

LITURGY,
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Call to Worship



Volume 59.4
The Work of the People?

Presbyterian Association of Musicians



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Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

Volume 59.4

The Work of the People?



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Call to Worship

Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts

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

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Call to Worship

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Volume 59.4

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About the Art in This Issue

Laura James is a Brooklyn-born, Bronx-based painter of Antiguan heritage whose work reimagines sacred and everyday narratives through a distinctly Black lens. Self-taught, she has spent more than three decades blending Ethiopian Christian iconography, African diasporic traditions, and contemporary storytelling to center Black women, families, and communities in vibrant, narrative-rich paintings.

Her collections—from reinterpreted Stations of the Cross and Stations of the Resurrection to her Orishas and American History series—explore

spirituality, memory, justice, and joy with bold color and emotional depth.

James is also the founder and executive director of BX200: Bronx Visual Artist Directory, supporting and showcasing the work of local artists. As a children’s book illustrator, she brings warmth and representation to stories that uplift Black girls and Caribbean culture.

Widely exhibited, collected, and published, Laura James continues to shape a more inclusive vision of both sacred and contemporary art. Find her work at laurajamesart.com.

Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

It has been a joy to see this issue come into form and focus. Many of the articles included respond to a central feature article by Jennifer Lord, “Liturgy: The World Being Done.” While engaging the question about what it means to participate in the liturgy for both worship leaders and those “in the pews,” Lord offers theological and historical analysis about the often-used definition of liturgy as “the work of the people.” She interrogates and reframes this definition with theological and historical analysis, recognizing the better translation of the Greek word *leitourgia* as “a work done for or on behalf of the people.”

Alongside each contributor to this issue, Jennifer Lord offers other ways to think about what is done in liturgy and sparks a foundational conversation. The question mark in the title of this issue was born from this conversation, inviting you, our readers, to expand the definition yourself in the context of your work. Even as you may be using the Lectionary Companion for this year, vol. 59.1, this thematic issue raises questions about the function of practical liturgical resources, engaging issues of context and recognizing all the factors that become part of liturgy beyond words on a page or on our lips.

For Lord, fuller definitions of liturgy include “life in ritual form,” “at full stretch before God,” and “the work of the people *for* the life of the world.” Ruth Meyers expands the idea that liturgy is work for the life of the world in a discussion about what it means to worship in cultural partnership. With historical and theological sensitivity, she considers the ways liturgy forms us to be repairers of the breach and teaches us to dismantle unjust structures. Injustice does not only exist in structures and in relationships between persons but also in relationships among different kinds of persons in the environment. With this in mind, Abby Mohaupt considers the meaning of “the people” in the often-used definition of liturgy, inviting us to expand our understanding of the term to include all living things and even “non-living” materials.

The Work of Our Hands by Katie Owen Aumann shares the story of a tree planting at Morningside Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. The article calls us to expand our understanding of liturgical space, liturgical labor, and liturgical art, further encouraging the idea of liturgy as the work of the people for the life of the world.

In his response to Jennifer Lord, Cláudio Carvalhaes applies wisdom from performance theories to liturgical theology, considering theater director Augusto Boal’s use of “spect-actors” instead of “spectators” to refer to an audience. Carvalhaes recognizes the agency, responsibility, and ethical demands worshipers have in an event of worship when they consider themselves full participants.

Many other contributors bring a conviction that worshipers are primary enactors of liturgy and ask questions about what constitutes leadership in worship and music. Maren Haynes Marchesini and music columnist Patrick Evans both consider ways to engage congregants in music to increase their sense of agency in liturgy. Both authors recognize the impact that the cultural phenomenon of “leaving it to the pros” has had on congregational singing and offer ways to dismantle this power dynamic.

Still another approach to the theme for this issue is to consider what it means for a congregation to build trust and work together across difference, a foundation for meaningful participation in worship. Lori Archer Raible, Dareion Malone, and Fred P. Spano offer together a reflection on what it was like for their two congregations to merge, recognizing the gifts of each in creating one meaningful community. Their experience is valuable in developing liturgical theology that accompanies communities through change and transition.

Christopher James approaches the conversation with a Reformed lens, noting the ways Reformed liturgy is catechetical, forming and teaching. He identifies the relationship between form and freedom in Reformed liturgy and recognizes the role of sensory experience in this theological framework,

especially in sacrament. James uses the verb *to happen* when he offers the idea that worship is participation in God, noting that “liturgy is . . . what actually happens in the sanctuary.” This idea also resonates in a contribution from author and artist André Daughtry, who references the idea of the “happening,” a term coined by artist Allan Kaprow in 1959 while staging art events in which an action or series of actions were performed in a controlled environment. Daughtry writes about the history of Judson Memorial Church in New York City as a center for avant garde art, offering a model for a worshiping community to support the artists in their neighborhood.

Allan Kaprow’s happenings created a ripe space between planning and chance, implicating viewers and the body of the artist in new ways and raising questions about the art object and the role of participation in visual art. As André Daughtry

recognizes, this idea has much to offer in the conversation about the role of work and people in worship. In whatever capacity you lead, I invite you into this conversation as well. What happens in your context? What happens when specific voices come together in a particular time, when bread happens to break in just such a way and the light moves slowly across the sanctuary over the course of an hour or so?

When we come to worship together, we witness (as participants) a happening that would not be the same without each one present. The visual, audible, and somatic elements of this happening are all specific and important. If we were to recognize that it cannot happen the same way twice, how might we enact together liturgy as “humanity at full stretch before God”?

—Sally Ann McKinsey, *Editor*

Call to Worship

Feature Articles

Liturgy: The World Being Done

Jennifer L. Lord

Spectator or Participant?

Are those of us “in the pews” on a Sunday morning spectators at an event? Are we recipients of and responders to what happens “up front”? Or are we actual participants in the action; does our individual and congregational agency in a Sunday morning worship service matter? These are questions provoked by Søren Kierkegaard in an essay where he challenges norms about worship and labels the spaces of a church sanctuary according to a common theatre architecture. And he rearranges the places for audience and performers!¹ His essay contests any approach to public worship that presumes the congregation as mere recipients of the things done “up front.”

I was serving as a pastor when I first encountered this work by Kierkegaard. It was included in a denominational confirmation curriculum publication, and its images have stayed with me. Kierkegaard acknowledges that most worship spaces (of his nineteenth-century time and Northern European location) place the congregation in the seating area, in pews, as an audience; the ministers and music leaders up front, onstage as performers; and God somehow present above it all. Instead, Kierkegaard invites readers to imagine the ministers, music directors, and other worship leaders as if they are standing off to the sides of the stage, hidden from sight, in the wings. And he invites us to imagine that the congregation is not seated as an audience but is onstage, up front, centered under the spotlights. God, he says, is in the audience. This is quite the flip. Can this be?

Years later I would apply a bit more theological scrutiny to this re-mapping and take his rearrangement one step farther: yes, ministers,

music leaders, and other worship leaders act “as if in the wings” and yes, the congregation is centered and acts “as if in the spotlight,” but God cannot be only in the audience, as if merely a distant observer or one who is far off and needs to be appeased. God, the Holy Trinity in the perichoretic sense of an *eternal dance around Glory*, is onstage with us all, in us, among us, through us, leading us, enticing us, summoning us; the centripetally and centrifugally acting Holy One is with us.

Some years later I would meet, through his written works, that irascible Aidan Kavanagh. He too had something to say about whether or not the congregation is spectator or participant: “Pews, which entered liturgical place only recently [thirteenth century], nail the assembly down, proclaiming that the liturgy is not a common action but a preachment perpetuated upon the seated, an ecclesiastical opera done by virtuosi for a paying audience. Pews distance the congregation, disenfranchise the faithful, and rend the assembly.”² He critiques the actual seating arrangement because it impairs the participation of the people.

On the Court (As in Basketball)

But Kavanagh does not stop with a critique. He provides an image that reframes what is meant to happen in the pews. He gives this Hoosier a basketball image as an image for liturgical celebration: “Filling a church with immovable pews is similar to placing bleachers directly on the basketball court: it not only interferes with movement but changes the event into something entirely different.”³

I was still worshiping most frequently in church buildings with pews when I first read his sharp-tongued commentary, but because of his basketball

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court prompt I started to focus on my actions during Sunday worship. And so it began: even in places with pews, could I see with the eyes of my heart what he was revealing about Sunday liturgy? I started to ask more of myself: What was I contributing to that local convening of the body of Christ? How was I not simply a recipient of “a preachment”? How could I sense and see that to which Kavanagh gestured, that *event* before it was “changed into something entirely different”? How could I participate *as if* that event was happening?

Here is what changed:

- I sang more robustly, despite being a total amateur singer; I sang with a renewed sense that my voice in the mix mattered, that my vocalizing manifested myself as co-member with the other members of Christ present and accounted for⁴;
- I tried to truly “say what I mean and mean what I say” while praying the prayers, be they opening words, short prayers, prayers of the people interceding for others. I meant for my entreaties to rise like incense, conjoining and curling with all the other offered prayers;
- I prepared to pray the prayers of the people (what my tradition calls longer prayers of intercession), mindful ahead of time of that ancient grouping of beseeching categories that bid us pray for all manner of people and needs, the earth, and for peace; I would have specific people and places and situations in mind, even though I might only say those silently;
- My speech became performative (as the word indicates), my form coming through.⁵ I would say things audibly and with purpose. I would speak as if the words manifested the reality, as if the words changed things, as if the words mattered. Akin to the words that change reality in the marriage ceremony—the constant “I do” of that ceremony now played out in ten thousand different ways on Sundays, words bringing about a shift in reality: “I *confess*,” “*Hear our prayer!*” “I *believe* in one God . . .”;
- I listened to the Word read and proclaimed, expecting God speaking to the me *and* to the us there in that shared space and time;
- I prepared for the prayer of confession of sin, whether a reiteration of an old known prayer, or one with sentences far too long to easily say in unison, or too lightweight or too thematic

as to miss my sinnings of the week: I would have my true confessions ready and would attach them to that unison prayer;

- I gathered with others, strangers and friends, knowing we were becoming something more, something other, by our gathering in God’s name, dwelling contemporaneously for that time, dwelling deeply *in* the Name;
- My bulletin became a prompt—that I would attend to the action at hand rather than bury my face in a piece of paper or the pages of a book or have eyes locked on a screen.

To Dance with God

Because of this growing attention to my part in things, I also felt that I wanted to know some of the worship matters by heart. I had discovered that if I knew words by heart or if I knew what was coming next by heart, I could, as C. S. Lewis is purported to have said, dance because I no longer needed to count the steps. I could enter into words and song and actions more fully. I consulted the worship bulletin less; I could set it down on the pew. I wondered about worshiping communities whose liturgies change all the time and what is happening if the people in the pews are always surprised or always needing to be directed at every turn. I wondered about the ways that some liturgies keep the people in the pews bound to a screen or a page or a book or to someone directing us. When I began knowing things by heart, I started to have ownership and experience deepened meanings of the things said and done; I re-encountered words and song and gestures and actions in ways that increased the layers of meaning manifested by those symbols, those images, those verbal icons. What happens if we have not been granted the chance to know things by heart, in our hips and in our hearts?

In all of this I am telling my story. I am someone with disabilities and abilities; my brain functions in specific ways, and as far as I know (and for now) many of those ways are labeled typical (according to?).⁶ And of course I am also, as I describe my relationship to liturgies, relaying information about my gender and race and privilege and class and nationality as well as the types of worship to which I have grown accustomed (ones with confessions of sin and prayers of the people!). These declarations about myself are acknowledgments that *who* and *how* I am absolutely influence which liturgies I want to learn by heart. My ways of being in the world

absolutely influence the *how* of my participation in worship. And these admissions are to also acknowledge that some do not want or cannot have that type of know-by-heart/not-count-the-steps dance relationship with worship.

But let me take a step back. So far in this essay, I've used the words *worship* and *liturgy* in an interchangeable fashion. But in the next two sections I press questions that are core to this journal issue: How does our participation in worship relate to what label is used? Am I describing liturgy? Or am I describing worship? Does it matter which word I use to label and describe Sunday morning?

Worship or Liturgy?

When I talk about liturgy and worship with congregations, in classrooms, and among colleagues and friends, I sometimes notice that people who are used to the word *worship* seem hesitant when saying the word *liturgy*. They seem to have discomfort around the word *liturgy*. Their voice relays a questioning tone as if they aren't quite sure they are using the word *liturgy* correctly. Perhaps the hesitation is because they sense a distinction between the terms *worship* and *liturgy*, and maybe they are not quite sure which side of the equation they prefer. Occasionally I experience someone's outright defensiveness regarding the word *liturgy*. When they talk about it, they describe *liturgy* as a form of *worship* that is imposed, that it is a form of worship that is absolutist and rigid, as in *the* liturgy. *Liturgy*, to them, designates those prayers and rites that have been prepared and passed along and upheld by those in power. The word *liturgy* seems, to them, synonymous with a formalized and repeated ceremony that is rote, representative of preserving the past rather than responsive to the present, does not leave space for the surprising movement of the Holy Spirit, and may perpetuate a misuse or even abuse of power.

Worship, in my circles of conversations, is the go-to word instead of *liturgy*. But even that word raises questions. Some persons understand worship as what happens first in the Sunday service, before the sermon. Songs and praise time is their *worship* time or even a particular genre of music.⁷ Some use the word *worship* to describe everything that happens in the Sunday service, from gathering together to separating and going their own way at the end, and including everything in between. Some persons use *worship* to mean listening to a favorite

song, reading a morning devotion, walking in the woods, or other personal acts that connect one to God for a *worship* time. And all of this could be in person or virtual/online.

All of this is further complicated by thinking about the power of liturgies in print. Liturgical books contain liturgies. Someone wrote those liturgies. Someone decided that they ought to be published and someone was authorized to publish them. Some ecclesial traditions' liturgical books are required for all liturgical services in that tradition. Some ecclesial traditions' liturgical books are published by a denominational publishing house and are made available but are not required. But what is published may flesh out that traditions' theology and polity of worship, and so even that optional book is recommended. Some church traditions do not have a judicatory or publishing house precisely because they value independence from such matters. The term *liturgy* is often associated with these books even though some of the books, like that of my own denomination, use *worship* in the title. Print and publication wields much power and further complexifies how we think about worship and liturgy.⁸

A potential summary could be: the usage of *worship* feels more descriptive of what pours forth from humans toward God, and the usage of *liturgy* feels more descriptive of what some humans have codified and authorized and put in print for other humans to do. Add to this: what the Bible says and what we do with that.

Scripture

I am not a Bible scholar, and I know that Bible scholars disagree with one another over translations and interpretations of words and just how much power that one word ought to yield for our interpretations and applications. Here is my attempt to touch on the highlights regarding the etymological origins for the words *worship* and *liturgy*. It starts with this significant tidbit: the translators who gave us the King James Version of the Bible (KJV) chose to use the English word *worship* when they translated Hebrew and Greek words that conveyed "obedience, service, and bodily performances related to them; God or gods are the sole referent."⁹ Worship in the KJV was not meant to express one's inner life or to offer praise but rather it meant one's ethics, one's disposition for and total commitment to a way of life/the personage representing that way of life. So,

to worship God was an act of total commitment, an *all-in* declaration. Again, to highlight differences between then and now, many of the biblical terms translated as worship are related to bowing and prostration. *Worship* carries the sense of an *enacted* fidelity, a relational obedience, an ongoing, life-adjusting, re-orienting, turning-to-God again and again commitment. “The molding of the body . . . primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely communicate a subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinate kneeler in and through the act itself.”¹⁰

And so personal prayer and communal ritual acts express (and create) that broader reality of service and obedience. It was all about one’s whole orientation in life, ethics, and even politics, not the inner “spiritual” life or worship style, or specific actions that we moderns might list as part of our worship. Of course there are other permutations of meaning; if you trace the word *worship* through the centuries, there are additional nuances. But I linger over this translation choice because, for many of us, a word that meant indivisibility of bodily actions from service and obedience to God can now, at least for some worshiping traditions, seem void of such body-centeredness. So says this author, formed by a style of worship that was so very much about education, information, knowing according to the mind.

Scripture uses other words pertinent to this conversation, but importantly it gives us the word *liturgy*. We find it derived from two Greek words, *laos* and *ergon*, literally *people* and *work*—*leitourgia*, the compound version of it reads. And, so, it is often thought to plainly mean “the work of the people.”

It’s become increasingly popular in Protestant circles for people to be excited about the word *liturgy* defined as “the work of the people” (full stop). Maybe this is because the phrase sounds like a corrective to the time when liturgies were in Latin or some other language unknown by the people actually gathered in that location. Or the excitement is because the phrase sounds like a corrective to the time when parts of liturgies were silent or spoken so softly and done behind a rood screen and the people, the *populus*, could not hear what was being said nor see what was being done. Or the shorthand phrase is underscored because it is a corrective to experiences of worship where the people “up front” deal out wisdom, or holy things, or are meant to be the only

important ones in the room. Or the excitement is because this phrasing finally sounds permissive against a backdrop of codified books and academic busybodies, as in we *can* create our own liturgies, and worship *is* about what we do.

However, *leitourgia*, in its context, really had nothing to do with the human-divine relationship or, at first, any act of worship. It referred to a public service or act of the state that was for the benefit of the people and, indirectly, to the work of a public servant in a state office. It meant a service act done by one or a few for the good of the many. “Too often one hears or reads a superficial etymology of the word ‘liturgy’ as ‘the work of the people.’ But . . . in its origins it referred not to work done *by the people* but rather a public work in the sense that we would speak of the ‘Department of Public Works’—in other words, a benefaction or work done *for the people*.”¹¹

And to further complicate matters, some people want to emphasize that the real translation is not “the work of the people” but “a work done *on behalf of* the people,”¹² raising questions about who does what on behalf of whom. Does that phrasing mean work done by the ordained persons on behalf of the laity? And if that is what is meant, can it be a right use of power? Those who answer yes often speak from Roman Catholic contexts.¹³ These meanings are interpretive moves. We moderns did not discover an absolute and singular meaning for worship and liturgy. To be clear, these claims about *leitourgia* are theological moves. But I know which meaning convicts me.

Full Stretch

A large, black-and-white photograph hangs over a desk in my office. Fans of Alvin Ailey know this is an old photograph, taken when he was still dancing. Even if you do not know Alvin Ailey’s work, you see a near impossible thing: this man extending his arms like wings but bending back, so far back, and on the tips of his toes. It looks like he will form the letter o. I gaze at his arc and remember the phrase *humanity at full stretch before God*.¹⁴ I see this in Alvin Ailey. He is fully present in that dance, giving all, outstretched, honoring Something beyond himself, a witness such that movement erupts from this still photo. I want to live that way too: that centeredness, that doxology, that impossible balance that must give way to the next move.

God made us to live that way, that doxology, that full-stretched-ness, however that takes form for our

particular physicalities. God made the cosmos to be that way. The biblical image of all living things at full stretch is, of course, Eden. God made all for Paradise. The earth and the fullness thereof (Ps. 24:1), all created things, humans too. All made for *shalom*, all with inherent dignity of particularity, all in community, all in doxological communion with God. This is Eden restored; by God's mercy this is the *télos* for all creation.¹⁵

I need to be clear that with this focus on *liturgy* it could sound like worship or liturgy is the object of our attention. No. The object of liturgy is God's relationship to us, ours to God, ours with one another and with God's world, and liturgy as the vehicle for all of that. "Liturgy is an ensemble of divine action and our response."¹⁶ Liturgy is our being together in the presence of the Holy Trinity: call and response repeated *ad infinitum*. Liturgy is our participation in that eternal dance around glory that bids us be poured out for one another and the world and be assured all things are caught up in Christ's new creation, the eighth day.¹⁷ Liturgy is our love language; it is our *being language* for life as Christ's own for God's beloved world. Liturgy is life in ritual form. Liturgy is our joining in something that is already in progress (in both an earthly and Communion of Saints' manner). Liturgy re-orientes us in the *paschal mystery*: Christ's death that defeated the powers of death and sin and Christ's resurrection and life now. We stretch together. Some say that we humans, in this ecology, are cosmic priests.¹⁸ We recognize all comes from God, we open our hands and receive, we bless and name again that all was created holy and good. Kavanagh calls *this* liturgy: doing the world the way the world was meant to be done.¹⁹

To say liturgy is "the work of the people" (full stop) is insufficient. What is beautiful about this word *liturgy* is the claim that our Sunday morning actions are for public good; we use that word to describe what the church is actually doing by its prayers, teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread (Acts 2:2). To use the word *liturgy* declares that the church's liturgy is for the life of God's beloved cosmos. It is the work of the people for the life of the world. Yes. For us to use the word *liturgy* also underscores that *what* we do matters. Remember: "For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinate kneeler in and through the act itself."²⁰ The *what* of worship, of liturgy, is transforming us through the acts themselves:

gathering, praying, lamenting and thanking singing, confessing and forgiving, listening and hearing, uplifting, water-washing and sharing in eating and drinking, blessing, sending. And our *doing* it matters. Liturgical participation forms us to live as repairers of the breach (Isa. 58:12), living as ones seeing, with the eyes of our hearts, a restored Eden even when all evidence seems to the contrary. I continue to use worship and liturgy interchangeably. But these things are what I mean. And if our liturgies are not reclaiming us wayward ones weekly for the fullness of life in God and for the world's restored fullness in God, then we should ask: what are we doing?

What is most important about public worship is that we gather the sisters and brothers together for a festival, a special occasion, a celebration of the reign of God (not yet terribly evident in daily life nor in the institutions of society), that helps all of us feel so good about ourselves, so important, so dignified, so precious, so free, so much at one . . . not as escape, not merely in distinction to daily routine, but in judgment, in the Lord's judgment on those ways and institutions. A celebration of the reign of God that goes way beyond the tight, drab, rationalistic, verbose, pedagogical exercises we sometimes try to make of it—all those dreadful "themes" we love—into a large, broad fully human landscape, where Jesus is truly the firstborn of a new humanity, and where our other liturgical tools (festival excess and colors and tastes and textures and odors and forms and touches) penetrate the Babel of our words and points and arguments to heal the human spirit and to raise it up in the covenant community's vision of new possibilities. Good liturgical celebration, like a parable, takes us by the hairs of our head, lifts us momentarily out of the cesspool of injustice we call home, puts us in the promised and challenging reign of God, where we are treated like we have never been treated anywhere else . . . where we are bowed to and sprinkled and censed and kissed and touched and where we share equally among all a holy food and drink.²¹

What does full stretch before God look like for you? What ought full stretch look like for those for whom life is nothing but violence and wickedness (Ps. 55)? For those for whom access and opportunity are constantly denied? What does the created earth look like at full stretch? God's cosmos, the universes, all things interdependent? May our worship, our liturgies be such that our response to these questions is to fling wide the doors of our church sanctuaries and say: Come and see.

Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart*, tr. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper and Row, 1938), 180–81 (SV XI114–15); reprinted in *Parables of Kierkegaard*, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 89–90.
2. Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1982), 21–22.
3. Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite*, 21–22.
4. See Kathleen Harmon, “The Ritual Nature of Music for Worship,” in *Lifting Up Jesus Christ Yesterday, Today, and Forever: Proceedings of the Worship 2000 Jubilee* (Minneapolis, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001), 48–56. Harmon writes: “Our singing makes us present to the liturgical action . . . our singing makes us present to one another . . . our singing unleashes our power as the Body of Christ,” p. 53.
5. Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997).
6. See Rebecca Spurrier, *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Worship* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019). See also The UDL Approach, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://theudlapproach.com/theudlgears-graphic/>.
7. See Lester Ruth, *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020).
8. See Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the End of the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020).
9. Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3. Here bodily performances include the literal practices of bowing down or prostration. See Gen. 24; Matt. 4:9; 8:2; 28:9. See too his discussion of words translated as worship in the New Testament: “Like their equivalents in the Hebrew Bible, these terms are concerned either with reverence or obedience or with bodily performances that enacted them,” p. 6.
10. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 3.
11. John F. Baldovin, *Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 67–68.
12. Lizette Larson, “The Languages of the Word ‘Liturgy,’” *Pray Tell: Worship, Wit & Wisdom* (blog), September 22, 2022, <https://praytelltellblog.com/index.php/2022/09/22/the-languages-of-the-word-liturgy/>.
13. Anscar J. Chupungco, *What, Then, Is Liturgy? Musings and Memoir* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 58.
14. See E. Byron Anderson, *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).
15. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James Leitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). “From the first to the last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity but it is the medium as such, the key in which everything is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day,” p. 16.
16. David W. Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World: On Mundane Liturgical Theology* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016), 68.
17. See Jennifer L. Lord, *The Sunday Meeting: Worship, Its Elements, and Conversion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press), forthcoming.
18. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973); Gordon W. Lathrop, *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004); Fagerberg, *Consecrating the World*.
19. Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite*, 45–46. “What one witnesses in the liturgy is the world being done as the world's Creator and Redeemer will the world to be done.”
20. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 3.
21. Robert Hovda, “The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers,” in Robert Hovda, *The Amen Corner* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 220. Used with permission.

Repairing the Breach: Worship in Racially Diverse Congregations

Ruth A. Meyers

Repairers of the Breach

Jennifer Lord invites us to envision liturgy as participation in an “eternal dance around Glory,” (see p. 2) being poured out for one another and the world, forming us to live as repairers of the breach (Isa. 58:12). The actions of worship transform us, shaping us for everyday life.

In the United States today, everyday life is marked by strife and division, including racial inequities rooted deeply in our history that have resulted in significant economic and social disparities that continue to this day. How might our liturgy bring together racially diverse communities whose members are transformed to become repairers of the breach in worship and in the world?

A Pentecost Vision

In his foreword to Michael Hawn's book *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship*, United Methodist elder and theologian Justo González asserts, “The church is multicultural by birth.” The communication that occurred at Pentecost, each member of the crowd in Jerusalem hearing the disciples “speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:6), was a crossing of boundaries, allowing those on each side to be equally at home. Pentecost worship, González argues, requires far more than one group welcoming different people into their church. He explains that crossing cultural barriers requires sharing the gospel “in such a way that power and control are also shared and even relinquished by its previous owners.”¹

A Pentecost vision understands the church as a diverse community, one that bridges differences, with no group dominating. In Ephesians, the apostle Paul writes of the dismantling of divisions

between Jews and Gentiles. Christ has broken down the “dividing wall of hostility,” creating “one new humanity in place of the two” (Eph. 2:14–15). This new humanity, as Paul envisions it, is rooted in baptism. It knits together not only Gentile and Jew, but also slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female (1 Cor. 12:12–13; Gal. 3:26–28; Col. 3:11).

The assurance of reconciliation in and through Christ runs throughout the New Testament, echoing Isaiah's vision of a house of prayer for all peoples (Isa. 56:7). It culminates in the book of Revelation, with John's vision of worship around the heavenly throne:

There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. . . , They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10).

Pastor and teacher Jim Wallis observes, “Human diversity is not abolished but rather celebrated and ultimately reconciled in praise of the Creator.”²

Our Unhappy Divisions

Underneath Paul's oft-repeated emphasis on unity rooted in baptism may be the struggle of first-century Christian communities to embody and enact that unity. In First Corinthians, Paul begins with a plea for unity: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and there be no divisions among you” (1 Cor. 1:10). These divisions are evident when the Corinthian community gathers for the Lord's Supper. Paul chastises them, “When you come

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together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk" (1 Cor. 11:20–21). Reminding the Corinthians of Jesus offering bread and wine at the Last Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–25), Paul urges the community to wait for the entire body to assemble before beginning to eat (1 Cor. 11:33–34).

A different form of division took root in the United States, which Wallis describes as “America’s original sin”: “The United States of America was established as a white society, founded upon the near genocide of another race and then the enslavement of yet another.”

A different form of division took root in the United States, which Wallis describes as “America’s original sin”: “The United States of America was established as a white society, founded upon the near genocide of another race and then the enslavement of yet another.”³ Racism was manifest in churches in different ways. Until the Civil War, it was common for people of African descent, enslaved or free, to worship with white people. Yet Black people were frequently relegated to balconies for seating for worship, and often a racial hierarchy prevailed in devotional practices and distribution of communion: first whites, then free Blacks, and finally enslaved people. Gradually African American congregations formed in Northern states, and enslaved people in Southern states gathered for secret religious meetings. After the Civil War, many newly freed African Americans left white churches to form separate congregations, providing a place for religious autonomy and for social and political activities. This segregation was never complete; a few white congregations welcomed African Americans, and most African American congregations did not bar whites from joining. In the twentieth century, worship in the newly emerging Pentecostal movement brought together white people and Black people, and a few intentionally interracial churches were founded during the 1930s and 1940s. But overall, churches in the United States remained largely segregated by race.⁴

Recognizing the persistence of segregated congregations in the United States, in a 1960 interview on the television program *Meet the Press*, Martin Luther King Jr. observed, “I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours [sic], in Christian America.” King’s dismay stemmed from his understanding of Scripture, as he explained, “Any church that stands against integration and that has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ.”⁵

Most scholars agree that integrated congregations were rare after the Civil War. The first comprehensive study of multiracial congregations was conducted at the end of the twentieth century by a team led by sociologist Michael Emerson, who published the results in his 2006 book *People of the Dream*. Emerson defines a multiracial congregation as one in which “no one racial group comprises 80 percent or more of the people.” He explains, “At this percentage, the proportion is high enough to have its presence felt and filtered throughout a system.”⁶ Using data from the National Congregations Study, Emerson estimated that only 7 percent of American congregations are multiracial. Moreover, most congregations are much more segregated than the neighborhoods in which they reside, except for multiracial congregations, which tend to be more diverse than their neighborhoods.⁷

Since Emerson’s first study, subsequent waves of the National Congregations Study have shown a growing number of multiracial congregations in the United States. Between 1998 and 2019, “racial and ethnic diversity within congregations steadily increased, with no signs of having reached a plateau.” Both the proportion of multiracial congregations and the percentage of religious service attendees participating in these congregations have grown. Notwithstanding this increase in racial and ethnic diversity, the authors of this study caution that greater diversity does not necessarily promote racial justice, pointing to several studies showing that these congregations may “reproduce racial inequalities rather than transcend them.”⁸

Worship in Multiracial Congregations

In what ways does worship in multiracial congregations reproduce racial inequalities? In what ways might it transcend those inequalities? To what extent are worshipers of every race and ethnicity able to participate fully, on equal footing?

In a 2004 study of racially diverse congregations in the United Methodist Church, Michael Hawn urges the development of “culturally conscious worship,” in which no clear majority dominates, and all can participate as full and equal members. Acknowledging the challenges of worshipping without showing preference or partiality, Hawn suggests several strategies to move beyond cultural uniformity or assimilation, which tend to reproduce the dominance of one race or culture, toward cultural openness and cultural partnership, which seek to transcend inequalities, breaking down walls of hostility and creating one new humanity in Christ (Eph. 2:14-16).⁹

Hawn encourages congregations to work creatively within their own tradition rather than developing entirely new structures.¹⁰ My tradition is the Episcopal Church, which sets forth worship in its *Book of Common Prayer*. In 2019, I began a study of six multiracial congregations in the Episcopal Church, worshipping with them and interviewing the clergy, director of music, and lay members. I returned in 2024, seeking to understand more fully how these racially diverse communities worship and how individuals participate in this worship.

In each interview, I asked what was most meaningful in worship. The responses varied widely. In one congregation, worshipers moved out of their pews to gather in a circle for prayers of intercession. Although this did not lead to any more vocal participation, one person I interviewed felt deeply engaged by the sense of community, seeing and hearing one another as they stood shoulder to shoulder. For another person, singing together after everyone had received communion created a sense of the community’s closeness to God. While the breadth of responses suggests that people engage worship in different ways, a common thread is the importance of practices that foster a sense of community. Despite the complexity and challenges of bridging racial differences, these congregations have found ways to draw people into one body.

Some aspects of cultural difference are readily observable, for example, music and language. But cultural differences go much deeper, to patterns

of behavior and communication. Fifty years ago, cultural anthropologists began to identify unspoken attitudes and actions that characterize interactions in different cultural contexts, for example, attitudes toward time, understandings and use of power, approaches to leadership, expression of emotion, and communication styles.¹¹ Using this research, I invited those I interviewed to complete a worksheet that marked their congregation’s worship on several continuums:

from emotionally restrained, to emotionally expressive;
from carefully following the printed order of service, to relying on oral tradition;
from managing time carefully, to living in the moment;
from priority given to requirements for worship, to priority given to relationships.

In nearly every interview, this simple worksheet led to significant reflection, and my experience of worship confirmed what worshipers told me.

Worship in these multiracial congregations tends to be more emotionally expressive than most white Episcopal churches, which tend to value restraint, dignity, and good order, with little spontaneity.¹² A high value for building relationships is evident in greetings before and after worship and in an extended exchange of the Peace. The use of time is also more fluid. Even when worship starts on time, worshipers do not all arrive on time. Many seem unconcerned about the length of the service, and people linger for a meal or coffee hour following the service.

These characteristics correlate with many non-white cultures, particularly Black and Latino/a. (My study does not include congregations with significant numbers of Asian/Asian American or Native American/Indian members.) In congregations that have been historically white, members are able to create space for people from other racial backgrounds by sitting more lightly with characteristically white cultural values and patterns. Historically Latino/a and Black congregations do not relinquish their cultural values and behaviors as white members join them. Some white people in these congregations report life experience of bridging racial differences, and some intentionally seek more racially diverse congregations.

Learning to worship in cultural partnership, with no single culture dominating, calls for openness

to diversity and the development of a capacity to adapt to different cultural contexts. Racially diverse congregations develop worship practices that foster a deep sense of community and connection to God, and their members are able to adapt to different patterns of interaction and communication in worship. Poured out for one another and for the world in their liturgy, they are formed as repairers of the breach.

Notes

1. Justo González, foreword to C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), xiv.
2. Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 108.
3. Jim Wallis, "America's Original Sin: The Legacy of White Racism," *Sojourners* (November 1987), cited in Wallis, *America's Original Sin*, 33.
4. For a fuller overview of this history, see Michael O. Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 9–23.
5. Martin Luther King Jr., "Interview on *Meet the Press*," April 17, 1960, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/interview-meet-press>. Although the statement is frequently attributed to King, see "Worship Hour Found Time of Segregation," *New York Times*, November 4, 1952, which reports that Dr. Helen Kenyon, chair of the policy committee of the Department of United Church Women of the National Council of Churches, in an address at Riverside Church in New York City, designated eleven o'clock Sunday morning as the "most segregated time" in America.
6. Emerson, *People of the Dream*, 35.
7. Emerson, *People of the Dream*, 46. For the National Congregations Study, see <https://www.nationalcongregationsstudy.org/>, accessed September 24, 2025. The study includes churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship.
8. Kevin D. Dougherty, Mark Chaves, and Michael O. Emerson, "Racial Diversity in U.S. Congregations, 1998–2019," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 4 (2020): 654, 659–660.
9. Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 5–10, 141–176.
10. Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 159.
11. Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1976); Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1990); Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences—International Differences in Work-Related Values*, abridged ed. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984).
12. For a discussion of characteristics of white worship, see Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 49–51.

To Desire One Thing

Cláudio Carvalhaes

Jennifer Lord's essay gives us powerful questions to probe (see p. 2). What does it mean to go back to the basics so we can keep what we do alive? Those who think and do rituals and theology have to constantly go back to the basics, otherwise we run the risk of becoming too comfortable with the orders of worship we have created and rest on the *modus operandi* of the *ex opere operato*, where the doing of the ritual is done by the ritual itself, as if the work itself worked.

The questions Lord's article offers are not just rhetorical. They have to do with the very practices we do and the specificities of each of them. Since we don't have time and space to consider each question in depth, I propose to respond to Lord's text by answering her first major questions and comment on two aspects of Kierkegaard's work that Lord brings forth.

Lord starts by asking a loaded question, one that has received much attention and needs to be revisited time and again: "Are those of us 'in the pews' on a Sunday morning spectators at an event?" I don't think anyone would say we are mere spectators, since we participate by singing, praying, standing, and partaking in the bread and the cup. People also respond mainly by seeing and listening, which are both forms of knowing. Our bodies are always responding to the stimuli around us, and in that way our responses are forms of participation in worship.

Theater director Augusto Boal would say that Western theater, religious, and nonreligious performances, have taught us passivity. In the performance of theater, the pleasure is in the pretending of that moment we spend together, but in the performance of the religious, the joy is in the presence of God. Yes, both rituals are

performances since both have specific movements, limits, gestures, expectations, a plot, and so on. Students have corrected me many times, saying that worship services are not performances. But in fact, they are! Though worship is often differentiated from theater performances in the role of making-believe, these distinctions are often blurred and contested. In any case, both are performances, just as everything we do with our bodies are performances. As I write this article, I am performing my writing. When I pray, I am performing my prayers. When I talk to you, I am performing. When I wake up in the morning, I perform my morning chores. When I lead the worship services, I am performing the ritual gestures of my community.

Augusto Boal doesn't like the word *spectator* because it connotes passivity. Instead, he uses the word *spect-actors*, since the people can do something bolder, like change the performance, interrupt the ritual. In his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal intends to awaken us from dormant rituals and frame performance as a way to dismantle oppressive structures. Any ritual, be it religious or secular, like a performance, can make us dormant, assuming a certain religious framework that will avoid any social markers like politics, gender, race, economics, sex, and so on. The seeing-hearing we do as spect-actors carries an ethical demand, one that makes us responsible for all that happens in our worship service. We are passive worshipers when we go to church to do church as the pastor has prepared and when we feel we have nothing to do with it except to agree to it.

Let me give an example: in this time of fascism through which we are living, what kind of worship are we offering to God and to one another as we reflect the two main commandments given to us by

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Jesus? Are we caring deeply for the immigrant and for brown people during these heavy days? If we are not, then we are just going with the flow, and our collective participation, our joint seeing-hearing ethical responses, reveals the deadly politics that have taken over our worship services without our noticing. To continue to do worship from a place of fear without considering our role as spect-actors is to be swallowed by the passivity of the politics of our day, a passivity that is celebrated in Jesus' name.

Every worship service must issue a demand for our conversion. Any worship service that does not convert us from our ways we can call something else, but not a worship to God. However, church people, and Reformed people, tend to want to be passive. Within the binary body-mind, Reformed people often chose mind. Faith went from practice to belief, and prayer lost its *ora-labora* format (prayer-work/action) and became passive, disembodied language or abstract ideas. We may go to church now expecting that the pastor will have cut-and-pasted the order of worship and spoken liturgy into the bulletin for us to follow. A posture of passivity is easier; there is a sense that it will save us from conflict, paradoxes, and complexities. This, for me, is the crux of our constant crisis. Ideally, the worship service is a site for the presence of God, and God's presence demands change, as we hear in Romans:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:1-2, NRSVue).

Reformed people are known to carry this motto: *Reformed and always being reformed*. This is not only a theological maxim but a liturgical practice.

Performance theorist Diana Taylor says this, which can be applied to our liturgical practice: "Performance can call spectators to action, but it sometimes puts them in very confusing, powerful, disempowering, or uncomfortable situations. . . . Performances ask that spectators do something, even if that something is doing nothing."¹

Doing nothing is surely part of doing something. However, if doing nothing means only repeating

what we do without bringing it to the needs of our time, then doing nothing becomes deadly or passive. I am not proposing we create different kinds of worship services all the time but that we carry what we have received into our time, responding to the challenges of our time. I gave the example of responding to fascism, but we could also move from passivity to full participation in responding to the challenges of climate disaster. Sadly, we have confused passivity with repetition and repetition with tradition. But the conjuring of these words is what makes some people feel that some worship services are not alive. If we understand that to keep any tradition is to change it, for the love of it, then we will move from passivity to action and respond to the call toward movement, engagement, and transformation in worship.

If God is in the audience,
does God move from the altar
or chancel to where people are?

Lord's questions also bring Kierkegaard to us in wonderful ways. She quotes Kierkegaard: "God," he says, "is in the audience" (see p. 2). If we accept this assertion, we can trouble the whole structure of the worship services, and even the questions Lord brings get turned upside down. First, if God is in the audience, does God move from the altar or chancel to where people are? If this is the case, we are all in deep trouble. But if God's place in the audience means that the whole congregational space is equalized with God's presence, then those who were consecrated and keep standing on top of the ritual space will lose their symbolic and real power. In this case, how would we understand the leading of the ritual or the presiding over the sacraments? With this statement, I would suggest that Kierkegaard is a liturgical liberation theologian *avant la lettre*.

For theology, and liturgy for that matter, start with the poor, with the people. In order to plan and lead liturgy as liberation, pastors and theologians would have to commit to people in a different way and create their worship services with different sources of revelation. Theology would not only rest on Bible, tradition, and God's revelation in Christ but also in the lives and experiences of the people. Our sermons would have to incorporate other resources, and the prayers of the people would have to be understood

very differently. The words of the sacraments could be said by anyone, and the representational format of liturgy would finally turn into what it should have always been: the work of the people. If God is in the audience, we are all equally possessed by the Spirit of God. Our worship experience may reflect more clearly many of Lord's questions.

Last, I want to focus on the central aspect of Kierkegaard's main theological assumption, that is, "purity of heart," which means to desire one thing. This is fascinating! But if we think closely, who is it that can desire just one thing? Perhaps the very reason we worship is to learn how to desire one thing: God, and God alone. This reminds me of Ernesto Cardenal's five hundred-plus-page poem called *Cosmic Canticle*. For Cardenal, we long for God as we long for the cosmos. If the cosmos for Cardenal is a song to the Divine, may our desire be a song to the universe, to God.

But to desire one thing is so difficult to attain. How can we desire just one thing in our capitalist society? How can we desire one thing if capitalism asks for our desires to be endless, stretched to infinity? I remember the day my therapist asked me this question, perhaps the most important one in any therapy session: "What is your desire?" When she asked me, I didn't know what to say. What do I want? I want many things, and I desire everything! Without knowing, she paraphrased Kierkegaard, asking me about the one thing I desired. I responded with a thousand words, only to realize that what I wanted was everything except what I actually said.

Kierkegaard's question comes from St Augustine, who asked in the *Confessions*: "What do I love when I love my God?"² To worship is to ask constantly, "What do I love?" This is the quest for our will, our desire. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21), but today it

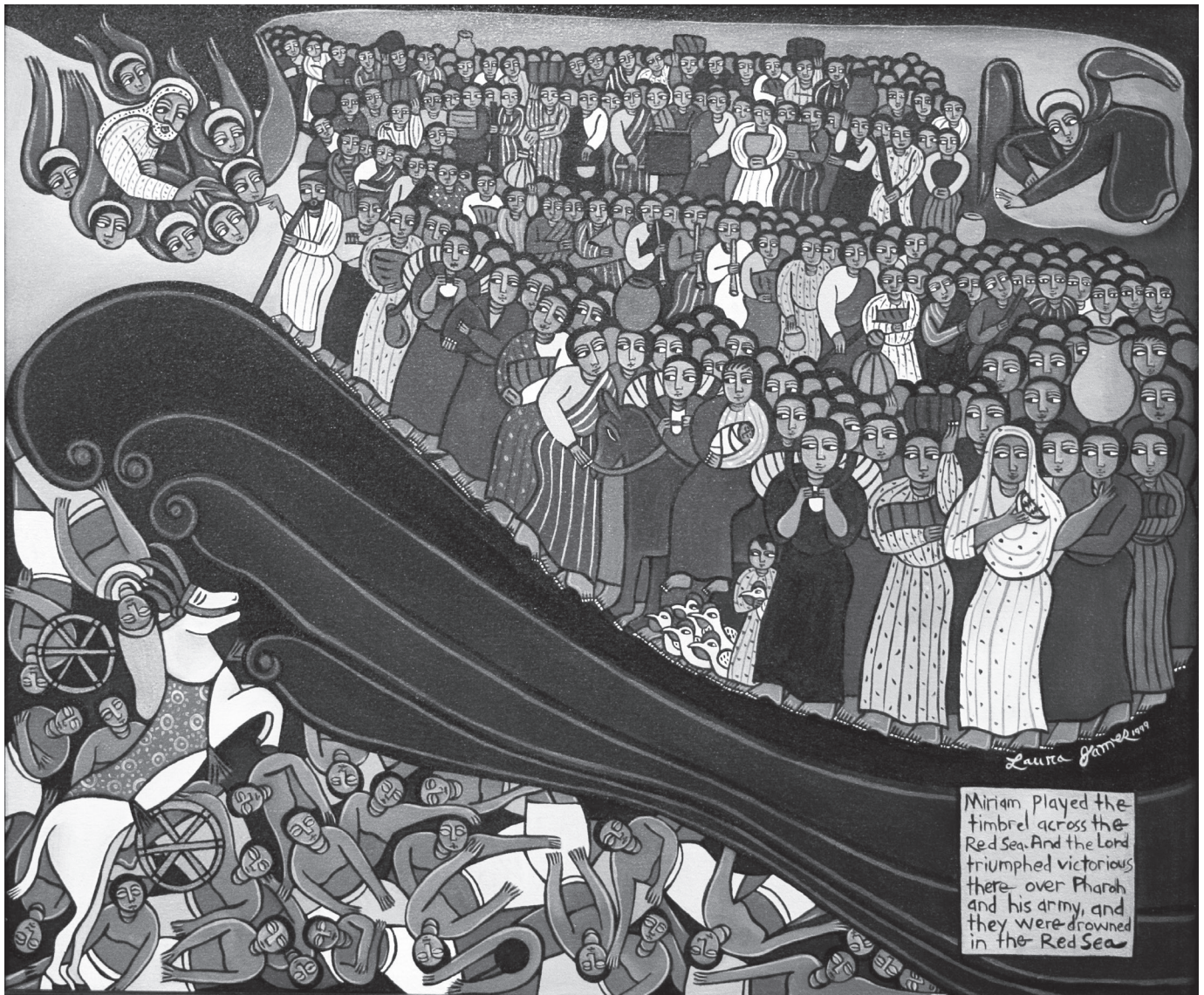
seems our hearts are so scattered that we don't know what we want. Capitalism has built in us a disposition that makes us desire everything; desire never ends. Our capitalist forms of living make us want and want and want with no bounds, to the point that we don't desire anything but desire. This is our spirituality: the desiring of desire itself. Where is God in the midst of all of these desires? Completely lost.

Perhaps this is my response to Lord's cluster of questions. If we all went to worship to learn how to desire just one thing, how to respond to the question "What do we love when we love our God?" then one day we would know what love of God and neighbor is all about. But to do that we need constant practice of the devotion Lord discusses. Perhaps over twenty or thirty years we may be able to hint at what it means to desire one thing.

A couple of years ago I put together a play that I wrote and presented it at the New York Theater Festival. To put together a one-hour show, I needed the help of so many people, and I had to rehearse countless hours to the point of nausea. I had to learn to have my body, my heart, and my mind in that one hour. I had to desire only one thing with the fulness of my life. Worship is not a rehearsal of anything; it is the actual doing of our lives, the learning to desire one thing: God. To learn this, we need each other and countless hours to get closer to it. Do we want to do this with our whole being? What do I love when I love my God?

Note

1. Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 82 and 86.
2. For a more extended development of worship and Augustine's quest for love, see Cláudio Carvalhaes, *What's Worship Got to Do with It?: Interpreting Life Liturgically* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).



Crossing the Red Sea. © Laura James, 1994. Used with permission.

Presentational and Participatory Worship

Expanding upon Jennifer Lord's "Liturgy: The World Being Done"

Maren Haynes Marchesini

In her article for this issue, the Rev. Dr. Jennifer Lord interrogates the question of whether a church congregant is the proverbial *spectator* or *participant* in the Sunday morning worship event (see pp. 2, 5). Lord argues compellingly for valuing congregational participation in our practices of worship. Indeed, Lord interrogates the very word *worship*, a term that conveys "obedience, service, and bodily performances related to them; God or gods are the sole referent."¹ She advocates instead for the term *liturgy*, etymologically derived from a Latin term meant to describe civic works done by and for the people, to describe our humanly organized gatherings of sacred reverence.²

It's hard to argue that modern church gatherings are lacking in opportunities for participation. Compared to the passive experience of watching cable news, TikTok videos, or most live music events, in-person church is a place where we commit our bodies and voices to the collective acts of singing, prayer, and sacrament. It's a common practice for modern congregants to engage their voices and bodies in worship, even if these practices come in many forms. Online worship services may be witnessed more passively by congregants, but many churches still encourage participation by viewers through on-screen lyrics and prayers, a live chat that allows interaction throughout the service, and other modes.

In my own nearly twenty years' experience as a church music director in majority-white Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian (PCUSA), and Methodist (UMC) congregations, the role of the professional priestly class—inclusive of pastors, musicians, and lay leaders—has largely been to prepare *content* for

the worship event in the form of liturgies, readings, prayers, sermons, hymns, and special music. Unlike the audience for an opera in which audience participation is limited to quietly listening while seated and clapping at appropriate times, congregation members *do* actively participate by standing, sitting, reading, singing, walking, touching baptismal water, and consuming communion elements. We also hope, as Lord names, that congregants will focus their sincere intention toward these activities, such that they *mean* the words they say and sing.

But some churches are comparatively *much* more participatory. Consider charismatic Pentecostal and Baptist congregations, for example. Portions of worship may be structured around readings, sermons, and hymns in similar ways described above. But they also often include expansive time for intercessory prayer and movements of the Holy Spirit in which the whole congregation is open to embodied spirituality. The role of the priest, worship leaders, and worship planners is to prepare the *container* for the work of the Spirit to move and speak through the community.

Participatory and Presentational Music-Making

As a PhD ethnomusicologist, I've studied music traditions from all over the world, with varied participatory practices. For example, I played in a Javanese gamelan ensemble, where our performances were marked by clear audience-performer divisions reinforced by physical distance, elevated stages, lighting, uniform dress, and so on. I also used to attend weekly Mexican *son jarocho* gatherings to

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informally sing, play, and dance together, with no spectating audience present.

My interdisciplinary academic training includes lenses from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and critical theory. I am interested in bringing these lenses to bear on our habits and rituals of congregational life—whether we call them *worship* or *liturgy*—to ask, *what's really going on here?* How do our congregational gatherings train our bodies and form our normative values pertinent to human agency, community formation, and power?

In his book *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino differentiates between these as *presentational* and *participatory* modes of musical performance. Turino defines *presentational performances* as those in which “one group of people, the artists, prepare and provide music for another group, the audience, who do not participate in making the music or dancing.”³ An extreme example of a presentational performance is a modern symphony orchestra concert, in which an audience member's singing or spontaneous dancing would likely provoke their ejection from the event. But it also aptly describes marching band halftime performances, indie rock concerts, K-Pop stadium shows, and much else.

By contrast, *participatory performance* is one “in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles,” like the *son jarocho* event I described above, as well as Puerto Rican *bomba* gatherings, traditional Venda (South African) coming-of-age rites, and much else.⁴ In these participatory music-making events, “the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role.”

In attempting to apply this presentational-participatory framework to the wide spectrum of different musical events—rock concerts, karaoke, steelpan competitions, campfire sing-alongs, singer-songwriter rounds, hip-hop shows, and so on—it becomes immediately apparent that few musical events fall neatly into one category or the other. Indeed, presentational and participatory modes of performance are not a binary either-or, but a continuum. Some events even oscillate between one decisive mode and the other, like when a symphony's holiday show ends with an audience sing-along, or when a Puerto Rican *bomba* group performs onstage at a folklore society gathering.

Performance or Worship?

I find Turino's presentational-participatory continuum useful when thinking about congregational worship, as well. However, I acknowledge that applying a lens from musical performances to our worship might be a difficult bridge to cross for some because “performance” has become a dirty word within worship settings that suggests that our egos are involved, and looking good or sounding impressive has become more important than our praise and worship of God. How many times have church leaders reminded us “it's worship, not a performance!” Church music scholar Monique Ingalls encountered this critique when writing about church music performance, and she began writing about “performance” with a strikethrough—~~performance~~—which she termed “performance under erasure.”⁵

Ingalls's argument is that church music and worship leaders engage in performance, even if we would rather call it something other than “performance.” However, Ingalls understands the term in a specific way, as defined by performance theory scholars like Richard Schechner.⁶ Within performance theory, *performance* encompasses anything that people *do* to create and communicate shared meaning and values.⁷ This includes modes of speech, bodily postures, emotional expressions, styles of dress, arrangements of time and space, elevation of sacred objects or texts, formations of relationship, and so on *ad infinitum*. Marcell Silva Steuernagel's 2021 book, *Church Music through the Lens of Performance*, connects the dots between definitions of *performance* and *ritual*, as defined by theorists like Catherine Bell and Ronald Grimes, showing that what we call *ritual* and *performance* are quite interrelated.⁸ Worship, like music, is a multivalent ritual performance (or, if you prefer, ~~performance~~) that communicates a complex set of preferential values, both explicit and implicit, through meaning-laden symbols. So, in what ways are our worship services variously *participatory* and *presentational*, and what implicit values are communicated therein?

The Politics of Presentational and Participatory Worship

Drawing out Turino's *presentational* and *participatory* categories further, it becomes evident that these modes emphasize vastly different social values.

Presentational performances emphasize individual virtuosity, mastery, and expertise. Emphasis is put on the authority of experts. In music, expert musicians focus on creating pleasing sounds for the enjoyment of a captive audience; indeed, performers with highly divergent training and experience rarely perform onstage together. Because the experts are often adept players who can memorize complex parts or read music off a page, musical compositions can have quite a lot of intensive variation—shifting time or key signatures, complicated forms, and little-to-no repetition. Further, the music often tends toward closed, scripted forms, like a piece of written music played correctly note-by-note, a band's song that is played the same way every time, or a jazz ensemble's structured chord changes that underscore a solo. The beginnings and endings of musical pieces and programmatic events are also often organized and apparent.⁹

Highly presentational worship services value and emphasize expertise, as well. In the Lutheran tradition, for instance, those without requisite training and authority are not customarily allowed to preach or preside over rites like communion.

Highly presentational worship services value and emphasize expertise, as well. In the Lutheran tradition, for instance, those without requisite training and authority are not customarily allowed to preach or preside over rites like communion. The printed book of liturgy has many opportunities for embodied congregational participation through responsive readings, hymn singing, sitting and standing, and imbibing communion elements. But seldom does participation include spontaneous offerings by congregation members. Instead, participation is limited to the scripted words, melodies, and choreography predetermined by experts.

Consider, too, how other elements, like *space*, *dress*, *literacy*, and *time*, function to elevate—sometimes literally—people in authority. The chancel area is often elevated, and the preacher's pulpit is raised even higher, so the congregation must look *up* to see them. Religious authorities often wear *vestments*, distinctive clothes that mark their status. Participation by the congregation is often

dependent on the ability to *read* that which someone else has written, whether it's words from a page, musical notation, or both. Further, sacred time is highly structured, and spontaneous congregational participation may be considered a disruption or distortion, interrupting sacred time—or causing the service to go over the appointed hour.

Is emphasizing expertise an *evil*? Certainly not. The pastoral work of teaching and shepherding disciples is a serious one that benefits from training and preparation. Sound biblical exegesis relies on a thorough knowledge of the diverse languages, cultures, and contexts that birthed our sacred texts and interpretations. The task of forming and sustaining a spiritual community also requires capable leaders who understand how to shepherd a congregation through the joys and hardships of life together. A good pastor not only must be a good teacher, but must manage conflict, understand individual and collective needs, inspire commitment, act in kindness and grace, and draw boundaries that keep people safe—not to mention adeptly manage money, facilities, staff, and much else.

But are churches' presentational proclivities emphasizing *authoritative* values, in which expertise conveys a responsibility to nurture people's spiritual growth and health, trusting God to work and speak in the hearts and lives of the people? Or do we emphasize *authoritarian* values, which implicitly distrust people's experiences of God and the holy, demanding obedience rather than co-creation? When the people's actions are only considered trustworthy when uttered verbatim from a received script, and in which no critical thinking, questioning, dialogic interpretation, or meditative musings are considered worthy of collective worship, what does this teach people about their relationship with God? In an age of rising global authoritarianism, and where 72 percent of American Protestant Christians voted for an aspiring authoritarian candidate, we ought to ask ourselves, "Where did our people learn that authoritarian control is godly?"

By contrast, participatory music—and worship—is primarily concerned with the involvement of the maximum number of participants. A successful gathering has a role for everyone. With no audience to listen to the resultant sound, participatory music emphasizes the experience of being together and *doing* the music-making. Participatory music tends to have varied roles for novices and experts. Novices, with fewer musical skills, may repeat the same few

chords over and over, sing a repeated response, or beat a steady rhythm. The sound is often marked by *heterophonic density*, which is the thick texture that results from people playing a little bit out of time or out of tune with one another, but generally together. It's usually quite difficult to pick out an individual voice or instrument from the texture.¹⁰ Experts, though, may add variation through solos or improvisation. But an expert's added flourish is for the player's own experience of fun and challenge in the group dynamic, or "flow" in the words of educational psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, not chiefly to showcase their technical prowess.¹¹

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Participatory musical events often have an improvisational ethos, ranging from the song list to the length of each tune, to the length of the entire gathering. When the beginnings and endings of songs are indefinite, Turino describes them as "feathered." This feature can be found in Celtic jam sessions where anyone in the circle may call a tune and a song may start out with one or two people playing, while others pick it up as it goes along. Usually, however, participatory music-making events draw from shared or traditional canons of songs that most everyone knows—rarely are new songs written or introduced into these contexts. Such collectivist events emphasize *social synchrony*—attention to, and interaction with, others. The events are highly attuned to the collective interests and energies of the gathered community.

What is the cognate to a participatory worship gathering? Consider the Pentecostal worship described in the opening paragraph, where congregants' experiences are so central, time and space bends to respond to the spontaneity that arises. For instance, if one person is "caught" by the Spirit, others gather around to support and encourage this moment of ecstatic spiritual in-dwelling, encouraging the person's body to be overcome by the Spirit, and listening for a prophetic word. Congregation members move from their seats, encircling the person. The pastor, too, walks down from the pulpit to pray over them, while

the organist improvises along with their gestures and words in a kind of responsorial dance. With many people praying audibly, the same *heterophonic density* can be heard in the sonic texture. And this kind of gathering may last a long time—indeed, I've experienced charismatic church services that extend for three or four hours.

Participatory worship can, of course, take many forms. One example might be an All Saints service with open time in the middle for people to light candles, bring forward pictures of loved ones, and speak a few words aloud while music plays gently in the background. Another might look like a sermon with time for meditative writing or even sharing with neighbors. Another might be weekly worship that begins with a long-form piece of repetitive music with Orff instruments borrowed from an elementary school available to play—and no wrong notes (because those keys have been removed—or because we tolerate "wrong notes" as part of *heterophonic density*). Our congregation has done all of these and much more, and we have grown resilient in our experimentation, knowing that sometimes participation leads to flourishing—and sometimes we retool and try something else.

If our congregational worship tends to emphasize presentational modes, introducing participatory worship practices may take time. Hosting workshops for congregation members to write parts of a written liturgy, prayers for the week, or even write new melodies for worship may open new creative possibilities. An expanded Prayers of the People, where individuals may raise up prayer requests may add time to the service—but also is a practice of *multivocality*, uplifting many different voices in all their diversities.

In any case, the key questions I seek to answer in shepherding our congregation toward a blend of presentational and participatory worship modes are "am I involving the maximum number of people?" and "am I allowing people to co-create worship in various ways?" Participatory worship teaches us how to live together in a community of faith, a dialogic call-and-response to the initiation of God in all our hearts and lives.

Notes

1. Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 3.

2. An adaptation of John Blacking's definition of music as *humanly-organized sound*, outlined in *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973).
3. Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.
4. Turino, *Music as Social Life*.
5. Monique Marie Ingalls, "Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania), 202.
6. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, media ed. Sara Brady, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013).
7. Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy," in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
8. Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music through the Lens of Performance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021); Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
9. Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 59.
10. Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 59.
11. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990).



Psalms 100. © Laura James, 2010. Used with permission.

Liturgy: Nurturing the Sacramental Imagination

Christopher Q. James

I grew up fishing every summer with my family. We would travel to south central Missouri to fish for rainbow trout in the valley of the Ozark Mountains. We skipped a few years when I lived farther away in seminary and then as my wife and I were starting our family. When my son was about five years old, my father and I took him on his first fishing trip. It was just a day trip a couple hours away, but we still fished for rainbow trout. Within a year or two, we traveled farther and spent more days fishing in some of those same valleys in south central Missouri (see p. 2 of this issue).

One Christmas, while my son was still young, we gave my father a framed picture collage of my son's first fishing trip with his grandfather. It comprised several photos of my father and my son along the bank of the stream, the elder teaching the younger the art of the craft. And there was a photo of all three of us, with our stringers full of our catch. Underneath the photos was a quote by Henry David Thoreau: "Many men [sic] go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after." My parents are both gone now, yet we continue to cast our lines remembering all they taught us.

What does any of this have to do with worship and liturgy, the "work of the people"? Jennifer Lord's feature article in this issue raises (and answers) many good questions about worship and liturgy. She rightly identifies resistance some have toward the term *liturgy* as connoting worship that is "rigid," "absolutist," and composed of "prayers and rites that have been prepared and passed along and upheld by those in power." Lord points out that, for some, liturgy "seems . . . synonymous with a formalized and repeated ceremony that is rote," that merely preserves the past rather than responding to the present, not leaving space for the Holy Spirit to

surprise us, and perpetuating a "misuse or even abuse of power" (see p. 4). While a fair critique, perhaps Lord would agree that this objection toward *liturgy* represents a narrow and extreme understanding of the term, gained maybe through a poor experience of church, in general, or of a liturgy carelessly and thoughtlessly enacted.

We are formed and shaped by our experiences, conditioned by our nationality, race, class, gender, privilege (or lack thereof), and more. While the terms *worship* and *liturgy* are often and understandably used interchangeably, there are distinctions. Generally speaking, worship is the act of assigning (ultimate) value and allegiance to someone or something. The Directory for Worship of my faith tradition, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), begins with this sentence: "Worship gives all glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving to the holy, triune God."¹ Perhaps it may be helpful to think of the distinction this way: worship is what we do; liturgy is how we do it, and liturgies can (and should) vary widely. One of the values of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition is the holding together of form and freedom in worship. That is to say, what we do (worship) takes a certain shape, but how we do it (liturgy) changes from one congregation to another and even from one Sunday to another in the same congregation.

In the Reformed tradition, worship (what we do) consists of Gathering, Word, Eucharist, and Sending. Eucharist happens in Presbyterian congregations every week in terms of the meaning of the word, "giving thanks," yet still a great minority give thanksgiving weekly in the form of sharing of the Lord's Supper. This is all a form of worship in which congregations gather together, receive God's word, respond in thanksgiving, and go back out into the world. Yet there is great freedom in how this happens.

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Just as Lord shares an experience that led her to reflect more deeply on her understanding and leading of worship, I too was prompted to consider the meaning of worship, its liturgical elements, and the *telos* to which it all points.

I grew up on the worship of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition in the latter part of the twentieth century in a large, old, historic church with wooden pews facing forward in rows affixed to the floor. In many ways, the worship that nurtured my faith growing up could be considered what some have pejoratively referred to as “a talking head up front,” with lots of words and little to no movement. Those words may have been both spoken *and* sung, but still only words. On the first Sunday of every other month, we celebrated communion, but even then we stayed in our seats, and the elements were brought to us. Lots of words and no movement except to stand for hymns. The thrust was toward the cognitive and appealed to the intellect. I do not mean to be overly critical. The worship of my growing up was normative for the mainline Presbyterian/Reformed tradition at that time, and my faith was certainly nurtured by it. However, it was not until I began planning and leading worship regularly that I started asking questions about how the elements of worship exist together and what larger purpose they strive to achieve.

The act of worship teaches, instructs, forms, and shapes faith over time, so the liturgy of a congregation at worship will either help or hinder that catechesis.

That led to the realization that worship itself is catechetical. The act of worship teaches, instructs, forms, and shapes faith over time, so the liturgy of a congregation at worship will either help or hinder that catechesis. Much ink has been spilled over arguing whether “traditional” or “contemporary” forms of worship are better or preferred. But that argument begs the question: Better in what way and for whom? To what end? And I think of Thoreau: “Many . . . go fishing all their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.” Or in this case, many experiment with different styles of worship without realizing that it is not style they are after.

Liturgy, the *how* of worship, the nuts and bolts that make worship what it is to be, is not an end

in itself, but rather aims for something beyond itself. That something is the holy triune God who created the cosmos, became incarnate in Jesus the Christ, who lived and died and lives again among us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. All liturgy should not only point to that but help us to experience it here and now.

Referencing Kierkegaard's metaphor of worship as theater, Lord rightly argues that God is not merely the “audience” of our worship but rather “God, the Holy Trinity in the perichoretic sense of *eternal dance around Glory*, is onstage with us all, in us, among us, through us, leading us, enticing us, summoning us; the centripetally and centrifugally acting Holy One is with us” (emphasis hers, see p. 2 this issue). I would take this a step further to suggest that, in our worship, God is not merely onstage with us worshipers, but that through the liturgy, we participate in God.² The best liturgy enables worshipers to see, know, experience, and be a part of what God is doing in and for all of creation.

For this reason, a focus on the style of worship is beside the point. Good liturgy can be traditional or contemporary. It can include choirs or bands. It can use scripted, preprinted prayers, or extemporaneous ones. The point is not the style of worship but the content. If liturgy is not merely “the work of the people,” as Lord's etymological study reveals, but even more “the work of the people for the people,” a benefaction for the public good, and if liturgy is meant to point beyond itself and lead worshipers to participate in the work and being of the triune God, then what is the content of that worship?

Most certainly, the content of the liturgy includes all the things we typically think of when we think of worship: prayers of various sorts (adoration, confession, illumination, thanksgiving, praise, lament); music, both vocal and instrumental; and readings from the common faith story Christians share as found in the Bible. But more. Liturgy—the work of the people for the people—is evangelistic, calling worshipers over and over again to remember the story of God's salvation history and to rehearse it together whenever they gather. No one is a “master Christian.” No one has fully and finally arrived at faith with no need to go further or learn more. We are always in the process of becoming, and good liturgy is always in service to leading worshipers more fully into the heart of God's work in the world. As Martin Luther is often quoted: “A Christian is one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.”

To this end, Lutheran liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop argues that the liturgy of our worship should make the center strong and open, the circle and the symbols large, the words of Christ clear, and the periphery permeable.³ Whether we have been Christians for a hundred years or just considering the possibility, the liturgy continues to invite us to receive (or remember) the waters that wash and welcome us and then lead us to the Table to feed on God's life and love so all can then go to share that life and love with the world. Liturgy done well always recalls two features of who we are as a part of God's salvation history: we are washed (baptism) and we are fed (Lord's Supper). Lathrop writes: "Numbering the sacraments, counting them as discrete phenomena can mislead us here. We may do better by considering a sacramental singleness: the bath leads to the meal; the meal and the sending to the poor recall the bath."⁴ Liturgy that intentionally nurtures the sacramental imagination, providing opportunities to actively remember (anamnesis), ushers us most profoundly into the "eternal dance around Glory," as Lord calls it.

So much of what the liturgy does is care for symbols and use them wisely because liturgy needs more than just words to bring us to God. Just as God hollows the materiality of creation by becoming incarnate in Jesus, so we too take the stuff of earth to rehearse in our assembly the story of salvation: water, word, bread and wine. Lathrop calls these "holy things,"⁵ and these are all engaged in service of the assembly, accompanied by ritual movements and gestures that help make worship strong, open, large, and permeable, so that all people are welcome, washed, and fed. None of this is new or original to us, nor should we think we have to make it up. We simply receive with gratitude what has been handed down to us and live it out in our own time and place. Embracing a liturgy that is, at its heart, sacramental, is a matter of claiming the larger Christian tradition that has always been available to us. Of course, some interpretive work may be needed to live that out in one's own particular location and context, but novelty is not necessary. Of course, presiders and other leaders of worship need remember that liturgy is not a script, but a lived reality in which we participate in God. As I have written elsewhere:

Educators know that the real curriculum is not the lesson plan for the day, but what actually happens in the classroom, the interaction between teacher and student. Musicians know that music is not the score, but what actually happens on stage when notes emerge from instruments and blend together as one. Liturgists know that worship is not found in a book or worship bulletin handed out at the church door, but rather is what actually happens in the sanctuary when thanks and praise emerge from the heart and mind and blend together in holy awe of the triune God.⁶

The way presiders and other worship leaders enact the liturgy in their words and gestures all contribute to the gathered assembly's experience of the liturgy. Leading the liturgy with our words and movement is a matter of careful interpretation and communication.

The congregation I pastor gathers every week, both literally and figuratively, around the baptismal font. Water is poured visibly and audibly in welcome, forgiveness, blessing, and sending. Every week for the past eighteen years, this congregation comes to the Lord's Table to share the feast of the risen Christ. Since doing so, our liturgy is now a much more sensory-rich experience as we not only *hear* the Word of God in Scripture and sermon but also *see* the Table set for a Holy Meal, *smell* the freshness and fragrance of the bread and wine, *feel* their texture, and *taste* the goodness of the Lord. The Word is not only spoken but also embodied as Christ is made even more fully known in the breaking of the bread. We receive Christ in the meal as pure gift and are then sent to serve the world God so loves. Indeed, Word and Sacrament together have further awakened us to the real presence of Christ among us. Sharing this meal as a part of our weekly worship draws us nearer to the heart of God and sends us out to share the heart of God with our community.

This sacramentally rich liturgy has significant implications for mission, as well. We are welcomed and fed, then sent to welcome and feed others. Disciples are formed by such liturgical catechesis. After several years of celebrating the Lord's Supper weekly, members of my congregation felt called to establish a self-serve food pantry on our church property. This food pantry is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. No questions are

asked, and the only qualification needed to receive food is to be hungry. We receive donations of food and finances from members of the church and community. Church members stock the food pantry every day of the week to feed those in our neighborhood and surrounding community. Relationships form, stories are shared, and people are cared for.

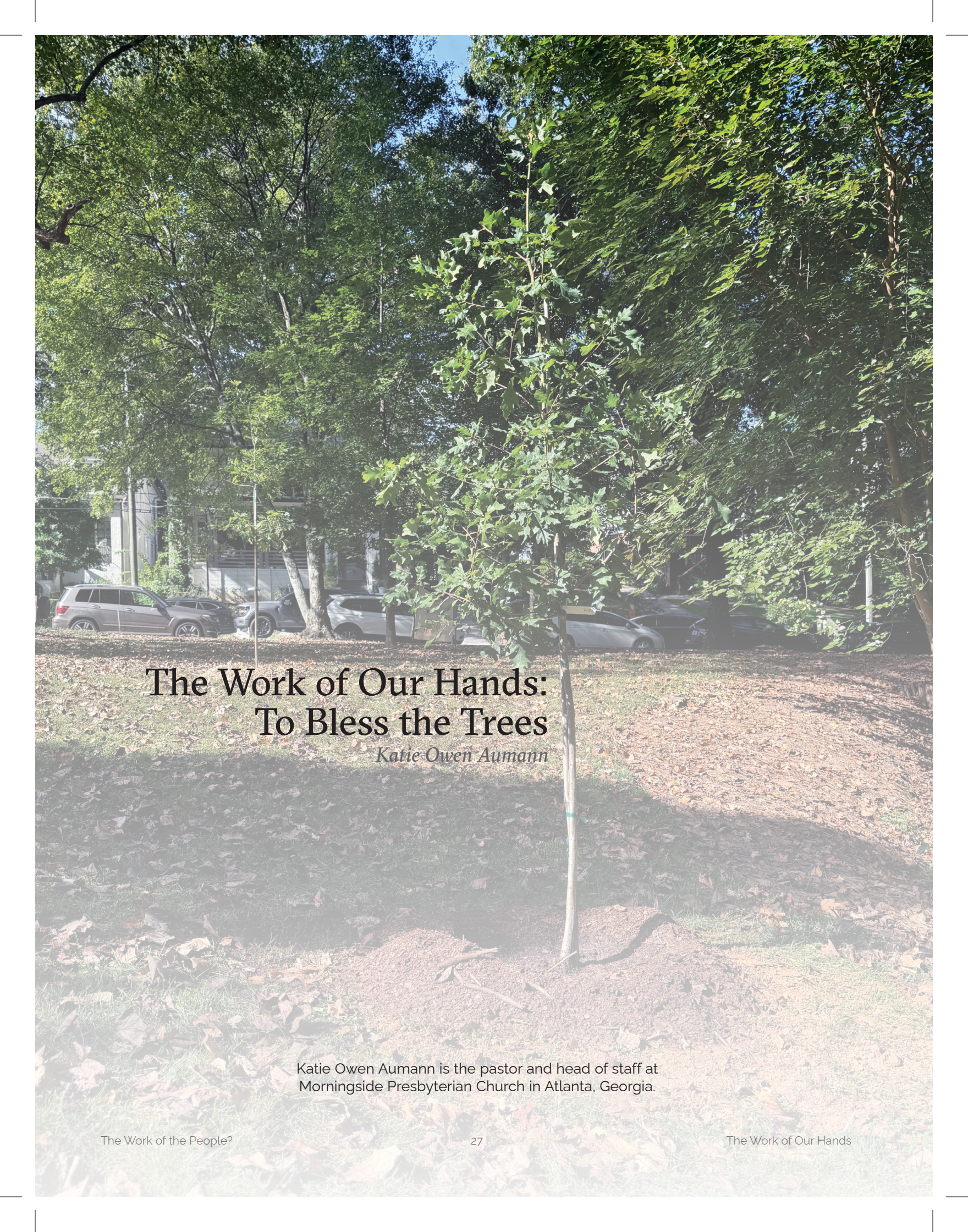
This, too, is work of the people for the people. The ministry of the food pantry flows out of the liturgy of our worship. It is, as Lord quotes Byron Anderson and Aidan Kavanagh, respectively, “humanity at full stretch before God,” and “doing the world the way the world was meant to be done,” taking worship out into the world. Indeed, through it all, we learn the liturgy by heart so that we no longer have to look at our feet or count our steps but are instead free simply to participate in God for the wholeness of all.

Notes

1. Directory for Worship, *Book of Order*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), W-1.01.
2. Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).
3. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 132ff.
4. Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 62.
5. Lathrop, *Holy Things*.
6. Christopher Q. James, “On Liturgy: Getting Got by the Triune God,” *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, & the Arts*, 53.3 (Louisville, KY: Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): 56.



And seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up into a mountain. And He opened His mouth, and taught them, saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.



The Work of Our Hands: To Bless the Trees

Katie Owen Aumann

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A Blessing upon Planting of Trees

God our Creator,
Bless the earth below our feet,
that it will provide nourishment and stability for the trees.
Bless these trees with deep roots and strong
branches, that they may live far beyond our lifetimes.
Bless those who will find shade and shelter in these trees,
people, birds, animals, and all God's creatures.
Bless this church, the neighborhood, and the city,
called to work together to be stewards of creation.
Bless each of us as we go about the work of planting.
Make us partners with you, O God,
in tending and celebrating this world,
that it may be rooted and grounded in love.





I've been asked to offer blessings in a lot of different settings throughout my years as a pastor. I've blessed children, pets, dinner tables, new homes, backpacks, marriages, and burials. I've been asked at the last minute to say the blessing at a wedding reception so many times that I keep a prayer saved in my phone to pull out at a moment's notice. But I had never blessed a tree, until this year.

As my congregation prepared to celebrate our church's centennial, we planned and prayed and plotted how we would mark this particular moment in the life of the church. The committee centered on Ephesians 3:16–17 as a galvanizing Scripture passage for the occasion:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

The phrase “rooted and grounded” stuck out to many in light of the beautiful land on which the church was built. The church's creation care team had spent months tending the property in preparation to certify a portion of the property as a bird sanctuary. They removed non-native species and cleared brush in order that it would be a sanctuary, a place of







praise, for God's winged creatures. Knowing this was in the works, the centennial planning team said, "What if we plant a tree as part of our centennial celebrations? It's a reminder that God's natural sanctuary was here before the church was built, and we hope God will be praised through us and through creation for hundreds of years to come."

Next came the logistics. We budgeted to plant one tree. Upon reaching out to a local nonprofit that helps with re-greening across the city, Trees Atlanta responded, "How about forty?!" They offered to pay for all the trees if we could provide the land, a place for the trees to be rooted and grounded in love. There was something biblically significant about planting forty trees in the wilderness on our church property,

a reminder that God shows up in the wilderness with blessings and provision we couldn't imagine.

God had provided this unexpected blessing of trees. Now we had to provide the labor. Planting one tree is a manageable task for a few folk, but forty required a community-wide effort. We put out a sign-up at the church, as did Trees Atlanta, and we were anticipating a few dozen people, which felt like a mammoth task. But as we gathered on a fall Saturday morning, nearly seventy-five people showed up. Half were church members ranging in age from two to over eighty, but the other half were new friends from across the city—a Chinese cultural youth group, a young adult new to the city looking for a way to serve and meet friends, a few folk who



joined us after passing by the local farmer's market in our church parking lot. The city arborist showed up alongside the experts from Trees Atlanta. The group of volunteers was as diverse in age, race, and religion as the city these trees would soon call home.

We gathered in our church's memorial garden before we would scatter in small groups across the property to plant forty trees together. We weren't there for a worship service, but being together in that outdoor space felt worshipful. We were enacting what our congregation does inside our sanctuary every Sunday—gathering as God's people to worship so that we could be scattered out into the world to serve. At the same time, most of the volunteers in attendance didn't sign up planning to hear about

Jesus or do anything particularly “churchy.” Our property was, to them, simply a place to plant a tree. After instructions from the experts at Trees Atlanta about how to plant, they handed the floor to me to offer a welcome and a blessing.

How do I take this interfaith, intercultural community event happening on church property and transform it from a secular volunteer opportunity into a sacred moment?

How do I offer a spoken liturgical moment that mirrors the “work of the people” we were about to do together?

After offering a brief word of welcome, I asked that we pause for a blessing. There are lots of ways to define a blessing. In this setting, a blessing was



a way to pause with intention to acknowledge the importance and value of what we were about to do together, and to invite God, in whatever form we understand the divine, to offer protection and care for us, for the work before us, and for the beneficiaries of our work. As I offered the blessing, I could hear the birds sing in the trees above us, joining us in *their* natural sanctuary that we were called to plant and tend.

As Rev. Dr. Lord offered in her reflection on liturgy (see p. 5), this blessing gave language, however brief, not just to the “work of the people” before us in planting trees but to the “public work” that would benefit all those who passed through this place. It was, in her words, “a service act done by . . . a few for the good of the many.” Spoken liturgy in that moment served to set the tone for the embodied work that

we would do together—shared across age, gender, religion, neighborhood—for the whole city’s benefit.

As I reflect on what it meant to bless these trees, I am struck by the way that the spoken blessing gave shape and set the tone for the work that we did together. If the blessing invited intention in our work, the blessing came alive in our actions. We were intentional about where we dug a hole for the tree to call home. We were purposeful in how we broke up the root ball and prepared the tree to thrive. We gave our trees names and thought about who might find shade under Leafy Lawrence and Mellow Yellow. And above all, we connected with each other in a way that was ordinary and yet sacred. In doing so, the words of blessing enacted by the community in our work together surely gave praise and glory to God.

All You Sea Monsters: Liturgy for All Creation

abby mohaupt

Others, experts in worship and liturgy, explore how liturgy (the order of worship) is the work of the people. Some of these experts have sought to make sure that the people who are at the heart of liturgical work are as diverse as possible.¹ As an eco-theologian, I return again and again to the words of Genesis 1:1 (and following) as a starting point for liturgy and a guide for faith—as a way to map whose work it is to create and be part of liturgy. There in the text, we read that “in the beginning, God made the earth and the heavens.”² God started with the earth. And then, in Genesis 2, God took the topsoil—“the healthiest, hardiest, best, and darkest soil”³—and made a human. Then God breathed God’s own breath into that first human. The human came to life! And then, because that human needed a home and a task, God set the human down in a garden, with other plants and animals made from the same topsoil. Those plants and animals were the first human’s family, because they all came from the topsoil—and then God told the first human to farm and care for the garden.⁴

I imagine God looked at that fresh-eyed, brand-new human and said, “Make it your home. Make everything your family. Love it with your whole self, because you are made of the same stuff of the plants and animals around you.” And that was the first task of our first ancestor: love the earth and care for creation—creation who is our very family.

In the context of those beginning stories, liturgy enacts praise to God, for the benefit of and alongside all creation. While I’m going to focus here on how we talk about all creation in terms of how to include non-people, that conversation also has to be in connection to making sure that all people, no matter the kind of people, are welcomed into the community

of God, into the congregations that love and serve God. Liturgy is the work of *all* creation, in creation’s beautiful diversity.⁵ In this article, I mean to tell the story of how a congregation and I brought creation into the liturgy, how liturgical practice can recognize nonhuman participants in worship, and how we might faithfully break down the human/nonhuman dichotomy.⁶ In doing so, we are stretched to imagine how we might praise God with and in all creation.

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There we were in our little chapel. “That didn’t really work, did it?” The words came out of my mouth as we finished the prayer of confession and set our rocks aside. “Not really,” said a member of the congregation, with more whimsy than critique. This conversation became part of the liturgy of that particular day in worship. My second ordained call was to serve Puente de la Costa Sur, a nonprofit that connects and supports farmworkers and their families on the South Coast of California, in Pescadero, about an hour south of San Francisco. My role in the organization was to connect faith communities nearby to the mission and to support the well-being of staff and participants, to invite faith communities into just action. I also became one of the faith leaders who rotated through the community church that started Puente.

When all the pews were filled, about fifteen people were in that chapel. This group was used to innovation and trying things out. The community was up for anything; each faith leader brought their own idiosyncrasies. And so, the liturgy was the work of an open-hearted, flexible group of people. Whenever I came, then, I felt free to try out something creative. Sometimes I was the musician as well as preacher and celebrant. Sometimes we

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set up prayer stations as a response to the sermon or text. Sometimes the sermon was a conversation.

The gift of this community meant that I would stretch myself as a worship planner. How many of the five senses could we engage? What would count as readings? And music? How many elements of creation could we evoke? And so, one August I thought: Let's see if we can bring creation into worship with us.

We based this work on an ongoing reading and enactment of Psalm 148. In the text, all creation is called into a liturgy of praise, a chorus that includes all living and nonliving beings, all that is created in the world. The psalm says:

- 1 Praise the Lord from heaven!
Praise God on the heights! . . .
- 3 Sun and moon, praise God!
All of you bright stars, praise God!
- 4 You highest heaven, praise God!
Do the same, you waters that are above
the sky! . . .
- 7 Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all you ocean
depths!
- 8 Do the same, fire and hail, snow and smoke,
stormy wind that does what God says!
- 9 Do the same, you mountains, every single
hill, fruit trees, and every single cedar!
- 10 Do the same, you animals—wild or tame—
you creatures that creep along and you
birds that fly!
- 11 Do the same, you kings of the earth and
every single person, you princes and
every single ruler on earth!
- 12 Do the same, you young men—young
women too!—you who are old together
with you who are young! (Common
English Bible)

As I've noted above, I have struggled as a worship planner to think about liturgy as the work of the people. Who gets to decide who we mean by "people"? Who counts? Which people? And, with a biblical example like Psalm 148, how can we possibly say that the worship is *just* the work of the *people*?⁷

The text invites us to stretch into who is part of liturgy. Not just "every single person" but the stars, waters, elements, animals—wild or tame—and even

the sea monsters. I like to imagine that the writer of Psalm 148 thought they couldn't put a limit on who or what could praise God, so they threw in sea monsters as a catch-all for all that was yet to be discovered. Likewise, theologian D. Cameron Murchison writes that all creation is summoned to praise God and that somehow God is bigger than whatever parts of creation we can list.⁸ He writes that "the overarching cosmological climate of Psalm 148 is that the purpose of all that exists, known and unknown, seen and unseen, is to give adoration and praise to God."⁹

That spirit of stretching spurred me on in the liturgy-that-didn't-quite work. We came together in worship by singing and then creating a windstorm with our voices and hands. In the prayer of confession, we banged rocks against the pews as we lamented how the world has been cracked open with and in pain and sin. We lit candles as we heard God's forgiveness and passed the peace. Wind, earth, fire alongside our human bodies in silent reflection and prayer, interpersonal conversation and connection, movement of bodies in sitting, standing, and passing the peace.¹⁰ Much like what Reverend Jennifer L. Lord says in the first article of this journal issue, "to worship God was an act of total commitment, an *all-in* declaration."

But it didn't quite work. We did our best, as human parts of the choir, to bring other parts of creation into worship. Where we failed, I think, was to take seriously where creation is and who humanity is in it. We brought creation into the liturgy, but we were still insisting that we humans were setting the stage and that we must control the narrative. We were still separating ourselves from the rest of creation and seeing creation as "other."

In his exegetical commentary of Psalm 148 in *Feasting on the Word*, J. Clinton McCann Jr. notes that there is no mention of dominion in this text. And, unlike in the creation stories, there is no division that sets humans apart from the rest of creation.¹¹ This is at odds with what we are used to, perhaps. Many of us have grown up in a culture that has divided the world and spirit. This division sees the world not through the lens of our original and foundational creation story—where we and all that exists are made from earth and spirit—and instead this division says the world is on one side of the equation and spirit is on the other side with a great big gap between the two.¹²

What's more, this division has historically put God on the side of spirit only, and wherever God goes in this division, there goes power too. People who have power put people of color, women, people who are poor, people who are LGBTQ on the side of the world and say that they do not matter. And we put men and whiteness and money on the side of spirit and say that this is what matters in the world.

But what the Genesis texts of our creation tells us is that earth and spirit are bound up together in God's making of all things, and Psalm 148 reminds us that we belong in the same choir as all parts of creation. There is no division. And so, matter—the earth—matters as much as spirit to bring all that is into the world. The earth matters, so women matter. The earth matters, so Black lives matter. The earth matters, so people who are LGBTQ matter. The earth matters, so people who are poor matter. Everyone and everything is made up of God's breath and the topsoil—everything and everyone matters. It means when we talk about a big inclusive love from God—we really are saying that all kinds of life matter.

What is liturgy? So often the answer is “the work of the people in worship,” and I've argued here already that we have to see this as the work of *all creation*, not just people.

What is liturgy? So often the answer is “the work of the people in worship,” and I've argued here already that we have to see this as the work of *all creation*, not just people. But there's another binary implicit here, one that Psalm 148 and the Genesis creation stories demand that we reject in worship. If all creation is called to praise God, wherever creation exists is an opportunity to worship.

The Rev. Colleen Earp, who is one of the directors at Massanetta Springs Camp and Conference Center, took on a practice during COVID to get to know her nonhuman neighbors. She says that she started the practice from a place of intellectual curiosity, which then connected her to spiritual practice. She says that

during the pandemic, I was one of the only people still going in-person to my work [at my previous camp]. It became a practice to walk through the pollinator habitat there every day, to see what I could notice. I didn't know the names of many of the wildflowers, so it became my pandemic hobby to learn them. Later in the pandemic, I shifted to chaplaincy, serving a children's hospital. Newborn babies' names weren't recorded in the charts, but posted at the bedside. I had to actually go visit the NICU and look for each baby to figure out their names, much like getting to know the wildflowers in the field. It made me appreciate getting to know my “neighbors” in a new way, which has extended to all of creation around me that I come across.¹³

To get to know the wildflowers by name would mean it would be possible to love them, to see them, to recognize them as other voices in the choir of creation. Such a practice—getting to know creation by name—is a little like what the writer of Psalm 148 is doing. Calling each part of the choir *by name* to praise the Creator. And, getting to know the other voices of the choir and going to be at the bedside of creation stretches us as part of the community of God. The author of Psalm 148 flings wide who is in the choir to praise God. Liturgy is thus the work of all creation.

But further still, our role as humans who are part of the “family of things”¹⁴ is to be open to what it might mean to join the rest of the choir where they are. To not just say from our sanctuaries, “Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all you ocean depths,” but to go to the oceans and praise God with the wild whales and the dolphins and crashing waves. To climb mountains and thank God for the striations and ecosystems, and every single cedar. To see the stars, and like my child, Juniper, say “Wow! The stars!” as she insists that all the grownups around her stop and tilt their heads back to take in the deep dark sky pinpricked with light from the cosmos, all the bright stars and highest heavens. If all creation is part of the liturgy, then all the world becomes a sacred place in which to praise God. Make everything your family. Love it with your whole self, because you are made of the same stuff of the plants and animals around you. And then praise God, all of you, wherever you are, no matter if you are human or sea monster.

A Liturgy by All Creation¹⁵

Singing Together

Come, All You People, UYAI MOSE, GTG 388

Opening Prayer

Cry out with joy to God, all the earth.

Worship God with gladness. Come into God's presence with singing!

Call to Worship: creating a windstorm

The leader starts with one of the body parts, and the community follows. The leader should start with number 1 and move through 2, 3, 4 and then back down through 3, 2, 1 and then hold silence.

1. Wind = rub hands together
2. Light Rain = snap fingers (or click your tongue if snapping is something you're still working on)
3. Heavy Rain = pat lap
4. Thunder/Lightning = stomp feet

Prayer of Confession: letting the earth quake

One: As we pray, let us beat our rocks against the pews and ground, letting the earth ache with us as we confess.

All: Let us pray.

One: "Life is split at the seams. No one knows the exact number of the dead. They were ours. They were yours and mine. Yet, we let them die. So, I will write a poem, and you will write a letter, and he will send some money, and she will say a prayer, but we will forget, as we have forgotten before. We closed our eyes, covered ourselves up, when this island without secrets, this island caught upside down, spread open by the great storm, went belly-up, exposing memories and guts. Disaster on disaster, mud on mud. Life is split at the seams."¹⁶

All: We pray all these things in confession.

Singing Together

Holy God, holy and mighty,
Evangelical Lutheran Worship 161

Forgiveness, Making Connections, and Passing the Peace: finding fire

One: As we remember how we are forgiven through Jesus, we light these candles.

All: Thanks be to God.

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

The community may pass the peace of Christ with hugs, handshakes, or other signs of connection.

First Reading: Psalm 148

Singing Together

Holy Spirit, Come to Us (Veni Sancte Spiritus), GTG 281

Second Reading: "When Love Is Unfashionable" by Alice Walker¹⁷

Sermon

Offering

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Thank you, God, for all these blessings.

Help us use these gifts to seek justice in the world, love our neighbors as ourselves, and walk with you in humility. Amen.

Prayers of All Creation

Together, we share the prayers of our hearts. Who do we know who is sick, lonely, hurting, or discerning? Then we will pray together in singing.

Singing Together

We Are Marching in the Light of God
(Siyahamba), GTG 853

Benediction

Let the winds blow
Let the healing rivers flow
Let justice roll like waters
And let the day begin when new life enters in
And let your kingdom come¹⁸

Notes

1. For example, in *Unmasking White Preaching: Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities in Homiletics*, editors Andrew Wymer and Lis Valle note that there is much to do in order to decenter whiteness, especially in homiletics which has a white, European bias. They argue for a more messy and beautiful exploration of homiletics and liturgies (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 5–6, 10. The God who digs into the topsoil in Genesis 2 models just how good and creative messy can be.
2. From the New Revised Standard Version. My own translation of the Hebrew of this text: “In the first phase of creating, God created the heavens and *this here earth*.” This translation emphasized that the (Priestly) writer of the creation story in Genesis 1 was trying to understand how the *particular* earth around them came to be. Thanks to G. Brooke Lester for support on this Hebrew translation. There are, of course, many different translations and re-tellings of the Genesis 1 story of our creation. See for example, the song “In the Beginning” by Matthew Black for a singing retelling that reminds us that we are made in the image of God (*A Little Closer*, Apple Music, 2024.)
3. This language comes from an unpublished draft of a children’s book by Theodore Hiebert, based on the Yahwist telling of creation in Genesis 2:4b–15.
4. In the Common English Bible, Hiebert translates “till and keep” as “farm and keep” to get at the Yahwist writer’s farmer connection to the earth around him. Some translations use the language of dominion, or having control, in here.
5. Just like ecosystems in nature are better when they are diverse, human ecosystems are more resilient and healthier when they have more diverse parts integrated into the whole.
6. Some of this text is adapted from a sermon preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church in McKinney, Texas, which in turn made an appearance in my dissertation, “Where Your Treasure Is: Orchestrating a Theological Social Movement on Climate Change, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and Divestment from Fossil Fuels.”
7. My colleague Andrew Wymer notes that we can’t make preaching or worship creation a single-issue activity if we seek to be justice-seeking. We are all wrapped into collective liberation together. If we take seriously that all creation is part of the choir, where might we worship God that would insist that people with power would see God? Isn’t this why activists for a variety of causes bring communion to the streets or why clergy wear their stoles and collars to protest?
8. D. Cameron Murchison, “Psalm 148 Theological Commentary,” *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 154.
9. Murchison, “Psalm 148,” 154.
10. The full liturgy is the second half of this article.
11. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “Psalm 148 Exegetical Commentary,” *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 155.
12. See also Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
13. Rev. Colleen Earp in conversation with author.
14. From the poem “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver.
15. First celebrated at Pescadero Community Church in Pescadero, CA, on August 13, 2017.
16. Michele Voltaire Marcelin in “Understanding Haiti’s Disaster through a Poet’s Eyes,” PBS News, last updated February 5, 2010, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/understanding-haitis-disaster-through-a-poets-eyes/>.
17. Alice Walker, “While Love Is Unfashionable,” in website entry titled “Wedding Ceremony: Marrying Good Men (from The Cushion in the Road), Spring 2013,” <https://alicewalkersgarden.com/2013/02/wedding-ceremony-marrying-good-men-from-the-cushion-in-the-road-spring-2013/>, accessed October 8, 2025.
18. “Prayers of the People” by Ben Johnson-Krase.



Phoebe. © Laura James, 2008. Used with permission.

Merging Churches, Merging Music

A Look at Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church,
Charlotte, North Carolina

Lori Archer Raible, Dareion Malone, and Fred P. Spano

Introduction

If your congregation were to close their doors and sell their land tomorrow, who would notice or care? Would the community in which your congregation is located feel a significant loss? Are there mission partners within your town or city who would suffer?

While the church continues to wrestle with an existential crisis of cultural relevance and power, rates of decline suggest that many congregations across the PC(USA) and other denominations will be closed sooner than later. Researchers like Ted Smith at Emory's Candler School of Theology agree that "consolidation, individualization and the general unraveling of religious institutions" threaten the very existence of the church as we know it.¹

Certainly, there is evidence across the PC(USA) to support these alarming declarations. The largest PC(USA) churches, with more than 500 members, represent 4.5 percent of the denomination's total congregations, and their membership represents 33 percent of the total. Meanwhile, 78 percent of our congregations have fewer than 150 members and represent less than 30 percent of PC(USA)'s membership.²

While the witness of many smaller congregations remains vital to the communities in which they are situated, more than one hundred PC(USA) congregations with a median membership of sixty-two dissolve each year. Overall, denominational membership declines at a steady rate of 5 percent each year. And every time a congregation closes their doors, the church loses not only its social standing and foothold within its local community,

but also the potential to witness the power of the gospel beyond its walls.³

Pre-Merger Context of Quail Hollow Presbyterian and Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian

Charlotte, North Carolina, is the third fastest growing city in the country, with projections for metro Charlotte indicating a 47 percent surge in population in just twenty years. Charlotte boasts both the second largest banking center and the second largest presbytery in the country! Yet it seems as if more and more church buildings are being replaced with bank branches. In cities like Charlotte, culture typically changes at a rate beyond a congregation's ability to respond.

While Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church is faithful and committed to the community, this had been part of their experience. A dedicated congregation of one hundred members, Quail Hollow is situated on a nine-acre campus on a bustling, diverse corridor in South Charlotte. Neighbors include four public schools, a large retirement community, apartment complexes housing many immigrant and refugee families, and existing neighborhoods of affluence. While Quail Hollow understood the potential for ministry surrounding them, their small congregation knew they needed to shift from surviving to thriving but lacked the capacity for such substantial change.

They were tenacious and trusted that when they were called by the Spirit to leap, closing their doors would not be their only choice. In fact, although Quail Hollow was feeling weary, they were determined to

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exhibit God's reign in the world in a new way. For more than five years, Quail Hollow discerned a way forward. As they navigated many a snare and toil, the congregation became more nimble, flexible, and willing to change. While caring interim pastors and supply preachers came and went, the congregation was sustained by their deep care for one another, and they came to rely on the consistency and creativity of Quail's dynamic music program.

Four miles up the road, I serve as the senior pastor of Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, nestled in the Charlotte neighborhood of Myers Park. For almost eighty-five years, Selwyn's identity and mission has been rooted in the sacrament of baptism and the promises we make to nurture children within and beyond our walls. Like Quail Hollow, Selwyn is close to several public schools. Selwyn's most significant mission partnerships are with schools and organizations supporting the well-being of children and their families, especially those who typically lack the resources needed to succeed. These programs include tutoring, after-school and summer enrichment programming, a food pantry, teacher support, and more.

While Selwyn isn't considered a "small" church (600 members and 150 children and youth), by Charlotte's standards we aren't big either. However, our congregation has grown by almost 20 percent in the last few years, and Selwyn's five-star, full-day child development center has a wait-list of more than 620 households. And yet, in the coming decades if churches like Selwyn hope to exist in cities like Charlotte, our identity must be clear, our vision bold, and our footholds strong within our community.

By learning and applying the principles of community organizing, The Black Mountain School of Theology (blackmountainschool.org) helped SAPC answer crucial questions that mobilized our congregation toward action and impact:

- Who have we been? Who are we now? Who do we hope to become?
- What makes us distinct as a congregation?
- Who are our neighbors and how can we know them?
- Who is suffering in our community and how can we help?
- Where is God calling us to go, and what is God calling us to do in the world?

Selwyn Avenue is an intergenerational community of faith, and we are intent on knowing one another and our neighbors in authentic and transformative ways. Like Quail Hollow, Selwyn is marked by a deep sense of hospitality and a love for high quality music and worship. While we remain committed to our work on behalf of children, we hold a deep hope to engage our mission work in a more just, sacrificial, and embodied way. In the spring of 2023, Selwyn Avenue adopted a bold vision for our future—our "North Star" vision. Specifically, Selwyn committed to *deeper and more transformative care for children and youth within early childhood development and youth mental health, especially those underserved as we seek to relationally engage our community within Charlotte.*

While we knew *what* we were called to do, we had no idea how we would do it! Selwyn Avenue is landlocked, our budget is lean, and in 2023 we were still recovering from a season of destabilization caused by the COVID pandemic. These barriers prevented us from imagining a way forward. God would need to shine a light on the path ahead if we were going to pursue something "big."

A few months after adopting our North Star vision, the staff at SAPC learned that Quail Hollow was in need of a leadership boost and some pastoral care. Because we already enjoyed several organic relationships between our congregations and staff, the clerk of the Quail Hollow Session, Jack Rand, and the senior pastor of Selwyn Avenue, Lori Raible, met for a cup of coffee. A loose partnership was formed. Parrish associates from Selwyn Avenue offered to provide pastoral care and worship leadership, I (Lori) met with Quail's session and their Presbytery Committee on Ministry liaison, and our two music directors, Dareion Malone (Quail Hollow) and Fred Spano (Selwyn Avenue) began to collaborate on a worship service with special music for the Advent season. We quickly realized our congregations had a lot in common. The synergies were obvious. Selwyn's capacity, energy, and vision were pulled into focus and grounded by Quail's fortitude and steady faithfulness. We needed each other, not out of our scarcity, but out of God's abundance and God's expectation for what it means to be the church. While our sessions entered a formal season of mutual discernment to consider a merger, every time our congregations gathered for combined worship, God's hope, God's promise, God's possibility, and God's call were magnified and celebrated by the

beauty of what happened when our choirs joined their voices as one.

In March of 2025, almost two years after we adopted our North Star vision, Quail Hollow and Selwyn Avenue merged. Today we are one congregation with 700 members, more than 150 children, and two campuses. Eventually, the nine-acre Quail campus will be redeveloped in partnership with other community and corporate organizations to become a community hub and multipurpose campus dedicated to the well-being of children and youth. While this vision seems bold and the campus redevelopment may take years, prioritizing our togetherness now orders our steps according to God's call. Growing together takes time and great intention. Because worship is the essential act of every congregation, our two choirs have the unique capacity to model what is possible when we embody and share a purpose.

In our first year as one congregation with two campuses, we are attending to our administrative and operational scaffolding creating efficiencies along the way. Admittedly, infrastructure changes have happened at a slower pace than we imagined. As a mid-size church, we don't always have the bandwidth or resources to overhaul branding, websites, computer systems, and databases with the swiftness we would like. However, our people continue to press ahead with faithfulness. Our session is integrated with elders from both campuses; the Selwyn clergy team now includes a pastoral resident, the Reverend Allyson Anderson, who primarily provides worship leadership and pastoral care on the Quail campus; and we are aligning the patterns of our church life in simple (but profound) ways. Remember, hospitality is an essential marker for both congregations, so ministries such as Presbyterian Women and Bible studies groups have revealed open and willing hearts to try new things. We created two distinct services so that our leaders and members could move between campuses. Worship at 9:00 A.M. on the Quail campus is more intimate and casual, with a blended music program and intergenerational formation, and fellowship is offered afterward. Selwyn Avenue maintains Sunday school before traditional worship at 10:30 A.M. Rehearsals for our choirs (handbells and choral) are now combined, and our music directors are exploring how our ensembles can and should move between the two campuses. While plans for our North Star vision

and redevelopment come into focus, we are rooted in our practices of worship, fellowship, study, and commitment to mission beyond our walls.

Questions and Responses from Our Music Directors: Lori to Fred and Dareion

Dareion and Fred's professional relationship extends over fifteen years. Their respect for one another and their willingness to collaborate create space for our choirs and congregation to experience transcendent and sacred worship. In those moments, all the committee meetings, votes, presbytery processes, fears, questions, and doubts are silenced by God's Holy Spirit, as if she is saying, "Yes, this is the path, keep going."

*1. **Lori:** Before our merger, both congregations had been blessed by and committed to strong music ministries. Why do you think our choirs are especially equipped to lead us through this merger?*

Fred: Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church has valued traditional worship, and it was evident when I was hired sixteen years ago. My professional background is in music education, and I have advanced degrees in that area. My musical focuses in education have been piano, choral conducting, and music education research. I attended universities with rich musical traditions and strong national reputations, fortunately, which gave me the skills and knowledge that transfer to other musical situations.

Additionally, I firmly believe that music in the church is about worship first and then the music. I never want our ensembles to be viewed as entertainment for the congregation. I indicated this to the hiring committee when interviewed, and this value was embraced by them also. Although they were concerned I would not be interested in leading a "smaller" music program, I was actually attracted to the position because of its size: Selwyn offered the chance to expand and create opportunities for the community; it is a relational congregation; and I felt it would be a good place to thrive as a musician and worshiper. As director of music, I inherited a small choir of about sixteen singers who mostly read (sight-singing) and learned music quickly. I also was to direct the adult handbell choir, at that time about ten ringers, and a children's choir.

While I had some learning to do about the Presbyterian faith, governance, and worship, I quickly realized that Selwyn was a “singing” congregation: that is, the congregation sang well and participated in hymn singing enthusiastically. I found an openness, too, for learning unfamiliar (“new”) hymns. Having served other congregations who resisted singing and exploring new hymns, Selwyn’s behavior indicated a rootedness in quality music coupled with thoughtful word from the pulpit.

Our pastor at the time—the Reverend Dr. Rush Otey—understood the theological intersections of music and worship and worked with me to shape worship in a way that deepened our congregation’s understanding and respect for our music program while bringing the word and messages to their minds and hearts. My background in music education, too, transferred to how I approached choosing literature for our ensembles. Our music program is identified as “traditional,” but it has a broad palette of genres of music that includes hymn arrangements, original compositions for church choirs, large works, classical music, spirituals/gospel, and world music. This broad palette seeks to help bridge the gap between our congregation’s predominant ethnicity/race and offer a more diverse and inclusive experience.⁴

Furthering congregational participation, I have instituted “occasional” singing opportunities such as an *ad hoc* men’s ensemble, a Mother’s Day choir, and congregational participation on anthems and responses. Selwyn also enjoys hosting an array of professional musicians for special services. Over the sixteen years I have served Selwyn, the music program has evolved and changed. However, my early impressions of an openness and rootedness in music and its function in worship have remained constant.

Dareion: At Quail Hollow music has always been cherished as a meaningful part of worship. While the congregation was not historically known as a “singing congregation” in the same way as Selwyn, music nonetheless held a central place in the life of the church. For many years, the choir carried the congregation’s musical witness, offering a traditional repertoire that was both faithful and beloved.

Part of this rootedness in music has come from the presence of so many gifted people throughout Quail Hollow’s history. Talented musicians, including pianists, guitarists, wind players, and those with strong music-reading ability, have long shaped and supported the worship life of Quail Hollow. In

addition, many members have been, and continue to be, active in community music ensembles. This blending of church and community gifts has enriched the congregation’s life, making music not only something to be heard, but something to be lived.

When I arrived in 2021, Quail Hollow was emerging from the challenges of the COVID pandemic. The choir served as a stabilizing force during that time and has continued to provide consistency through several pulpit supply ministers and pastoral transitions since that time. Remarkably, the choir roster remained steady, allowing the congregation to maintain a level of excellence in music that anchored worship.

I came with experience from another Presbyterian congregation, but also with a rich background shaped by Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, and charismatic worship traditions. As an African American musician serving a predominantly white congregation, I saw an opportunity to bring these diverse influences into worship. That mix of traditions and perspectives has allowed me to stretch the congregation’s musical boundaries, while their openness and support have made space for new expressions of music and worship.

What has remained constant, however, is Quail Hollow’s rootedness in music as a way of expressing faith, honoring the gifts of its people, and supporting worship that is both meaningful and heartfelt.

2. Lori: *Like the congregations we serve, our choirs have felt the impact of significant cultural changes. What persistent issues have you encountered as a music director? How do you see the merger impacting these frustrations?*

Fred: With joy comes struggle—indeed, we appreciate joy more when it comes out of struggle—and time seems to be our most precious commodity at Selwyn. The demands on an individual member’s time, that of their children—even among the church staff—prompts more struggles and innovative solutions. Over the years, we experienced a steady decline in consistent choir participation, especially with midweek rehearsals, and fewer young members were joining our music ministries.

As a result, about ten years ago we shifted our Chancel Choir’s evening rehearsals to early Sunday morning, and I shifted my expectations to accommodate our choir members’ busy lives. These would be augmented with larger two-hour rehearsals on Saturdays during seasons such as

Advent, Lent, and Easter. While this worked for several years, it is difficult to build community and increase numbers with this approach. At times, the stress of preparing for the service, preparing future service music, and intermittent attendance presented challenges for both the choir and me. More recently, however, and with the keen suggestion from Dareion, choir retreats (full-day rehearsals coupled with fellowship) have been scheduled to build the community between the two campuses' ensembles, and midweek rehearsals have been reinstituted.

Perhaps more than any other area, a consistent children's music program has been difficult to establish. Prioritizing church amidst work, school, sports, and dance, to name a few activities, seems precarious. However, the expectation of having music for children—and SAPC has a large population of children—is high. In an effort to promote more participation and to empathize with the needs of competing activities for parents and children, we structured children's participation to a concentrated rehearsal schedule of four weeks culminating in singing for a service.

As one can see, we sacrificed our initial expectations for both the Chancel Choir and children's music/choir to accommodate the day-to-day pressures of the membership. Although not ideal, we retained the importance and quality of music in worship. Flexibility of rehearsal times and expansion of literature genres renewed the spirit of both campuses' music ministries. However, the commitment to singing in Selwyn's Chancel Choir and myths/perceptions about singing in general plague recruiting. Furthermore, children older than second or third grade often drop out of the children's choir for various reasons (see above discussion), and presently there is no youth choir for upper elementary or middle school children.

Dareion: For QHPC, challenges often reflected its small size, particularly the reality of having very few children. The handbell program, while an important part of worship, also reached a point where it needed renewed energy. Though the congregation was not historically a "singing congregation," in recent years that has begun to change, with participation and confidence in worship continuing to grow.

One of the key transitions that coincided with the early stages of the merger was the sudden resignation of our handbell director, who also served as organist. Thankfully, it happened during

the summer while the handbell choir was already on hiatus. With the help of substitute organists and pianists, and by covering at the piano myself, worship continued without interruption. Fred's willingness to step in with the handbells was a tremendous gift, as that was not an area of my expertise.

What has always amazed me, however, is the commitment of Quail's musicians. Even as a small congregation, the choir maintained strong attendance at weekly rehearsals and on Sunday mornings. In fact, about 30 percent of the church was involved in music, whether it was choir or handbells. Their consistency and faithfulness were never in question, and that strength gave me confidence rather than concern. The merger brought with it clear financial and practical realities, but I never doubted that music at Quail would thrive. Its strength has always come from the devotion of those who, week after week, give their time and voices so generously.

Lori: More recently, we are experiencing a shift toward deeper engagement across both campuses. Our clergy, staff, and elders recognize a sincere desire for Christian formation and spiritual engagement. If we do not expect ourselves and our members to prioritize and practice our faith, we won't. For example, we just launched an ongoing midweek, all-church dinner and integrated programming for children, Music, Art, and the Bible. As a team, we are collaborating more, creating efficiencies, and deepening connections. Creating one gold-standard music ministry with two incredible music directors provides a framework for midweek rehearsals and music programming for all ages. We hope to provide more on-ramps to participate in our music program to meet the needs of our diverse membership. Dareion and Fred (and their choirs) are beginning to move various ensembles between the two campuses and worship services. Mainly, our choirs express trust, authenticity, and joy every time they gather. Their faithfulness sets the tone for the rest of us.

3. Lori: *As choir directors, what practical steps toward the merger have you taken along the way?*

Fred: The way we live our lives is by putting values into action. To realize the values of the merger, we have discovered that these approaches/practices for our music ministries are serving us well. In conjunction with the clergy, Dareion and I plan

together and look ahead over the liturgical year to see what Sundays Selwyn Avenue will have combined-campus services. To that end, we discuss the experience of our singers (singing abilities, etc.) and literature, rehearsal time leading up to a combined service, the season of the church, the preaching series/lectionary, and special rehearsals. Dareion and I also decide on large works and take turns choosing pieces for Advent and Lent and subsequently conducting the works. Monthly music reports that go to all musicians, preachers, and staff allow for more transparency with service. These reports include links to any practice parts for musicians and musical groups (children, Chancel Choirs, and handbell choirs), dates for rehearsals, special services, titles of anthems, and so forth for all concerned and affected by the music ministries.

While our worship experiences complement one another, and we strive to retain our distinctiveness, so far this arrangement has led to a more robust worship experience for congregants. This is not to say that each campus eschews the other's musical style: that is not at all the case. Both musical traditions are embraced, appreciated, and impactful regardless of which service our congregants attend. This is especially visible with combined services where large works are presented in worship.

While the two choirs have prepared Fauré's *Requiem*, Vivaldi's *Gloria*, and Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* (Part V) to name a few, our combined worship services celebrate a variety of music styles from traditional to Christian Contemporary Music. We feel presenting a full musical palette complements the preached word and expresses our commitment to inclusion: all kinds of music are welcome. Finally, we blur the lines between our musical groups throughout the year. Handbells might be coupled with the Chancel Choirs, or part of the Chancel Choir might sing alongside the young children for an intergenerational experience. As a common practice, we involve the congregation with singing on hymn arrangements presented as anthems (a common practice).

We have found communication across stakeholders to be important. Planning and transparency, combined singing opportunities, complementary functions of style, congregational and intergenerational opportunities, and collaboration in the choosing and conducting of large works are easing the adjustment of a merged congregation while retaining the identity of each campus.

4. Lori: *What vision do you have for our music program and congregation now that we are merged?*

Dareion: My vision for the music program across both campuses is to build something that lasts, brings generations together, and is welcoming and attractive to everyone. I envision a program that is open to people who read music and to those who do not, so that no one feels left out. I see us embracing a variety of styles, honoring our traditional roots while also reaching worshipers who connect with other kinds of music. I imagine this as the people's music program, where everyday singers and musicians, whether highly trained or not, all have something to offer. A longtime choir member, a child just starting out, or someone who plays an instrument and wants to share a gift all help shape worship. Music has a natural way of bringing people together, and widening the circle of participation allows us to reflect the richness of the church community. Ultimately, my hope is that our music ministry will be sustainable, inclusive, inspiring, and attractive, a place where everyone, whether singer or instrumentalist, reader or nonreader, child or adult, can find a way to contribute to the song of the church.

Fred: I echo Dareion's inclusivity for the Selwyn campus. Additionally, my vision for the music program at SAPC involves debunking myths about choral singing in the hearts and minds of the congregation.⁵ This is a nationwide issue, but the message of "anyone can sing or be taught to sing" must continually be at the forefront in order to change minds and hearts. As an intergenerational, singing congregation, I hope to create opportunities for our members to sing with the Chancel Choir on anthems, introits, and responses to engage them more in worship.⁶ This means we must expand our engagement of children with music to create an integrated approach to Christian formation and to include a choral program where continuous learning and participation leads to a deeper musical and worship experience from the ground up.⁷ I continually ask myself, "Who will be our next choir members?" If younger singers do not see themselves as potential choir/music participants, then we run the risk of halting the momentum created.

Finally, handbells provide a unique opportunity for ringers of all ages and experience levels. Being creative and intentional about how we retain and

capitalize on our intergenerational community through music seems like a compelling and exciting challenge.

Lori: My vision is simple. I want our neighbors and our city to know who we are because of what we do and why we do it! This hurting, divided, confused world needs the hospitality, love, joy, and compassion of congregations like ours, and so our actions (including our worship) matter, and they should witness the love, mercy, and justice of God in Christ.

What happens when two congregations amass all of their energy, imagination, intelligence, and love and then move together toward one, shared vision? Most churches who merge do so out of a need to survive, but Selwyn's merger with Quail Hollow is one of abundance. Not because we must, but because God is calling us to impact the city of Charlotte in a way that reflects the power of the gospel and the purpose of the church.

The North Star vision (as we refer to the campus redevelopment) is bold enough to seem impossible. And yet we won't get there if we are not honest and humble in our faith. Worship is the essential activity of the church. When we gather, God reorients our hearts, our postures, our priorities, and our perspectives about who we are and who God is. When our merged congregation gathers and our choirs join as one, something special happens. Two small choirs transcend their usual capacity. They "*light up*," and it is as if we are catching a glimpse of that North Star.

Final Thoughts

Other than the ease with which our congregations voted (unanimously), the merger of our two congregations has very little to do with the many documents, policies, and procedures we considered along the way. Our unity is expressed and deepened by our shared faith in God and an intentional approach toward ministry and worship. The merger created space for us to challenge long-held assumptions about our music ministries, programming patterns, and the current needs of our congregations. As a result, strengthened

connections and new opportunities for spiritual formation through music are emerging. Since our paths merged, the road we travel is not always smooth or straight. However, as God continues to shine a light on the path ahead of us, that light shines brightest through our musicians. As our congregations continue to integrate, we hope to honor the integrity and strengths of each. The journey to our merger has been exciting, and yet in many ways it seems as if we are standing on the threshold once again.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and
earth. ~ Psalm 121:1-2*

Notes

1. Ted A. Smith, *The End of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: WB Eerdmans, 2023), 97-121.
2. The Board of Pensions, PC(USA), "Living by the Gospel: A Guide to Structuring Ministers' Terms of Call," 2025, <https://www.pensions.org/file/our-role-and-purpose/the-connectional-church/living-by-the-gospel/Documents/pln-619.pdf/>.
3. Mark Elsdon, ed., *Gone for Good? Negotiating the Coming Wave of Church Property Transition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2024), 19.
4. See Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship*, Alban Institute (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 13.
5. See Elizabeth Gaile Stephens "Formation and Prediction of the Singing Perceptions of Self-labeled Singers and Non-singers" (PhD diss., University of Miami, 2012), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/formation-prediction-singing-perceptions-self/docview/1023446799/se-2/>.
6. Laura Keeley and Robert Keeley, "Intergenerational Connectors in Worship," in *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, ed. Howard Vanderwell, Alban Institute (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).
7. Mika Deshotel, "Unified Voices: Exploring Intergenerational Collaboration in a Unificationist Worship Model (DMin diss., HJ International Graduate School, 2025), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/unified-voices-exploring-intergenerational/docview/3227706906/se-2/>.





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Tillich, Judson Church, and the Avant-Garde

André Daughtry

Updated from a presentation at the meeting of the North American Paul Tillich Society at the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature convention in November 2018.

For its 2018 exhibition season, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City mounted a show titled *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done*, which was a gallery exhibition and performance retrospective highlighting the experimentation of a group of dancers and visual artists who performed in the 1960s inside the Judson Memorial Church situated in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan. The exhibition, which was on view from September 16, 2018, to February 3, 2019, highlighted the activities of a collective of New York avant-garde artists who turned a Protestant Baptist church into a sanctuary for the arts. On October 13, 2018, Judson Church and MOMA co-organized an all-day event held inside the church, intended to be a celebration of Judson's history and its continued relationship to experimental art and social justice. I co-curated the performances for that day, and I also put together and moderated a panel discussion titled "The Mutual Influence of Art and Religion."¹

The panel included author Kay Larson, who writes extensively about the arts and Buddhism, Rev. Micah Bucey, who is currently the senior pastor of Judson Church, and Dr. John Thatamanil, professor of Theology and World Religions at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.

My intention for the panel was to bring to the MOMA audience the mostly unknown connections between modern art and religious thought that influenced the clergy of Judson Church to incorporate

the arts into the ministries of the congregation as well as the spiritual influences on the artists themselves. Since the event was taking place in a New York landmark church, I felt compelled to reintroduce theology as a generative foundation to contemporary arts practices. I decided to invite Dr. Thatamanil to open the panel presentation with an introduction to the modern theologian in the West who wrote the most about the mutual influence of modern culture, theology, and church. That theologian is no other than German Christian existentialist philosopher Paul Tillich. Tillich's thoughts of the "ultimate concern," art, the latent church, and spiritual communities are very fecund ideas that had a huge impact on the congregation and clergy of Judson Church. Tillich's writings directly informed Judson's early relationships to the burgeoning artistic communities surrounding the church, and it is Tillich's views on the institution of church and culture that served as the foundation for a veritable revolution in the arts. But before we get into how Tillich's thoughts on the dialectics of modern culture and religious institutions affected the thinking of Judson's clergy and congregation, let's take a brief look at Judson's very unique history.

In 1890, ground was broken for a new church on the southside of Washington Square Park in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. It was the vision of a young minister by the name of Edward Judson, a Baptist minister and the son of Adoniram Judson, the first well-known Protestant missionary to Asia, working in India and Burma. Edward Judson's vision slightly differed from his father's in that he turned his missionary impulse towards domestic immigrant communities in America. Judson wanted to erect a church in service

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of those particular communities beyond preaching and praying. Edward's theology and philosophy was that church should be a community center that serves the needs of the community.

His ideas would later be written in the form of a primer called *The Institutional Church: A Primer in Pastoral Theology*.² With the help of seed money from John D. Rockefeller himself, Judson would build a structure to help realize a church that was intended to serve the people. The architect was none other than Stanford White, the famous American architect who also designed the popular arch across the street at Washington Square Park. Artist John La Farge, who was the inventor of the innovative opalescent glass process that became the reigning decorative window style during the American Gilded Age, completed the stained-glass windows. The Romanesque style of the building is an intentional testament to the envisioned utilitarian mission of the church. Edward wanted to make the building familiar to the Catholic Italian immigrants who inhabited lower Manhattan at the time in order for them to come and receive services and not feel unwelcomed by an overtly Protestant-looking structure.

For Judson's first sixty years, its ministries served the community with services that ranged from a health clinic that maintained the only clean public water fountain accessible to the poor immigrant families, to summer camps for children, English-language courses, and American cooking and sewing classes, just to name a few services in a long list of programs.

For Judson's first sixty years, its ministries served the community with services that ranged from a health clinic that maintained the only clean public water fountain accessible to the poor immigrant families, to summer camps for children, English-language courses, and American cooking and sewing classes, just to name a few services in a long list of programs. But by the 1950s the demographics of the community, which became known colloquially as "the Village," were starting to shift quite significantly. The Village was being repopulated by a new group

of people who were looking to settle a new land that would allow them a new way of life, but as opposed to the previous inhabitants who traveled to the Village from overseas to find food and work, these new pioneers were looking for a place that could lead to a new form of sustenance by way of the arts.

In 1955 the Rev. Robert Spike, who was the senior pastor of Judson Memorial Church at that time, hired a young seminary student by the name of Bernard "Bud" Scott from Union Theological Seminary in upper Manhattan to become head of Judson's artist outreach program. Bud Scott's new position was created with the intention of expanding Judson's ongoing mission of being an institution that was to serve the needs of the community. Rev. Spike saw that the mission of the church needed to evolve to meet the needs of the new community of artists who were starting to call the Village their home.

By the time of his departure from Judson Church to pursue a more national role in the civil rights movement, Bud Scott, who eventually became an associate minister at Judson, had already spent some years meeting with artists in the various pubs and cafes nearby. At the same time, Judson's new young visionary minister, the Rev. Howard Moody, took on the role of senior pastor at Judson and quickly encouraged Scott to establish the Judson Gallery with the artist Claes Oldenburg as co-director in 1958 in the basement of the building that was known as Judson House, an adjacent building that the church owned and used for student and staff housing. Judson Gallery was where famous artists like Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, and many others would have some of their first shows in New York. After Bud Scott's departure in 1960, Howard Moody would eventually hire another Union Seminary student named Al Carmines to work with the arts.

Associate minister Carmines's interest in art was more related to musical theater, and he would eventually become leader of the Judson Poets Theater, which staged regular performances in the choir loft, making Judson Church one of the three original homes of off-Broadway. Judson, having quickly become the site of artistic experimentation and progressive theology, would eventually allow a group of experimental dancers to use its spaces as a sanctuary to cultivate their multivocal practices radicalizing traditional forms of dance. These dance/performance artists would come to call themselves the Judson Dance Theater, which also

Judson Church's congregation also embraced Tillich's innovative ideas around theology and modern culture, which ultimately impressed a certain self-imposed responsibility on the part of the congregation to show up not only for Sunday morning church services but also for all the experimental visual and performance art works that were taking place inside the building on a weekly basis.

makes Judson the original home of postmodern dance. Dance, performance art, and visual arts departments around the world study Judson as the birthplace of postmodern dance and as the frequent venue for the happenings and Fluxus performance art movements. Major exhibitions at art institutions like MOMA are testaments to the power of Judson's lasting influence on the world of contemporary art.

Preceding these seminal years of radical experimentation with art in shared proximity to a sacred space, there were a few Christian theologians—some of whom taught at some point at Union Seminary—who were redefining religious tradition in relationship to society in very radical ways. It is Tillich who attempted to provide a systematic theology that specifically concentrated on culture and the arts.

Tillich's ideas had a profound influence on all the post World War II Judson ministers. Rev. Al Carmines had a personal connection to Tillich, who was at the time of their meeting the professor of theology and culture at Union Seminary. Carmines had met the influential theologian while he was still an undergraduate at Swarthmore College. Tillich encouraged Carmines to continue his studies at a seminary after Swarthmore because of his deep inquiries around faith and culture. Carmines would eventually earn a bachelor's degree in divinity and a master's in sacred theology at Union Seminary with the intention of becoming one of Tillich's PhD students.

Judson Church's congregation also embraced Tillich's innovative ideas around theology and modern culture, which ultimately impressed a certain self-imposed responsibility on the part of the congregation to show up not only for Sunday morning church services but also for all the experimental visual and performance art works that were taking place inside the building on a weekly basis.

Many who are familiar with Tillich are aware of his ideas around a necessary interpenetration of religion and art, and it is Judson's congregation

that became acquainted with them in order to implement those ideas in the church. Decades of cross pollination between congregational life and the witnessing of artistic exploration in the church ranged from the anecdotal to the pragmatic, and finally to the theological. One memorable anecdote is artist Carolee Schneemann's performance of *Meat Joy* in 1964 in Judson's sanctuary, a work that consisted of raw fish pressed between semi-nude bodies. The performance left a stench so palpable and lingering, the following Sunday service Rev. Howard Moody was moved to give a sermon on the New Testament story of the loaves and the fishes.

Pragmatically, the wooden pews were permanently removed to make the sanctuary more spatially fluid for performances and the worship service itself. Theologically, the weekly artistic and political activities of the church eventually led to the revision of all liturgical practices during Sunday morning worship services. The visible contrast between artistic practices and worship services led to the creation of the 1964 Worship Council, which was formed to respond to the dissonance that many felt made worship feel out of step with the times.

It is important to note that a structure like Judson's, which was funded by one of the most famous American capitalists, would continue to fulfill its original founder's vision of the "institutional church." But Judson was constantly evolving by adopting Tillich's dialectical critique of the traditional church that denies the secular world, a critique that can be understood to coincide with Tillich's noticeable Marxist leanings, which informed his idea of a latent church that adopts a praxis of dialectical interactions between church and society.

In his book *The Socialist Emigré* Brian Donnelly speaks to what he convincingly claims is Tillich's undeniable influence from Marxism's dialectical materialism as a necessary tool when theorizing the role of church in modern society. Donnelly states that

the awareness that Tillich gives is that secularism is not irreligious but rather the “expression of the latent religion in nonreligious forms.” The dialectical engagement of the church helps to identify and thrust forward the religious elements found in secular society. . . . How Tillich substantiates and justifies this position is the measure by which he drew parallels from the Marxist concept of the Proletariat.³

Judson Church expresses this unique perspective not only by holding worship services for its mostly white congregation, who worship inside and administer the space, but also by renting space to other progressive congregations. Communities like the mostly LGBTQ congregation of color called Restoration Temple Ministries, a progressive Korean church named The Least of These, and a progressive Jewish community which call themselves Lab Shul have all used the space as their homes of worship for a time. This sharing of space can be viewed as an example of the internal dialectic. The myriad activists, artists, and activists/artists associations who use the church for secular social justice and experimental artistic practices show the community's engagement with the dialectics of church and secular society. This markedly unique and singular perspective is what has been called “The Judson Model.”

At Judson, services express a belief in the total dissolution of the bifurcation between the sacred and the profane. This dissolution is clearly expressed in Judson's main service where, for example, an ancient testimony like the Twenty-third Psalm is read alongside a modern work like the Broadway tune “Hot Patootie—Bless My Soul” from the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The impact of the intentional breakdown between the two traditionally understood opposite poles allows for anyone in attendance to participate in church services because the spiritual is revealed and elevated from all aspects of human creativity. Especially for those who consider themselves “spiritual yet not religious,” Judson has provided a community that allows multivalent entry points to reach a sense of the spiritual, since the spiritual is allowed to pull from all experiences and affirmations of life as opposed to one particular Christian doctrine.

While speaking of a church and its community as a part of a dialectical process in Tillich's theology, Donnelly points us to Tillich's other borrowings from

Marx such as the concept of the proletariat, which was previously mentioned. The proletariat is one of those concepts that evolved over the years for Tillich, especially after moving to the United States, which was quickly becoming a postindustrial society at the time. The proletariat, according to Marxism, is the class that suffers the most from economic alienation, but in a religious socialism that Tillich proposed, the “latent church” could be a viable site for an alienated and estranged community to find resources for the creation of a new society within a dialectical process between church and contemporary culture. After his move to the United States, Tillich's adaptation to an American material, economic, and political reality drew even more from his existentialist foundations, especially in his ideas about estrangement, which give more religious depth to the Marxist alienation that tends to stay in the materialist, economic spheres.

So when one thinks of the specific role of the bohemian artists making work at Judson who do not neatly fall under the classical Marxist category of the proletariat, one witnesses that their work speaks to the estrangement and alienation of many Americans in the 1950s and 60s.

So when one thinks of the specific role of the bohemian artists making work at Judson who do not neatly fall under the classical Marxist category of the proletariat, one witnesses that their work speaks to the estrangement and alienation of many Americans in the 1950s and 60s. Donnelly states that Tillich believed that social organization would come from “sections of the intelligentsia, of the churches, and of the younger generation.”⁴ It is obvious that artists are useful in the fueling of a social imagination. When speaking about a community that deals with the “ultimate concern,” Tillich's concept of the fundamental, all-encompassing concern that shapes a person's life and gives meaning to their existence, he believed that the community did not need to be delimited by the doctrines of any religion. Tillich believed that “the Spiritual Community can be seen in ‘nonchurch’ and secular forms.”⁵

So, one can consider the artists who are making artworks that express ultimate concerns to be a part of a spiritual community, and in the case of Judson this happens to take place in a church while remaining to be considered secular and “nonchurch.” That is why Judson sees every community that shares its space as just another one of its many congregations. An example of a secular expression of ultimate concern inside a church can be seen in this transcript of an interview with the earlier mentioned artist Carolee Schneemann.

Performed in 1964, *Meat Joy* involved barely clothed performers, raw fish, sausages, and paint in Judson’s sanctuary. Schneemann said,

I thought of *Meat Joy* as an erotic ritual for my starved culture, with the body extended into raw fish and chickens and sausages and layers of paper and plastic and paint. I wanted things to really break at the edges and to merge and be wet where they had been dry and on top of each other where they had been separated. The culture was starved in terms of sensuousness because sensuality was always confused with pornography. The old patriarchal morality of proper behavior and improper behavior had no threshold for the pleasures of physical contact that were not explicitly about sex but related to something more ancient—the worship of nature, worship of the body, a pleasure in sensuousness. It was performed in the center of the church and of course, the incredible aroma never left of the raw mackerel, the old chickens and the old sausages. Rev. Howard Moody accepted that and did his sermons, in regard to the smells, sermons on the loaves and the fishes. It was wonderful.⁶

Now to use only one anecdote, which in this case is Carolee Schneemann’s unorthodox work and Rev. Moody’s innovative response by means of homiletics, as an example to sum up the seminal decades of interaction between radical artistic performance and equally radical congregational life at Judson, is like taking the New Testament verse “Jesus wept,” found in the Gospel of John (John 11:35), to summarize Jesus’ entire character. But I wanted to give a clear example of Tillich’s concept of autonomy performing itself inside the walls of a building erected on the foundations

of heteronomous religion—religion that imposes doctrine over spirit—so that the theonomous, or “God’s law,” could be powerfully expressed.

Tillich’s concentration on developing a theology for American culture in which he considers the role of the arts and the church is truly the foundation to the spiritual community of Judson, which continues to be known in the art world as a sanctuary for the secular arts today. Tillich’s profound ideas—which were partially realized by Judson’s clergy—did indeed provide a revolution in the world of contemporary arts, and I would want to believe that that was a lot of Tillich’s intentions during his time in the United States.

Tillich’s ideas that he developed in part from Marxism were in direct response to the Germany that bore and raised him, but once he found himself in his new home here in the States, there was inevitably a fundamental shift in his focus. Donnelly mentions that Tillich once said to Max Horkheimer, a famous German philosopher and friend,

“I once believed that with religious socialism I could lead a fundamental change in Christian theology. But since then, my hopes are confined to giving the American people a well-worked out theology which they have never had.”⁷

I personally enjoy discovering Tillich’s relationships to thinkers like Max Horkheimer. It reminds me of my own art school background, which was saturated with assigned readings from the writings of most of the members of the German Institute of Social Research, better known as the Frankfurt School, whose members were acquainted with Tillich like Horkheimer was. The influence of the Frankfurt School on questions of aesthetics, culture, and ideology had a real effect on Tillich’s theology, and his thoughts on providing space and pledging support to artists from inside a church sparked an invaluable place for the nurturing of new movements in performance, theater, and visual arts. It was a provocative revolution back then as it continues to be today.

Since Judson Church served as a physical, intellectual, and spiritual space in the history of experimental art, it started the careers of many avant-garde artists like video artist Nam June Paik and sculptor and performance artist Claes Oldenburg, to name just a couple of the Judson-

affiliated artists whose works continue to influence experimental artists around the world. What can the Judson Model teach church institutions today about the practice of liturgy?

I recently went to Judson to see a puppet show called *The Obligation to Live*⁸ put on by the New York based Bread and Puppet Theater. That night's play was a response to the ongoing struggle in the Middle East and brought into focus the lives of all those who were suffering with the current war in Gaza. Judson's senior pastor, Micah Bucey, introduced the experimental troupe with his revivalist tone, no differently than he would speak from a Sunday morning pulpit, naming artists "as our modern-day prophets." One would be hard pressed to see a difference in passion and conviction between his weekly Sunday sermons in worship with the Judson religious community and his opening speeches at JAW (Judson Arts Wednesdays). The way the space functions for performances and for liturgy are virtually indistinguishable. The sanctuary has no pews, but an army of stackable chairs that can be rearranged depending on the needs of artists or clergy.

The notion of the sanctuary that functions as a laboratory allows experimentation to become part of liturgy in the way worship is crafted and the physical space organized. I also experienced this way of shaping space for experimentation without impediments while I was a student at Union Theological Seminary, as James Chapel, the worship center of campus life at Union, allowed seminary students to turn liturgical theory to praxis in a "laboratory" setting. Other churches that have freed themselves from traditional pews and have welcomed artists, like the neighboring St Mark's in-the-Bowery Church, have become celebrated homes for artistic expression and progressive congregations as well.

A pillar and an invitation that Judson can offer to other institutions negotiating their own relationship to the arts is Judson's rule of not censoring art performed in its space. Free expression was a part of the inception of the arts program, and over more than a half century of holding space for artists, one could even say that free expression is the only doctrine that everyone willingly agrees to at Judson. Of course, the implementation of free expression for other congregations will be contextual and will depend on many factors, including geographic location, demographics of the congregation, and liturgical-theological perspective. But it is indeed this spirit of letting art speak freely back at the church that becomes the foundation for the type of spiritual community Tillich envisioned. Church by way of the Judson Model might bring us close to the spiritual community that a post-secular world needs urgently today.

Notes

1. See <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/311569185/>.
2. Edward Judson and Henry C. Potter, *The Institutional Church: A Primer in Pastoral Theology* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 1899/2010).
3. Brian Donnelly, *The Socialist Emigré* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 87.
4. Donnelly, *The Socialist Emigré*, 85.
5. Donnelly, *The Socialist Emigré*, 96.
6. Interview with Carolee Schneemann and Thomas Lax, Museum of Modern Art, Audio Transcript #289, New York, NY., <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/53/>.
7. Donnelly, *The Socialist Emigré*, 20.
8. Bread and Puppet Theater, *The Obligation to Live*, dir. Peter Schumann, 2025, Judson Memorial Church, New York, NY.

Translating the Judson Model: A Report from Westminster Presbyterian Church in Albany, New York

Heather Kirk-Davidoff



Westminster Presbyterian Church's experience with hosting the renowned Bread and Puppet Theater is an example of how a local church might translate André Daughtry's discussion of the Judson Model in their own context. In his article for this issue (found on page 50), Daughtry references a performance by the Bread and Puppet Theater at Judson Memorial Church in New York City.

Our church's relationship with the Bread and Puppet Theater began in 2022 when the company reached out to us, seeking a venue in the New York Capital Region. Westminster has a history of supporting the arts, having employed a full-

time minister of music and arts for years, but this focus has largely been on classical choral music and organ performances featuring our famous Skinner pipe organ. Hosting Bread and Puppet was a significant departure from our usual fare. This is why the enthusiastic support from the few families in the church who did know them was essential, particularly since hosting requires preparing lunch and dinner for the artists and helping to house them.

While Judson's unique physical structure facilitates a "sanctuary that functions as a laboratory," we have a traditional, Gilded-Age sanctuary with fixed pews. So part of the experience of hosting Bread and Puppet in our space is embracing the

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dramatic tension between radical performance and a highly traditional setting. Bread and Puppet hangs their art throughout the sanctuary and stages their show in our front chancel. One year, they used our pulpit to deliver some of their lines.

The shows attract large crowds of more than three hundred people who are largely *not* involved with Westminster's regular life. As member Lily Mercogliano Easton notes, "Bread and Puppet brings in a community of people who are deeply moved by their art and music. Their experience at a performance

is connected to aspects of worship—but in a form that is very different from what happens on Sunday morning. I think that's really cool."

By offering our space, we adhere to the Judson tenet of non-censorship, fostering a community space rooted in social justice and free artistic expression. We witness the "ultimate concern"—the fundamental concern that gives meaning to existence—expressed by the artists and experienced by their audience. This active commitment brings us closer to the spiritual community Tillich envisioned.



Call to Worship

Columns

On Music: Singing a New Song to the Lord

Patrick Evans

There are few things that permeate most people's lives in nearly every cultural group across the globe as thoroughly as music, and this has likely never been truer than in current days, when the majority of us carry pocket computers holding thousands of songs, with Internet access to seek out thousands more. Listening to music on a regular basis is such a near-universal human experience, and yet, commodified consumer culture around music sends a powerful message: unless you have a recording contract, are an *American Idol* finalist, or have a conservatory degree, you should leave the music making to those who do. Unfortunately, many of our congregational cultures have years of tradition to emphasize this external cultural message—we entrust, rightly, the planning and making of music to the organist, choir director, cantor, worship leader, praise band, or soloist, but we also may tend toward leaving all the singing to these leaders, with hopes that some in the pews or chairs will join in by the third verse, but without necessarily proclaiming an active theological statement or strategy that counteracts the broader cultural message and proclaims what John Bell of the Iona Community calls the eleventh commandment, which appears multiple times throughout the Psalms: Sing a new song to the Lord, all the earth.¹

What then, when we think of liturgy as the work of the people, shall we say about these things regarding congregational song? I know I am literally preaching to the choir here; readers may have fully participatory congregational singing as a high priority, but does the average worshiper in the pews? How can we engage reluctant worshipers in the life-changing act of joining their voices with the saints of every time and place?

First, many of the people in our pews have been disincentivized from raising their voices in public not only by the aforementioned performance culture (and perhaps within the walls of the church by a similar “leave it to the pros” ethos), but also by personal experience—the sixth grade general music teacher who told them to just mouth the words, the humorous but perhaps not helpful testimony from a pastor that all they were able to contribute was a joyful noise, or other life events which lead to silence. Pastoral musicians must do this excavation work and remove barriers that stand in the way of full participation. We can be proactive in proclaiming the liturgical and theological imperative that every voice is valued and needed in the people's song.

What we sing, how we sing, and how we invite people to sing matters greatly. Singing has an indelible power to connect text to tune and both to memory in a way that transcends time and age. This is why we have songs in elementary school to teach the alphabet and multiplication tables (I can to this day recall the tune to “Four times seven is twenty-eight,” and I am nearing sexagenarianism.) How many of us have stories like mine with my grandmother, who towards the end of her life would get to about the fourth word of what she wanted to say and repeat that word multiple times, unable to continue, but when I sang “It's very clear” to her, she could respond by singing “our love is here to stay” and never get the Rockies crumbling and Gibraltar tumbling mixed up in that beloved Gershwin song, which was popular when she and my grandfather were young?² The lived theology we call on in time of trouble or in time of decline is not necessarily what we have read or heard from the pulpit, or what we have seen from a television evangelist. It is the

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theology we have *sung*. We live in a culture in which it's easy to opt out, and we are not doing all we can to fully equip the saints for the living of their days.

Recognizing that we all have limited time (a daylong workshop would be a luxury!), I address two methods for cultivating full participation here: creating a learning culture and the use of the choir or leader(s) in the worship space. Many of our congregations have active Sunday schools, book groups, and small discussion cultures—learning and discussing and growing in our understanding is an important underpinning of our lives together. However, in many cases, once we enter the worship space, we must do what we've always done because preparing to do something differently would require words or actions that would interrupt the flow of worship. For those who have been disempowered from their own voices, an organ introduction or a four-chord turnaround from the band is not enough to actively engage them. I often actively proclaim this to my folks: "If singing a new song to the Lord is a faithful act of worship, then *preparing* to sing a new song is also a faithful act of worship." Taking a few minutes at the beginning of the service to, in a concise manner, teach a new melody using call-and-response, using theological language to actively invite *all* to sing can create a pattern of teaching and learning that is perfectly appropriate to corporate worship. If your congregational worship is more formal so that it's not possible, having the choir sing a verse as an introit, or having a cantor or choir sing the first verse of a new hymn or song, with a note in the bulletin inviting full singing, is also a useful technique for cultivating full participation.

In one of my congregations, we were staging Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* in Advent (with the requisite weekly prayer that our Amahl's voice wouldn't change before Advent IV), and one of my choir shepherds, after rehearsing their entrance, boldly proclaimed, "Well, this isn't really much more running around than you have us doing every Sunday!" I had realized from some more experienced church musicians that disengaged singers are more likely to risk joining their voices in the people's song when they hear a stronger leading voice within four feet or so of them. This meant that what had originally been a procession through the pews on the first verse of the opening hymn eventually became a procession in which they stayed through all four verses, the Prayer of Confession, and Assurance of Pardon, so singing a new Gloria before the Passing of the Peace was fully supported. Also, after the offertory, they'd go into the congregation during the doxology, sitting strategically among them for the Affirmation response and most of the closing hymn, before encircling the congregation for the Choral Benediction. To be clear, mobility of choir members is certainly a consideration, as are stairs and balconies, but most of us could engage at least part of the choir or band or soloists in some physical relocation as we develop a teaching and learning culture for the sake of ensuring that *all are welcome and given the musical tools needed* to do the work of the people in singing a new (or ancient) song to the Lord.

Notes

1. John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000).
2. George and Ira Gershwin, "Love Is Here to Stay" (New York: Chappel & Co., 1938).

On Preaching: Preaching with an Artificially Intelligent Companion

Opportunities and Challenges of Using AI in the Craft of Preaching

David Lower

I began my vocation in information technology during the birth of the modern Internet, and now as a pastor I am captivated by the next great shift: from the Information Age to the Age of Intelligence, with its potential to transform not only how we live and work, but also how we preach.

I have spent significant time as a pastor in the Artificial Intelligence sandbox, as I suspect many of us have, and continue to reflect on the opportunities and pitfalls this technology poses for the craft of our calling. I have used ChatGPT for quick answers, NotebookLM for podcast-style theological dialogue, Claude for relational insight, and Grammarly for writing support. When engaged with care, each has constructively supported my preaching practice.

While the field is vast and evolving, I share these reflections to invite fellow preachers into an urgent and hopeful conversation about how we can faithfully integrate AI into preaching. Preachers must engage the tool and the topic of AI in our preaching, discovering new potential for proclamation while maintaining a distinctly human witness. I believe it is imperative for us to understand AI and use it wisely—which includes advocating for clean, renewable energy to power it, seeking justice through fair and equitable access, and reflecting on the spiritual and ethical ways our congregations are already engaging these tools. I remain convinced that when faithfully and carefully used, AI can expand and enhance our potential as preachers in today's world—but it must always remain a servant of the Spirit's work, never its substitute. Preaching is still “work of the people.”

Preaching is the Spirit-powered proclamation of God's Word, bearing human witness to Christ's redemptive action for a particular community in a particular moment.¹ Anna Carter Florence characterizes preaching as testimony, as the human expression: “This is what I have seen and heard.”² Howard Thurman claims that faithful preaching should facilitate the human journey of encounter with God—wonder, exploration, and discovery—inviting listeners to experience the presence of the living God, too.³ The human medium is essential for gospel proclamation, both for what it is (witness) and what it offers (invitation).

AI then has an interesting but sometimes uneasy place in preaching. It can be helpful at times, but it cannot do the most important parts of bearing witness. AI lacks consciousness, experience, and spiritual insight. It cannot believe, feel conviction, or testify from life. It only echoes the past, never the present—and never with presence (although robotics is bringing this possibility). Because of this, things like discernment, testimony, and invitation are still the preacher's job. Still, as with any new tool, we need to ask what AI can truly add and where it might risk taking away from the heart of preaching.

Even with its limits, AI can be a helpful partner in preparing, illustrating, and refining sermons. AI can summarize historical backgrounds, trace patterns in the text, highlight theological themes, and surface perspectives that broaden the conversation. Preaching on Luke 15, for instance, it can place patristic, Reformation, and liberation readings of the Prodigal Son side by side, giving a richer horizon than any one voice alone. This is especially

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important for preachers in privileged contexts who need help hearing voices too often unheard. When it comes to illustration, Fred Craddock reminds us that images are not ornaments but part of the sermon's logic. Here, AI can suggest metaphors from history, science, or literature to spark imagination and memory, though these always require checking for accuracy and resonance. Finally, AI can also edit, smoothing transitions and clarifying grammar. Sermons must be not only true but artfully shaped, and here AI can assist, though always under the preacher's discernment.

But there are real challenges in these assisted tasks, too. AI sometimes makes things up or gives false information, so you always have to double-check what it offers. It cannot share stories, show authenticity, or offer pastoral care. Overreliance risks losing your own voice. Drawing from massive datasets, it can also repeat cultural or theological biases uncritically. Even when it helps with writing, it can take away some of the subtlety. That's why the preacher always needs to be the assertive conversation partner, the final editor, and the decision-maker.

Given its virtues and limits, what does faithful use of AI look like? A few guiding practices emerge from my experience. Begin with Scripture, not AI—let the Word speak first. Use AI for breadth, not as a source of authority. Push it with questions and test its claims. AI is not the Internet; it is a conversation partner. Verify everything. Keep your voice. Edit the editing. Resist dependency, for wrestling with the text is part of our calling. And be transparent: integrity means letting people know AI is a servant in our study, not a ghostwriter in our pulpit.

One practice I commend is to preach an AI-generated sermon and then evaluate it openly with your congregation. When I tried this, the AI sermon sounded clear and well-structured, but it failed in crucial interpretive ways, and most importantly, it could not offer human witness.

That contrast proved instructive. It was, in a sense, collaborative preaching with AI, but the exercise revealed how much interpretation, discernment, and proclamation belong uniquely to the preacher. The practice engaged the technology, acknowledged its limitations, and reclaimed the essential human nature of preaching the gospel. It has been a couple of years since I first tried this, and my congregation still recalls and values both the sermon and the community reflections that have followed since.

AI is already part of our world, and the people we preach to are using it, too. If we approach it with humility, good judgment, and care, AI can be a helpful partner in our work. It can help us understand Scripture, express ourselves better, make new connections, and use our time well. Still, it can never replace the preacher's voice, personal witness, or the deep engagement that comes from real faith.

The preacher's timeless challenge is to proclaim human witness to the divine Word with clarity, courage, and love. AI may help us do better in that task, but it must never take the preacher's place. The Word became flesh, not code; preaching remains incarnational, embodied proclamation. May we preachers embrace AI as a tool, not a substitute, and let it serve the holy calling of proclaiming Christ crucified and risen. I look forward with great hope and intrigue to continued engagement, conversation, and discernment together in the company of preachers.

Notes

1. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 19–27.
2. Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 87.
3. Howard Thurman, *The Living Word* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981), 3–12.
4. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 63–70.
5. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 185–202.

On the Arts: The Human Body at Eucharist

Deborah Sokolove

At different times and places, people have sat, reclined, stood, or knelt during Eucharist. Individual worshipers have received the bread and cup from leaders, passed the bread and cup from hand to hand along the pews or around a circle, or served themselves from plates or baskets set on a table. While there are texts that prescribe how individual worshipers should conduct themselves, the evidence for what people actually did in any particular time and place is often found in pictures from that time and place.

Some of the earliest images of Christians participating in worship come from the catacombs outside the ancient walls of Rome. In the Catacomb of Priscilla, for example, there are at least two such frescos, dating to sometime between 100 and 350 CE. The first is generally referred to as the *Fractio Panis*, or bread-breaking; and the second is simply described as “communion with fish.” In both cases, seven figures (it is unclear whether they are men, women, or mixed group¹) sit or recline on one side of a long or curved table on which there are plates with bread and fish. In the *Fractio Panis* image, one figure appears to be breaking a small loaf, while in the other, one of the figures lays hands on one of the loaves.² Similar images are found on several sarcophagi of wealthy Christians from the same period. These images of people sitting or reclining at a table laden with bread and fish suggest that participants are eating a real meal, just as described in the letters of Paul.

Following the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century, the physical substance of Eucharist was no longer an actual meal, but rather symbolic eating and drinking consisting of only a piece of

bread and a sip of wine. To emphasize the unity of political and divine power, many church buildings were lavishly decorated with mosaics. Among the most famous of these are two images that face one another across the altar in the sixth-century Basilica of San Vitale, in Ravenna, Italy. In them, the elaborately clad emperor Justinian I and his empress Theodora lead matching processions across a golden field, eternally bearing the communion vessels in the form of a golden basin or paten for the bread and an elaborate chalice for the wine. Like the ordinary worshipers who gathered beneath these glittering reminders of who they should thank for the provision of food and drink, and like Orthodox worshipers today, everyone in the images stands as a sign of respect for the Divine.³

Illuminations like the fifteenth-century *Communion of Louis IX of France*⁴ indicate that when medieval lay people received communion, they knelt before the priest, signifying their submission to God as they would to their king or local lord. Fearing that a single crumb of the Holy Body might fall to the floor, worshipers opened their mouths for the priest to place the wafer carefully on their tongue. Other images, like the Elevation of the Consecrated Host found in folio 55 in the *Rothschild Prayerbook*,⁵ show people either standing or kneeling as they participated in what came to be known as “ocular communion.” For them, it was enough to simply behold the miracle in which the wafer was transformed into the literal body of Christ.

During the Reformation, some churches revived the custom of sitting for Eucharist, either remaining in their pews and handing the elements along, or moving to tables in groups. Elsewhere, the custom

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remained for people to walk towards the altar to receive, forming a kind of procession. Towards the end of the twentieth century, some liturgical dancers began to argue that procession is a prototype of dance, and some churches have experimented with inviting the entire congregation to take that literally. At St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, a mural called *The Dancing Saints* surrounds the rotunda above the altar. Completed in 2009 by iconographer Mark Dukes, the icon consists of seventy saints who were chosen by members of the congregation, and includes such figures as Malcolm X, Queen Elizabeth, Rumi, and Ella Fitzgerald as well as more traditional Christian saints. Wearing clothing appropriate to the time and place in which they lived, the saints hold hands with one another while standing on one foot, the other lifted in a posture which suggests a step in the dance. As the Liturgy of the Word ends and the Liturgy of the Table begins, the congregation rises and turns towards the altar, each person placing a hand on the shoulder of the one ahead, echoing the saints above them by dancing their way towards the altar as they sing songs of praise and thanks.⁶

As these images remind us, there are many ways for the people of God to show their gratitude and joy for the gift of God's love and forgiveness. Whether they sit or kneel, stand or dance, they present their bodies in order to become what they receive, the body of Christ.

Notes

1. Sarah Cascone, "Does Fresco in Ancient Rome Catacombs Show Woman Priest?" in *Arnet Art and Exhibition* at <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/does-fresco-in-ancient-roman-catacombs-show-woman-priest-270018/>.
2. For more on images of communion in the early church, see <https://earlychurchhistory.org/beliefs-2/communion-in-the-early-church/>; and Gabriela E. Ingle, "The Significance of Dining in Late Roman and Early Christian Funerary Rites and Tomb Decoration" (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017), Edinburgh Research Archive, <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/25949>.
3. For more information and images from San Vitale see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_of_San_Vitale and "Why Orthodox Christians Stand During Services," Saint John the Evangelist Orthodox Church, <https://www.saintjohnchurch.org/standing-orthodox-church/>.
4. *Communion of Louis IX de France*, in William of St. Patrus, *Life and Miracles of St. Louis*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français 5716, fol. 61 verso, circa 1330-1340, illumination on parchment, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_IX/.
5. Anonymous (Ghent or Bruges), *Elevation of the Consecrated Host*, from the *Rothschild Prayerbook*, fol. 55, private collection published in Ruben Suykerbuyk, "Parish Liturgy," 2020, 10.1163/9789004433106_007, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Anonymous-Ghent-or-Bruges-Elevation-of-the-consecrated-host-from-the-Rothschild_fig2_372028445/. More information and images of Eucharist in medieval manuscripts may be seen in *Illuminating Faith: The Eucharist in Medieval Life and Art* at The Morgan Library and Museum, <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/illuminating-faith?id=73/>.
6. For more information and images of the dancing saints, see <https://saintgregorys.org/dancing-saints/>.



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