussion, are ideal for this kind of playful creativity. “Sometimes we overcomplicate things,” Makela notes. “The Orff instruments are easy to play, so the children can focus on melody and rhythm. It’s immediate gratification. You’re not concentrating so much on the instrument.”

Soon the children had an opportunity to share their new song in worship. Inspired by their confidence and creativity, the congregation embraced it with enthusiasm. The Wednesday evening improvisation quickly became a Sunday morning standard. Hand motions were added and, as the song was repeated over subsequent weeks, worshipers came to know the melody, words, and movement by heart. Led by its youngest members, the church learned a new way to sing a central affirmation of faith.

Belonging to God is, after all, the point. “My goal for the children is to have a positive musical experience in worship, where they feel valued and important,” Makela explains. “Children need to be heard and need to know that they matter and belong. When they can sing something that, in fact, they even wrote . . . that’s just beautiful to me.”

David Gambrell is a parent, choir member, and occasional guitar player at Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Kentucky.

Call to Worship

Columns

On Liturgy: One Conviction to Summon

Elizabeth H. Shannon

In life and in death we belong to God¹—to be perfectly frank, it's the only thing I'm sure I believe all the time. Certainly, there are days when the stories of Scripture, the great rituals of the church, and the extraordinariness of our faith all come easy to me. But there seem to be many more days, especially lately, when belief is next to impossible, when the weight of the world bears down on my chest. Days when the hurts are too great, the sorrows too overwhelming, the destruction too apparent, the mess simply too messy. Hope, joy, peace, and love all seem just too far outside my grasp. On those days, there is only one prayer, one breath, one deeply held conviction I can summon from the depths of my weary soul: In life and in death we belong to God.

Over the years I've found myself standing in rooms aching with deep pain and grief and using these words to assure all of us that not only has God placed a claim on our broken hearts, but also God uses that claim to call us to care for each other in our brokenness. I've found myself taking teeny, fresh babies into my arms and whispering into the delicate curve of their ear that from the very beginning of time they have been named and claimed as God's own beloved. I've found myself using these words to move from a posture of paralyzed overwhelm to a posture of action as cruelty, indifference, and ignorance impact very real lives.

I used to believe the power of this statement hinged on the word *belong*, the promise and the hope in the claim that we are God's own. To belong is to have a place at the table, to be called by name and welcomed with open arms and our beverage of choice. To belong is to see and be seen, to hear

and be heard, not as others would like, but just as we are. The covenant of belonging is sacred and fundamental to who we are at our very core.

But as the state of our world is increasingly pained and troubled, belonging feels even more elusive than it might have previously, not because God is less present or our call is diminished in any capacity, but because the cultural definition of belonging is so tied to individual belonging. It is not enough for me to belong.

I have come to believe that the power in this statement hinges on the word *we*. In life and in death *we* belong to God. This isn't a claim about my personal and private relationship with Jesus. Belonging to God is not my own exclusive treat for doing or saying the right things, showing up at the right time, or being born in the right place. We live in a culture and a church in which people like me of dominant culture and identities expect to belong. The claim of belonging to God is not just about me; it's fundamentally about us, the biggest and widest us, the *all* of us. I can't belong to God if you don't belong to God.

Beloved, we are in it together, for better or for worse.

Yet in the face of Christian nationalism, white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and erasure I'm finding the big "we" not nearly as comforting or aspirational as I once did. I feel less convinced by the call to unity or the call to community as I once did. My own brokenness and sin doesn't want to be in a "we" with *those* people with whom I so vehemently disagree. I want to belong to God and I want the poor and the broken and the outcast and the ignored and the hushed up

Libby Shannon is a minister member of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area where she is currently receiving a Master's Degree in Social Work and chasing her toddler.

to belong to God, and I want *them* over there to get their act together.

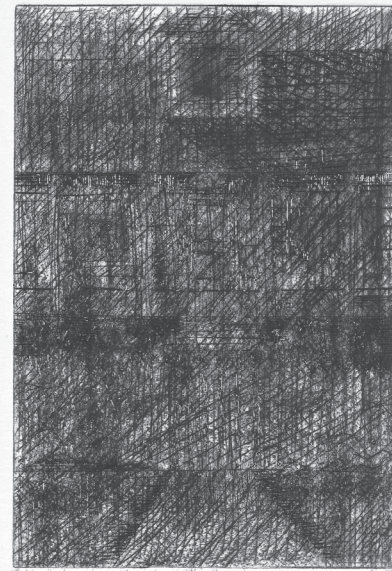
And then I remember that over and over again Dorothy Day said that she could only love God as much as she loved the people she loved the least. I can't belong to God in life or in death unless *we* belong to God in life and in death.

And I find myself back where *we* started, clinging tightly to what I'm sure I believe: in life and in death we belong to God. This statement of faith brings me from callousness to empathy, carries me from merely existing in the world to living in it, and delivers me from apathetic individualism to bold, prophetic, and even messy covenant community. This statement of faith calls me to engage, to act, and to bear witness, not just to, but for and with the people I respect and the people with whom I share no discernable commonalities except that they too belong to God.

By all measures our lives aren't going to get any less messy or complex. It seems impossible that we will find our way out of the divisiveness keeping a stranglehold on our culture any time soon. I have little confidence I'll stop being overwhelmed by the hurts and pains of our world. So, I'll return to the fundamental claim that gives voice to deep pain and the statement of faith that gives hope to a more just and generous future. I'll return to the fundamental claim that has been placed on my life and on your life and on the lives of those who frustrate me deeply. I'll return to the fundamental claim that "with believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate *us* from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."²

Notes

1. A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.1.
2. A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.5.



Anna Yearwood
Memory & Understanding, detail
Fabriano Rosapina paper, water-based ink, copper plate, dry-point etching.
Partial view of series originally displayed in cycle: prints 1-7 followed by 7-1
14 prints 6 x 8.5 in.
2017

On Music: We Belong to God

Patrick Evans

In the mid-to-late 90s, I had only been in Delaware a few years in my first academic music job and was also serving a downtown, scrappy PC(USA) congregation that had made a clear choice to open its doors wide and not be a fortress against its changing neighborhood, but a place of true welcome and support. Members had worked hard to let go of longing for the “good old” days when the pews were filled with white, straight, middle-class couples and had done the hard work of becoming intentionally interracial and LGBTQ-affirming. They had reached out to the neighborhood, which had half-million-dollar houses on one side and Section 8 housing on the other, with a growing Hispanic population and LGBTQ folks moving in, as well as a halfway house for women struggling with mental illness across the street.

When I first arrived in Delaware, I was sure I didn’t want a church music job any more, and I had both feet out the door of the institutional church, tired of the racism, misogyny, and homophobia that seemed rampant in the fundamentalist congregations of my youth and even in some of the more mainline churches in which I’d worked as a musician. But this congregation and its mission called me to put my whole self back together—to be *out* in the church for the first time at age twenty-eight, and to reclaim the improvisational musical styles from my Pentecostal background and utilize them in serving a multiracial congregation while continuing to support its long tradition of classical choral and organ music. For me, it was life changing. On Presbyterian AIDS Awareness Sunday, for the first time in my life I heard from a pulpit that LGBTQ people were good and holy and blessed by God, and I learned from this particular gathering of saints far more than I

brought to them over the decade I served with them. During this time, I would eventually learn from John Bell, Mary Oyer, Pamela Warrick-Smith, and others about the power of incorporating global song into local worship, humbly listening to songs of non-Western cultures, giving literal voice to important aspects of our faith viewed through lenses and experiences far different from our own.

Early on in my time at this congregation, before my ears were opened to this rich heritage of global song, I received a call from a colleague at another church, the largest and wealthiest in the presbytery, with more formal worship than ours, but an equally strong commitment to justice and to God’s people. “Patrick, could you cantor a funeral on Thursday?” Linda asked. “This is a particularly difficult one and needs special sensitivity.” I replied that of course I’d be glad to help in any way I could, and then she told me that the infant child of a couple in the congregation had died and that the father spoke very little English. They were planning a service to celebrate the child’s brief life, serve as witness to the resurrection, and include as many of the family as fully as possible. “I’m hoping you could sing and lead us in #400 (from the blue 1990 hymnal, of course), ‘Pues si vivimos,’ do you know it?”¹

I was somewhat embarrassed to say that I didn’t know it, not yet, anyway, but I would certainly learn it for this important moment in the life of their church family. I hung up the phone and opened my hymnal, remembering how many times I had glanced at the hymn, translated in English “When We Are Living,” considered it, then reminded myself that I had such a busy few weeks ahead, that I’d probably get the Spanish wrong, that my improvised accompaniment for the melody and chord charts in the hymnal might

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not be authentic enough to the style, and all the other things we say and think to talk ourselves out of what God may be calling us toward.

This time I finally took the time to learn it, thanks to the faithful pastoral musicianship of my colleague, whose only concern was to include every hurting person in their large, stone sanctuary in the act of raising our voices in unison, proclaiming a central tenet of our faith.

This Mexican folk tune was first published in *Celebremos II* in 1983 as part of an effort of the United Methodist Church to include more Spanish-language indigenous music into the worship of the global denomination. Gertrude Suppe, a member of the editorial board, recorded and transcribed the first verse after meeting with a Mexican woman after a worship service in Los Angeles.² “Both in our living and in our dying, we belong to God,” the hymn states with a musical and textual reiteration, in case we might not fully believe it—“*we belong to God.*”

Around the time *Celebremos II* was published, the PC(USA) appointed a committee to write what would become A Brief Statement of Faith, which was adopted into the *Book of Confessions* in 1991 as a part of the union of the former PCUSA and the PCUS, amid significant struggles over biblical understanding and theology, gender and racial justice, care for creation, and human sexuality. The very first line of that confession is “In life and in death we belong to God.”³ Of course, Romans 14:8 provides the scriptural framework for both the Statement and the hymn: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

Clergy and musicians from my colleague’s congregation report that following the infant’s funeral, and the profound act of unity created by the singing of this hymn together in such a crucial time, it entered the regular repertory of their congregational song, all due to the act of a faithful pastoral musician.

In the thirty years since, I’ve learned much more and served many worshipping communities, and I’ve experienced the loss of friends, my own parents, and other family members that inevitably follow in life’s journey, but this clear gentle melody and its profound witness—that everyone, living or dying, of any age, national origin, gender, denomination, sexuality, or any condition of life, belongs to God—have sustained my faith, and that of so many others, thanks to the Mexican woman who sang it, to the editorial committee member who recorded and transcribed it, and in my life, to Linda, who taught me not only this hymn, but also what it means to be a true pastoral musician. We belong to God. Alleluia!

Notes

1. *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), #400.
2. Diana Sanchez-Bushong, “History of Hymns: Pues si vivimos,” *Discipleship Ministries, The United Methodist Church*, August 31, 2016, umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-pues-si-vivimos/.
3. *Book of Confessions*, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1 (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)), 11.1.

On Preaching: Proclaiming Death Unfinished

David Lower

These days most places seem to have hospital waiting room vibes. The usual noise of ordinary places—grocery store lines, school parking lots, traffic jams, sidewalks and lobbies, pews before worship—even places that celebrated the last election, sounds different.

To me the everyday din now seems like the hushed ringing that hangs in the corridors outside the ICU, heavy with unspoken anxiety, where time holds its breath. Beneath this unsettled silence runs a current of deeper dread—not just for personal losses, but for our shared dreams, collapsing institutions, and disintegrating common ground. The waiting room of course is where the truth we've avoided has its say: *I can't fix this. I don't know what's coming. And I'm scared it might be death.*

It is from this Congregation of the Waiting Room that I find myself called to preach the gospel lately. Maybe this is always the calling, just clearer now. But there's urgency and accountability here. Casual Christian theology—that God is with us, no matter what—though true, is not enough. Not now. Not with so much unknown and at stake.

Because what the waiting room demands is more than companionship; it demands transformation. It demands a word strong enough to confront despair, honest enough to name pain and fear, and bold enough to declare God's work isn't finished, even amid dying. Our Reformed faith surely has much to say in such a dreadful room: God is not only present in suffering but actively bringing life from death. Resurrection isn't mere encouragement

but God's radical interruption of death's certainty with more life.

God loves us and abides with us all no matter what, but it sure feels like it's time to make clear again that love and presence are only the beginning. The further claim is that God is not done, and neither fear nor death will have the last word. Faithful preaching of course is pastoral and prophetic, and the prophet defies principalities and despair itself. Resurrection preaching is an act of holy defiance against despair, against the assumption that things are as broken as they'll ever be, that death holds the last word, that our future can be predicted solely by our past and present. This act of preaching doesn't rush past suffering; it steps gently, honestly, into the middle of it. It names sorrow. It acknowledges loss. It doesn't pretend death isn't there. But it dares to trust something deeper—that the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead still moves among us, still speaks into tombs, still whispers to bones grown dry: "Live."

One day in a hospital waiting room I encountered Anders, a stranger whose dad, like mine, was dying in the ICU. When he asked if he could pray for my dad, I nodded, unprepared for what followed. With eyes fixed on mine, Anders unleashed his Pentecostal faith and defiantly released me from fear, released my dad from his affliction, and released all who loved him from worry. Though we likely would not have agreed on much, what power there was in those words: "I release you." That's what my family had sought since Mom died—release. This wasn't

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meek petition but bold proclamation. He finished: "When you come to know ultimate love, you come to know freedom and power." His prayer didn't end my sadness but interrupted it with possibility in that sterile room of endings. Years later, I still remember the surprise of those words, showing how divine interruption can arrive precisely when we have stopped expecting anything new. It changed my grieving and still does. I wish my praying and preaching could do more of that.

Preaching like Anders's isn't cheap hope or wishful thinking. It's resurrection hope that has walked through Good Friday, waited in the quiet agony of Saturday, and been astonished on Sunday morning. It's the same hope that calls churches to seek peace where conflict seems entrenched, to offer forgiveness when the wounds are still fresh, to strive for justice when oppression looks immovable. And it's the hope that keeps our weary hearts open—still praying, still loving, still willing to risk another breath and another step forward.

Because if God raised Jesus, then death—in all its forms—is unfinished. Our feared endings, intensifying in our times, are not God's endings. And our stories, wounded and wearied and worried as they are, still rest in the hands of the One who writes resurrection into every chapter, every heartache, every seemingly irreparable break. That's

the gospel promise that has the power to interrupt and divert this life in the waiting room.

Our waiting rooms won't empty anytime soon. Grief, confusion, and uncertainty are reasonable and natural responses to the times. But these places of suspended breath need not remain chambers of resignation. They can transform into sacred ground for quiet rebellion—where hearts tender with loss still dare to whisper that God isn't finished. The church, when true to its deepest calling, doesn't merely endure such despairing times but becomes their holy interruption. We are summoned to preach not with shallow reassurance but with a weathered hope that has seen new life get made. When we break bread across chasms of difference, when we build bridges over boundaries deemed permanent, when we stubbornly affirm human dignity, when we stand up for justice, when we show mercy, when we work for peace—we aren't just performing good gestures. We are embodying resurrection itself, helping what we believe be seen.

Maybe that's our truest calling in days like these: to preach and live as people who trust resurrection so deeply that we're willing to wait differently—less afraid, less alone, and surer than ever that the final word belongs to God. And that word, even now, is life. In that word of our faith may we find release from this scary waiting room.



Anna Yearwood
Memory & Understanding, detail

On the Arts: An Inclusive Burial Liturgy

Deborah Sokolove

Like funerals and memorial services, liturgies at the graveside, vault, or columbarium are opportunities for the living to remember and mourn the person who has died. Various denominational resources, as well as seemingly endless web pages, offer patterns for such services, complete with prayers, hymns, Scripture readings, and other materials to help officiants design such liturgies. In times and places where both the deceased and the majority of mourners are Christian, and especially when such services follow immediately after the funeral or memorial service and the same person leads both, it is reasonable to expect invocations of and references to Christian faith.

However, as families and communities become more complex, it happens with increasing frequency that although the deceased as well as some family members may be Christian, a large proportion of those who mourn are members of other religions or may profess no religion at all. While some might advise that such a mixed assembly is an opportunity to evangelize those who do not claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior, doing so is neither hospitable nor comforting to many who grieve. If the intent of a Christian burial is to both honor the dead and console the living, is it possible to design a liturgy that offers consolation to both the Christians and those of other beliefs who are in attendance while also honoring the Christian faith of the deceased?

Recently, I was asked to design just such a service. Several months earlier, there had been a well-attended, explicitly Christian, memorial service for my Japanese-American father-in-law in the Baptist church in Los Angeles where he had been a member for many years. Now, it was time to place his ashes next to those of his late wife in the oldest public cemetery in Oahu, Hawaii. This location itself was an

important symbol for the multicultural, multiracial, interfaith family that gathered to lay one of its elders to rest. Established in 1844, O'ahu Cemetery has always served an international, nondenominational community, rather than a specifically religious one. Most of the burial plots around the expansive, gracefully landscaped grounds feature angels and obelisks, with names that are mainly English, Irish, Scottish, and German, reflecting the missionary history of Hawaii. Interspersed among these are a few headstones remembering persons of indigenous Hawaiian heritage.

One section of the cemetery, however, looks like it could be in Japan. Shaded by an enormous monkey-paw tree, it is filled with closely-spaced, dark granite headstones with names engraved mostly in kanji. The family plot where the service took place is at the edge of this Japanese enclave, in a newer, intermediate zone. Here, the headstones are simpler and more modern in style, bearing both European and anglicized Japanese names. This mix of names and cultural heritage is a lot like the family that gathered to lay one of their own to rest.

While the deceased was a devout Christian and all four of his children retain at least some of the Baptist identity with which they were brought up, his closest sister and many relatives remain Buddhist, and several relatives are suspicious of all religion. With this mix of mourners, it was important to offer comfort and hope to everyone present without putting Christian words into the mouths of those who hold other convictions. In this instance, it seemed important to replace more specific names for God with more general ones, such as Holy One, Spirit, or Divine, especially for prayers or readings that were to be spoken by all.

Deborah Sokolove recently retired as the director of the Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary, where she is now professor emerita of Art and Worship.

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On the other hand, to respect the needs of Christian members of the family and to honor the faith of the person whose ashes were being interred, some specifically Christian elements needed to be included. In this case, everyone was invited to sing “Precious Lord,” one of the deceased’s favorite hymns. Also, one of the sons read Psalm 23, which, while part of the Hebrew Scriptures and not specifically christological, would be understood as Christian in the context of this specific gathering. With these adjustments, it was hoped that all of the relatives, whatever their religious persuasion, would be able to feel invited to participate rather than feeling like outsiders at someone else’s ceremony.

At the end of the service, everyone watched in silence as cemetery workers reverently placed the urn in the vault, sealed it with the concrete cover, and used hand shovels to carefully replace the earth that had been removed. After I stepped from behind the table to place a floral lei onto the grave, the mourners began to file past, picking up a flower or an origami crane to place silently on the fresh, damp earth. A few took some of the flowers and placed them onto the nearby graves or headstones of other family members, remembering those who had gone before. This spontaneous acknowledgment of the deep familial connections with this place and with one another was a moving, unplanned ritual action that was profoundly human. It was liturgy in its deepest sense, the work of the people to comfort one another, to remember and honor the dead together, and to reconnect with each other and with the holy.

After the gathered mourners left, one final ritual remained—the placing of the headstone. For practical reasons, this had to wait twenty-four hours to allow the earth to settle a bit. When the immediate family returned to the place of burial the next afternoon, they were surprised and grateful to see that the cemetery workers had carefully draped the floral leis over the headstone, now standing upright, in honor of the parents’ lives of love and faith.

Liturgy is a collaborative artwork that brings together words, ritual action, and material objects that have meaning for the participants. The final ritual action done by the cemetery workers underscores the experiential reality that the most important parts of this liturgy were not the words that were said or spoken, but rather the profound physicality found both in ritual and in art. Honoring their Japanese heritage and the mixed Hawaiian and mainland cultural traditions in which this family is immersed, mourners brought floral leis and folded paper cranes, in addition to several more Western-style bouquets, to the service. The bulletin, designed by one of the deceased’s daughters, carried visual symbols that evoked a connection with both Hawaiian culture and Christian faith. Finally, the workers’ respectful use of symbolic actions and cultural artifacts, even after the mourners had gone away, brought a sense of completeness to a collaborative, liturgical artwork that was created by all of the people who were involved.

An Inclusion Burial Liturgy

Welcome

We are here to pay our final respects to [name], brother, father, father-in-law, cousin, and friend. Today, we will lay his ashes to rest next to his beloved wife, [name], and remember his love for all of us, and the deep faith that carried him through the seasons of his life.

Opening Prayer

Holy One, you give us life and surround us with love and grace.
Help us to know your presence in our midst and comfort us in our sorrow. **Amen.**

Scripture

Psalm 23

Committal

Holy One, into your hands we commend your son
[name],
who believed in the certain hope of resurrection
to eternal life through Jesus Christ.
We commit his ashes to their final resting place:
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
We bless his memory and are grateful
for all that he shared with us,
for all the good that he did in his long and fruitful
life. **Amen.**

Hymn

"Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

PRECIOUS LORD

Prayer

Holy One, give us healing and comfort as we grieve.
Amidst the things we cannot understand,
help us to trust in your care and guidance.
Bless us and keep us.
Make your face to shine upon us and give us peace.
Amen.

Dismissal

As we say our final goodbye to [name],
let us all walk in the world with peace
and with courage,
holding onto what is good,
returning to no one evil for evil.
In his memory, let us help one another
to strengthen the fainthearted,
to support the weak,
to help the suffering,
and to honor all people
in the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Call to Worship

Reviews

A Requiem Remembered: Catharsis, Lament, and Hope in Sacred Song

A Review of the West Village Chorale's 2025 Winter Concert

Requiem, March 22, 2025

Judson Memorial Church, New York, NY

Derrick McQueen

Throughout the centuries, varied liturgical expressions have served as tools by which spiritual catharsis with the holy can be embraced. Just such an event occurred on March 22, 2025, at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City. The West Village Chorale offered their 2025 concert entitled *Requiem*. The performance paired two very powerful expressions: Gabriel Fauré's 1888 work, *Requiem in D Minor* (Op. 48), the Latin Mass for the Dead, and Joel Thompson's 2014 requiem, *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, to consider the intricate power of the requiem beyond simple compositions to honor the dead.

There are many ways to remember the dead, whether by funeral events, memorial services, sitting shiva, or the gathering of friends to tell stories and remember relationships. All serve as a way to embrace the divine mystery of life and its journey as a universal human reality. Whether one is "spiritual" or "religious," the rite of passage from life into death is often marked by guided practices and experiences that may use both sacred and secular liturgical forms.

On this particular evening, the structure of the requiem was artfully crafted to bring about a kind of catharsis: there was a pointed sense in the room that everyone left changed. Colin Britt, the artistic director and conductor of the West Village Chorale, and his team leaned heavily into two distinctive purposes of the requiem: a musical composition in honor of the dead and a solemn dirge for the repose of the dead.

Next to Gabriel Fauré's 1888 work, *Requiem in D Minor* (Op. 48), Joel Thompson's 2014 *Seven*

Last Words of the Unarmed is a musically dense and rich piece that draws on diverse musical forms, including fugue, medieval tunes, odd 5/4 meter, Negro spirituals, musical interpretations of modern medical equipment sounds, and even Byzantine textures. All of these create a liturgical expression by setting to music the spoken words:

Kenneth Chamberlain: "Officers, why do you have your guns out?"

Trayvon Martin: "What are you following me for?"

Amadou Diallo: "Mom, I'm going to college."

Michael Brown: "I don't have a gun! Stop shooting!"

Oscar Grant III: "You shot me! You shot me!"

John Crawford: "It's not real."

Eric Garner: "I can't breathe."

These are the last words of seven unarmed African American men and boys before their lives were taken from them by gunshots and other violence. They are words that are now part of the fabric of undeniable American history. This piece brought together musically what is often so difficult to put into words as a social response to these events. As liturgy often does, the piece allowed the unspeakable to flow through the body and spirit of the audience and

Derrick McQueen is the pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem, New York, and the associate director of the Center for African American Religion, Sexual Politics & Social Justice at Columbia University.

impacted those in attendance personally, enabling them to feel, rather than rationalize, the content.

The presence of Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, at the event contributed a powerful personal dynamic after she was introduced at the beginning of the evening. Her presence was a deeply moving embodiment of the requiem in its capacity to simply honor the dead. She was not expected to speak, to justify her emotions to the press, to answer questions, or to respond to arguments of injustice. She was welcomed into a moment in community where her son's life mattered enough to be honored. The quiet dignity and beauty of Black mothers was a thread carried by a musical interlude, a piece of the event from *Piano Quintet in A Minor* by Florence Price, the first African American woman nationally recognized for her symphonic works. This piece recognized the enduring musicality of a Black mother of the symphony. Then the words of Gwen Carr's son Eric Garner were presented as the last movement of the piece. Britt was thoughtful enough to provide a wonderful transition between the pieces.

The program notes explain the use of Fauré's *Requiem* as part of an intention that "gradually lifts us from anger, sorrow and despair to consolation and even hope," with the caveat that it "should not paper over the trauma and systemic racism" explored in *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*. Herein lies the power of pairing these two. While the form of the requiem is often thought to be associated with a funereal offering in memory of the dead, it is important to note that Fauré's *Requiem* reflects his vision and belief in focusing on a gentle and more hopeful view of death. The incredible beauty of Fauré's work carries the hearer through a request to God for mercy that leads to divine eternity and paradise. The work is not a sorrowful dirge so much as it is a way for those left behind to imagine a loved one's—and their own—hoped-for journey to the everlasting.

This ideation alone is enough liturgical and prayerful engagement by which the audience can honor the unarmed seven into a glory-filled homecoming, despite their manner of death. The fifth movement, "Pie Jesu," created a quiet moment

by asking, "Merciful Jesus, Lord, grant them rest, everlasting rest," leading into the "Agnus Dei" as an intercession that carried the blessing within it: "Let the perpetual light shine upon them, O Lord, with your saints for eternity, because you are merciful." This created a sudden shift in atmosphere, causing me to realize that this requiem's promise of hope and peace defied the very manner of death of those seven unarmed and of all the unarmed African Americans *unalived* throughout the history of America into recent memory. The presentation of "Pie Jesu" included an image of the seven walking together toward the light, having been blessed and guided to one another by our collective spiritual entreaty for them to experience Fauré's release from anger, sorrow, and despair.

And then it comes. As the sopranos and altos take a seat, the basses, baritones, and tenors rise in support of the bass soloist. The first quiet measures of "Libera Me," a response sung as part of the Catholic Office of the Dead, accompany Eric Garner himself finding his breath and standing to represent the seven to make a plea for them all: "Deliver me, O Lord, from everlasting death on that dreadful day, when the heavens and earth shall be moved, when you will come to judge the world by fire." In the audience, tears were streaming down faces at this point, leading to sobs that continued without stopping for the entire movement.

It was here that the requiem fulfilled a rare purpose as it became the voices of the seven requesting repose. In this one movement, the two pieces embraced one another in a prayer for a state of rest for each unarmed after exertion and strain. The prayer did not lift to God their deaths only, but also their Black Lives. The movement seemed to last seven lifetimes, ending with the repeated plea of "Libera me"—"Deliver me." And Fauré, in his mastery, satisfies the seven by bringing all into the lyrical strains of "In Paradisum" and the blessing for them all: "May the angels receive you into Paradise; at your coming may the martyrs receive you." The Seven Unarmed are welcomed home, finally, by the longstanding liturgy of the *Requiem*.

Word and Sacrament: Tracing the Theological Movements of Reformed Worship

Paul Galbreath

(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024)

Reviewed by Julie Erkel Hagee

Baptismal life is messy. It is inescapably linked with the sign of death of the old in order to make room for the new life that comes as a gift of the Spirit (p.161).

I knelt on the floor in front of the class as my seminary professor generously poured water over my head in triplicate, soaking my head and drenching my clothes. While this was not a “real” baptism, the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable. Once I was back in my seat, I shivered my way through the rest of the class, unable to identify where the chilling effects of the air conditioning ended and the animating movement of the Spirit began. I hold onto this memory with wonder, referring to it when I need to reconnect with the depth of meaning baptism provides.

I had a similar encounter when reading *Word and Sacrament: Tracing the Theological Movements of Reformed Worship*. In it, Paul Galbreath guides the reader through the history and theology of Reformed liturgy and dares to wonder about future ways of engaging Scripture, the Lord's Supper, and baptism in today's church. Holding historical analysis in one hand and openness to the Spirit in the other, the result is a text which unlocks deep understanding of our tradition while also challenging our practices in a truly reforming fashion.

Divided into three main parts, the book examines John Calvin's influence on Reformed understanding of Word and sacrament, modern influences on the Reformed understanding of Word and sacrament, then finally delves into the future of Reformed worship and ponders how we should both celebrate and question the ways we have engaged with Word and sacrament in the past.

The comforting and structured nature of our liturgy and spiritual practices can be a buoy to us as we navigate a world of ever-growing polarization and ever-shifting culture. At the same time our liturgy must change and adapt to our ever-reforming theology. Galbreath wants to make sure we approach these changes “with our senses open to the beauty and suffering of the earth and our hearts and hands open to the poor” (p. 122). He argues that through the biblical text, God demonstrates a commitment to earth care and a preference for the poor that we should emulate in our liturgy and in our daily lives.

Galbreath contends that through this lens the elements of the Lord's Supper cannot be separated from the actual physical needs of people facing food insecurity and baptismal water cannot be separated from the sacred nature of all water. Nor can our faith be pure spirituality without materiality. Our liturgical practice must guide us toward just and life-giving action in the world. This wondering dialectic can feel messy, but it is necessary in order to live out our baptismal life in Christ through the gift of the Spirit.

Fourteen years after my Introduction to Worship class in seminary, Galbreath has revived my appreciation of the history of our Reformed rituals and opened my mind to wonder about how the future of our liturgy can get its hands dirty in our daily lives. This book has rightfully earned a permanent place on my bookshelf. I know I will refer to it often as I seek to teach and preach Word and sacrament in my congregation and come to times when reviving the wonder of these gifts of the church is necessary to its flourishing.

Julie Erkel Hagee is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

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