LITURGY,
MUSIC,
PREACHING,
AND THE ARTS

Call to Worship

Volume 57.4

Queering the Liturgy

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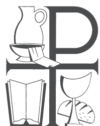

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Call to Worship

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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Front cover: Maria Fee, *Divine Theater*, detail, acrylic on paper, canvas, 2023

Back cover: Reed Fowler, Rainbow placemats warped onto a floor loom, 2023

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Call to Worship

Queering the Liturgy
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Statement on the Art throughout the Issue

Whether nest-like paper objects or large, multi-paneled canvas installations, my work reflects issues of locality, migration, multiformity, temporality, and transcendence. Micro or macro scale, the art performs placemaking strategies. Farraginous forms, overlapping and makeshift create immediate shelters, approachable sanctuaries. The fragile construction honors the authority of vulnerability. Layering, folding, piercing, and cutting materials afford corridors and apertures, visual pathways to access new vistas and inner sanctums. The bricolage method also refers to mestizo mode—the mixing of media and forms representing cultural mixing. As someone bridging two cultures, hybridity becomes a playful method reconciling disparateness, granting openness, largess, and fluid intimacies. Mestizo art operations are unifying tactics—a type of hospitality able to host diverse schemes.

—Maria Fee

Introduction

Sally Ann McKinsey

In her article "A Holy Discomfort: The Spiritual Work of Singing Welcome," Amanda Udis-Kessler defines *queering* as a practice of "making the familiar strange." While the collection of articles found here present many definitions of what it means to queer the liturgy, this one may unite them all. To queer worship is to use a particular lens to consider what we already believe and do together. Used as a verb, *to queer* is to practice nuance, claim particularity, and cultivate contextual awareness in our liturgical theology and practice, rejecting binaries that keep us from embracing the fullness of the God we find in the life of Jesus and in Scripture. When we practice queering worship, we recognize the ways we are actively being reformed according to the incarnate God we have always believed and the sacramental practice we have always known.

The liturgy and ideas presented in this edition share in common a deep grounding in the ecclesiology and theology we already affirm together. Both Elizabeth Edman and Kallie Pitcock center their investigations on the incarnational theology at the foundation of our faith as a lens for considering the act of queering. Reed Fowler, a fiber artist and pastor, also uses incarnational and sacramental theology to examine the relationship between faith practice and queerness through art practice.

Other contributors have offered compelling explorations of the language we use in worship. Stephanie Budwey and Heather Gottas Moore collaborate to offer an analysis of a case in which a congregation sought to reform their language in worship. Amanda Udis-Kessler gives skillful and compassionate analysis of the awareness needed when seeking to sing welcome in worship, which involves conversation about language and context in congregational song. Jess Cook, Kenneth Cuthbertson, and Amanda Udis-Kessler offer practical liturgies and prayers that model both possibilities for the kinds of rituals congregations can offer and specific language for prayer within them.

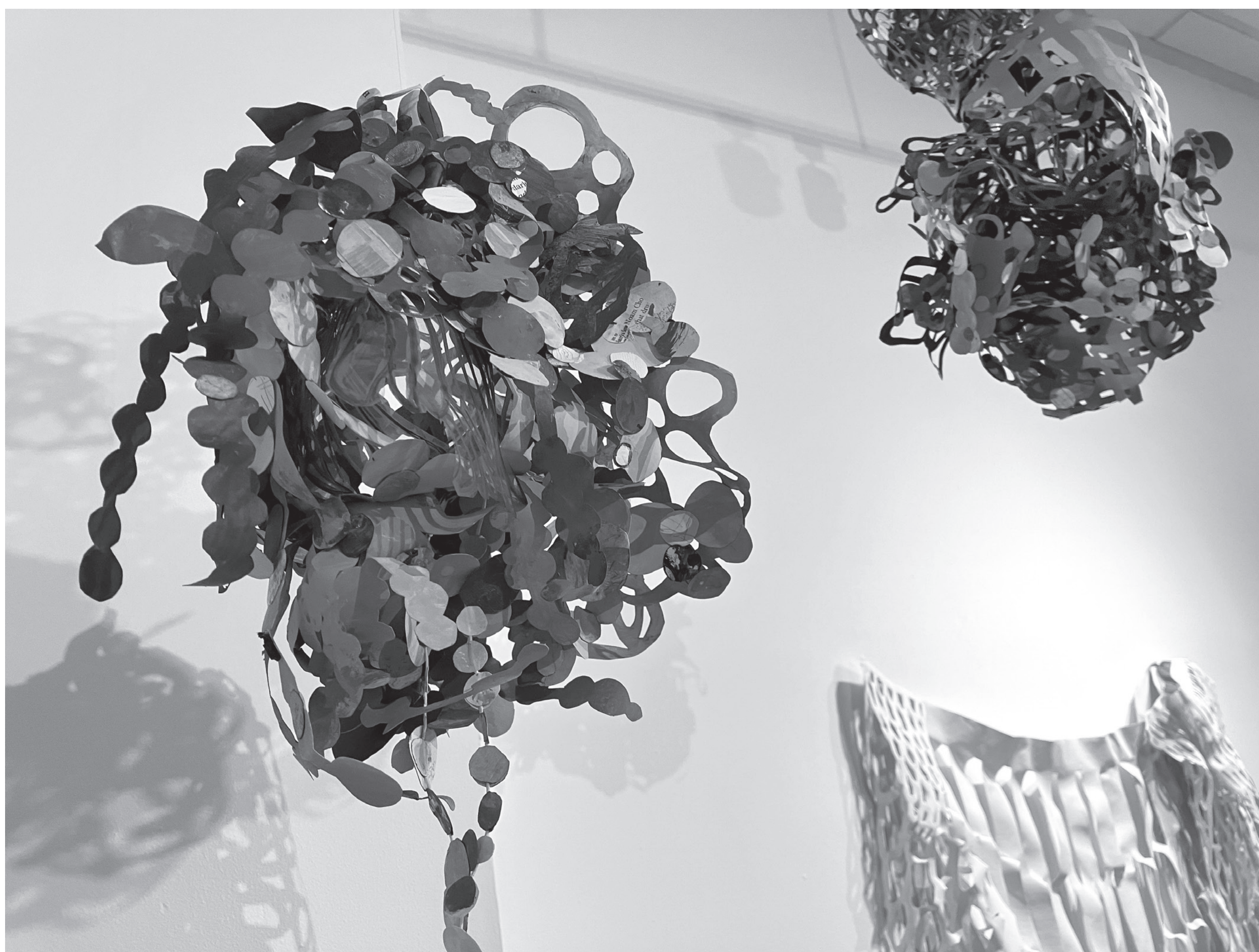
Brian Ellison gives a beautiful testimony about his experience in ministry and invites us to consider the relationship between a Reformed understanding of ordination and the particular identity of a worship leader. Amy Cerniglia's column on music also explores the gifts of worship leaders and in particular the gifts of LGBTQIA+ identifying musicians. Jess Cook discusses the role of the Spirit in the practice of queering the church, which involves vulnerability and seeks wholeness for persons and communities in the midst of upheaval and crisis.

This issue affirms the relationship between the disciplines of theology and queer and trans studies in the conversation about what it means to queer Christian practice. Columnists Derrick McQueen and Lis Valle-Ruiz discuss the connections between liturgy and queer theory in their columns for this issue. Art columnist Maria Fee writes about approaching worship with the lens of contemporary art theory and the importance of methods like juxtaposition and rupture when doing liturgical theology. In the Work of Our Hands section, Derrick McQueen offers an analysis of the worship at Not So Churchy, a new worshiping community, providing an example of a community that uses some of these methods to think about liturgy and community life. This section also seeks to blur the boundaries between liturgy, art, and music as a way to think about queerness in practice.

This issue in particular offers an invitation to recognize the strengths of a journal format when considering topics in the life of the church. A journal is a publication in which different authors' perspectives are presented side by side, and because of that, authors have an opportunity to converse. A journal is a collection of ideas, curated not because they agree, but because they inform one another. My editorial invitation is for you to listen and give thanks for the research and writing gathered here, to be challenged

and comforted, and to seek your own perspective somewhere in the midst. This work reflects years and years of wisdom, discernment, conversation, proclamation, and heartache in the church. As I recognize the gifts of these contributors and the many nuanced perspectives offered here, I also give thanks for the countless others who have contributed to this larger conversation over the years. May the Spirit transform us as we learn more and more what it means to follow an incarnate, living God.

—Sally Ann McKinsey,
Editor



Maria Fee
Nests: *"Le Regard Surplombant"* and *"Hereness,"* acrylic on paper, 2023

Feature Articles

Queering the Liturgy: Living the Essence of Our Faith

Elizabeth Edman

Christian liturgy, the living of these stories, the worship of this God—there are few moments when I feel so alive as when I am engaged in that vital space, pulsing with God's presence. It is up there with really good sex, with fierce anger, with floating effortlessly in the ocean, with being overcome by the surf and pounded mercilessly onto abrasive sand.[1]

Good liturgy may be innovative or ancient, contemplative or active, repetitive or transitory. But most importantly, whatever the form or format, good liturgy must be alive. Liturgy is supposed to wake us up, not lull us to sleep—physically or spiritually. In my experience, the best liturgy heightens my awareness and helps me see/feel/things like I've never seen/felt/thought them before.

So why queer liturgy? What does it help us to do and to be? What does Queering the Liturgy free up, make possible?

Let's take a moment to consider what the word *queer* means. You may be familiar with the idea of queer as verb. Queer theory posits that to queer is to disrupt false binaries. In particular, queer sexuality disrupts the false binary of male and female. This queer approach to binaries has helped me think in a new way about Christian faith, where I see a relentless disruption of false binaries. For example: Was Jesus human or was he divine? Well, we Christians say he was both. After the resurrection, was he alive or had he died? We say both. And when Jesus touched people who were ritually unclean in order to heal them, were his actions sacred or were they profane? Well, both!

One of the biggest binaries that Jesus challenges his followers to rupture is the one between self and other. You see this all the time in Jesus' parables, like the story of the Good Samaritan. Paul followed suit. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). These were the biggest binaries of Paul's day, and he queered every one of them.

These rupturings—these queerings—are not peripheral to Christianity. Both theologically and ethically, they are the very heart of the Christian movement, which is why I argue that *authentic Christianity is and must be queer*.[2]

So let's be clear: it isn't important to queer Christian liturgy because it's a way of showing that the church can be nice to LGBTQ+ folks. It is important because if we Christians aren't aware of the queerness of our tradition—if we aren't living into it by bringing it to life in our worship —then we aren't grasping the most important, challenging, and vivifying aspects of the Christian movement.

Let's turn that last sentence around. Rather than focusing on what might be lost by neglecting queerness, let's focus for a moment on what is gained by embracing queerness and living into it liturgically. Queering the Liturgy creates opportunities to dig into what any liturgy means/offers/makes possible/enacts. Looking at liturgy through a queer lens can freshen our perspective, challenge convention, pose new questions, and breathe new life into worship.

To explore what I mean, I invite you to take a walk with me through two experiences I have had Queering the Liturgy. One, Glitter+Ash, was an explicit attempt to be liturgically queer. The other

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came long before Glitter+Ash and was simply an attempt to be *real*. A community came together to dig deeply into the most significant moments in our liturgical year—the narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—asking, "What do these events mean for us now?" Because queerness depends so much on honesty and authenticity, let's start our walk there, in a small church in Hell's Kitchen on the west side of Manhattan.

The Passion of Christ in Real Time

As a young adult fresh out of seminary, I was blessed to find St. Clement's Episcopal Church. St. Clement's houses an off-Broadway theater and as a result has long held particular appeal both to theater professionals and to LGBTQ people. When I was there, the theater was always dark during Holy Week. We reserved the space to live as fully as we could into the drama of the last week of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We had a beautiful garden of repose on Maundy Thursday. Congregants would sign up for hourly slots to ensure that someone was in the space keeping vigil throughout the night.

And so it was that in 1998 I found myself sitting in that lavish garden dreaming about what it would be like if the story we were enacting somehow actually came to life around me. What if soldiers suddenly showed up to arrest Jesus? What if we were sitting around a fire eyeing Peter suspiciously when the cock crowed at sunrise?

In hindsight I can see that the entire exercise was shot through with queerness. First and foremost, it was an attempt to situate ourselves inside the story. In my work with queer folk struggling to overcome hateful religious rhetoric, one of the hardest challenges is dismantling the notion that the authority of Scripture exists outside of them. So many people walk around with the idea that the essential narrative of our faith is "over there," or "back then"—not living and breathing in us right now. This is something that Jewish liturgy does well, living into vital stories as if they were happening to us: "When *we* were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt . . ."[3] That night in the garden, I dreamt of a liturgy that would queer the space between those people back then and us trying to live our faith right now.

A few weeks later I brought this idea to our then-rector, the Rev. Barbara Cawthorne Crafton. She invited me to lunch and introduced me to Ken Arnold, a contemplative writer, editor, and deacon who had just been assigned to St. Clements. Barbara cut to the chase: "Liz has this idea to do some kind of experiential liturgy around the Triduum.[4] Ken, I think you would be the perfect partner for her." And he was.

I can see now that impulses I'd gleaned from queer community were already at work: imagination, a desire for an immersive experience, the need to find strong partners, and the impulse to share the dream with others and see it come to life in community. What we developed was a twenty-two-hour liturgy running from the evening of Maundy Thursday through 3 P.M. on Good Friday. In addition to the queer impulses listed above, I can see that both the event and the planning process embodied numerous principles that are foundational to queer liturgical planning.

Principle #1: *Queerness starts from a place of accountability, which requires soul searching, hard listening, and disciplined truth telling.*

A common criticism about religious embrace of LGBTQ+ people is that affirming denominations have thrown off the teachings of the church for the sake of a contemporary morality that blows with the wind. Queer ethics are not a form of moral relativism. Rather, queerness demands rigorous honesty as you negotiate the challenging terrain between the vagaries of human experience and what you know in your bones to be true. When planning liturgy, it matters to model this principle by allowing Scripture itself to speak truthfully, listening hard to what the text actually says while also listening hard to what is emerging in our souls—our memories, our instincts, our desires, our fears.

Together, Ken and I organized a multi-week Bible study of the passion narratives in all four Gospels. We started in January, during Epiphany. We took turns leading the sessions, both of us Bible nerds in love with Scripture and deeply committed to responsible readings of the text. In class, we read the stories slowly, with care. We looked at words and phrases, wondering aloud what they might signify, both of us bringing insights we had gleaned from our studies. We invited participants to pay attention to whatever caught their eye. What took us by surprise? What didn't sit right? What were we hearing that we had never heard that way before? What felt suddenly fresh, real, alive? Those sparks became touchstones for us as Lent arrived and we turned to planning the liturgy itself.

The question that had begun to dominate our conversations was, "What was this long night like for the disciples?" We knew we were not attempting any kind of traditional passion play that simply enacted the story (again, as if the characters onstage were somehow separate from us). We wanted to find a way to immerse ourselves in the story and let it play out around us and in us. Hoping that such immersion would lead to greater understanding not just of these three days but also of core teachings of our faith, we wanted to cultivate access to what James Allison describes so beautifully as "Oh! So that's what I've been involved in!"[5]

We paid close attention to the movement of plot, including the physical movement of the narrative from place to place. We decided to incorporate physical movement into the liturgy, inviting people to move just as the disciples had. St. Clement's had long hosted an Agape meal on Maundy Thursday evening. We began there, noting with gratitude that this traditional liturgy was already immersive and experiential, with people reclining at tables and washing one another's feet.

Principle #2: *Always pay attention to community, and be aware of how your community/ies extend beyond the walls of whatever space you inhabit, be it physical or spiritual.*

Queer ethics demand an awareness not just of one's own situation, but also of the impact of individual choices on the larger community. Thus, for instance, queer and trans people have historically grappled with the paradox that while coming out as individuals places us at risk, it is in being seen that we establish greater safety for our people. At our best (and we are not always at our best), queer and trans people cultivate awareness and appreciation of the fact that we are an intersectional people, that no one person's experience tells the entire story, and that making room for a multiplicity of perspectives is the best way to understand what is actually going on.

From a Christian perspective, the intense focus on Jesus as a singular, unique human can create barriers to this kind of communal awareness. In our planning we worked hard not to separate anyone out, to share roles. There was no single Jesus, no single Peter. We were aware of ourselves as members of a larger church. Thanks to the generosity and liturgical courage of several neighboring parishes, our liturgy followed this path: from the Agape meal at St. Clement's, we walked the twenty-six blocks to St. Peter's in Chelsea and seated ourselves in the beautiful garden behind their rectory. There we rested, prayed, chanted, and tried not to fall asleep.

We grappled openly with fear that our most beloved person/place/community could be savagely ripped from us. We each brought a talisman representing what we treasured most in the world. We were encouraged to hold our talismans and reflect on them. As it grew late, the peace was suddenly shattered by a group rising and forcefully grabbing one of our members, standing in the place of Jesus, and taking them a bit roughly out to the street. Not everyone knew when this would happen. "Whatever talisman you brought, HIDE IT," we were instructed. "It is not safe. Hide it on your person. Hide it now!" Each of us decided in that moment whether to follow Jesus and the soldiers out to the street, or to flee.

Those who followed walked another nine blocks south to St. John's in the Village. St. John's has a courtyard where we were able to build a fire and sit together warming our hands. We talked. We sang. We wondered aloud what was happening and what was coming. Someone encircled us slowly, singing a cappella Patti Smith's "Walkin' Blind" from *Dead Man Walking*. Twice a spotlight was shone on different Peters among us; twice Peter deflected, denied. We timed the third denial to take place exactly at dawn, and we all rose abruptly to gather our things as fast as we could and get out.

From there we traveled to General Seminary to participate in a mock trial of Jesus. The first year, this didn't work as well as we wanted—it was a bit too much "passion play-esque," so the next year we went instead to a public park and played a modified game of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" that we called "Who Wants to Be Rome?" Following the format of the game show in which contestants are asked increasingly difficult questions, our players were asked questions about crises in the world and/or our adherence to Jesus' most fundamental teachings ("How many people are incarcerated in New York City right now? How many times per year do you visit someone in prison? Have you *ever* visited someone in prison?")[6] Upon missing a question, the player was instructed to "Build That Cross!" Together, piece by piece, feeling waves of embarrassment at what we did not know or had not done, we constructed a large cross. Hoisting it up, we enacted the Stations of the Cross en route

back to St. Clement's. Arriving back at our home church at noon, we held a three-hour preaching service in which participants reflected on what we'd experienced. We took out our precious talismans, held them close, and quietly nailed them to the cross. I remember reading Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival."[7] At 3 P.M., we departed in silence.

Principle #3: *Queer liturgy must respect and draw inspiration from lived experience of queer people, elevating queer experience as authoritative.*

We Christians face two big challenges in adopting queer practices. The first is that we will continue to view queer liturgy as merely a gesture of welcome to LGBTQ+ people, a feel-good exercise that tends to be relegated to Pride Month. Something much bigger is at stake. Attaching "queerness" to core Christian concepts like Jesus' status as God/human or his complex relationship to death/resurrection creates the potential for Christians to perceive something new and different and valuable when they see a queer *person*. So we don't queer liturgy to "be nice to queer people." We queer liturgy because queerness is an essential movement of Christian faith, and the best way to understand how queerness is at work in our faith is by stepping into it deliberately, liturgically.

The second challenge is that many of us are part of an emerging movement in which we claim an identity as "queer Christians" regardless of our sexual and gender identity. This is a good thing. *And* I am keenly aware of the danger of misappropriating queerness as an identity marker. As Christians adopt queerness as a theological lens, it matters to underscore that *queering by the church must never become merely a theological exercise that ignores the lives of queer people.*

The most effective and important way to address both of these challenges is for Christians to continue explicitly to lift up queer experience itself as authoritative.

The Passion in Real Time drew implicitly on the authority of queer experience. Most of the event took place in Chelsea and Greenwich Village, two of the gayest historical neighborhoods in New York City. Many of the people involved in planning this liturgy were sexually queer. We knew what it was to walk those streets knowing ourselves to be at risk simply for being who we were. We explicitly connected that risk to the experience of the disciples during the terrifying hours from Thursday night to Friday afternoon. The experience of such fear—fear on the streets, fear of exposure, fear that something you love desperately could be taken from you—has always informed, indeed been central to my uptake of the gospel message and of Holy Week specifically. Of course, we now talk openly about the ways that religious authority is itself the greatest threat to queer safety. If I were to do this liturgy again, I would ask that we pay specific attention to the ways that religious denigration blocks queer access to whatever might be spiritually salvific in the passion narrative.

Principle #4: Queer experience is not the only experience that should be authoritative for Christianity, a faith that draws together different kinds of people with particular attention to people who have been marginalized and brutalized, and a faith that itself has brutalized others.

Christianity demands a shift from "you are welcome" to "you have things to teach me about God, about how God works, about my own faith." This shift does not apply only to queer experience. Black and brown experience, Indigenous experience, the experience of people with disabilities, of people who have fled their homes and arrived in a strange new land seeking asylum, these and so many more iterations of human experience of struggle and hope must inform our understanding of God. Such perspectives are crucial to any authentic read on our faith and represent a fundamental shift from "welcome" to shared power.

The Passion in Real Time worked to tone down anti-Semitism by emphasizing Rome's role in Jesus' execution. As Americans, Ken and I wanted us to grapple with the fact that the United States is the greatest military force in the world, and that we are the ones now exerting massive pressure on local governments and political movements for justice the world over.

If I were to do this liturgy again, I would pay greater attention to the ways that the passion narrative has been weaponized horrifically against Jewish people. The Episcopal Church is one of many that has in recent years been digging into our Holy Week liturgies, Good Friday especially, to rewrite language that implicitly and explicitly villainizes Jews. This is important work. Yet so much more needs to be done to address the anti-Semitism that is baked into central stories of the Christian tradition.

One of the best ways to cultivate our awareness is to walk around in the stories themselves, liturgically. I would want us not to sidestep quite so neatly the role that religious authority played in Jesus' execution, while recognizing, crucially, that for Jesus and the disciples, the religious authority involved in these stories is not the religious authority of "the Jews," that is, "those people over there, who are not us." No, the events of this week are about us grappling with our own people, with our own religious authority. Christians in the United States and in many parts of the world wield enormous political power. Holy Week is an unparalleled opportunity to explore how we use that power, how our religious leaders collude with political leaders to oppress and brutalize, and the depth to which we are caught up in our own fear about what risks we are and are not willing to take in a terrifyingly unjust world. Drawing on queerness as a liturgical lens can help us do this well, partly because:

Principle #5: *Queerness of any kind involves our bodies and depends upon deep wisdom that is embodied, incarnate, physically manifested.*

By embodying our teachings, liturgically, we are better equipped to feel *in our bodies* whether we are getting it right or wrong. Queer liturgy has the power to beta test all those linguistic efforts to clean up any liturgy that we know to be oppressive, pressing the questions: This is good, but is it enough? Does something still feel amiss? How would my body feel if other kinds of bodies were listening in on what we are saying and doing? Is there still a small voice of discomfort? Whose voice am I not yet hearing? What would it take to heed that voice, to be guided by it, to honor it?

Glitter+Ash

Unlike the Passion in Real Time, Glitter+Ash[8] was an explicit attempt to explore queerness in one of the most powerful liturgies of the Christian year: Ash Wednesday. Realizing that Christians "come out" visibly on Ash Wednesday, I wondered how people might come out as "visibly Queer + visibly Christian." I have written in other places about the origin and impact of Glitter+Ash.[9] In short: my girlfriend at the time suggested mixing glitter into the ash being imposed on participating congregants' foreheads. I wrote a short prayer service for the ritual. In New York, we launched the event at the Stonewall National Monument in Greenwich Village. Standing for an hour or more at the Christopher Street subway stop, we offered glitter ashes a la "ashes to go." A small pamphlet explained the liturgy, and we made sure people understood what they were receiving before we imposed glitter ashes. Only one person declined them that morning. We worked hard to communicate the serious theology undergirding the ritual.[10]

The effort was not well served by the very article that brought international attention to it.[11] I will never forget my horror in reading the lede: "Lighten up, Ash Wednesday." Thankfully, many Christian communities across the world embraced the call for a powerful, queer-positive Christian witness; and many of these communities took seriously the theological complexity—the liturgical queerness—of mixing glitter and ash. But for many Christians, that one spurious sentence defined the entire movement. Many nominally LGBTQ-friendly Christians dismissed Glitter+Ash as shallow, superficial, and blasphemous.

As I look back on how the event played out in its first year, 2017, I am struck more than ever by a final queer principle that was at work before our very eyes, yet that somehow in the moment did not make its way to consciousness:

Principle #6: *Queer liturgy must scandalize.*

The Christian gospel is inherently scandalous, and our liturgies should make that scandal visible, palpable. The Christian narrative depends on the proclamation of ideas that challenge, unsettle, and disturb: God comes to Earth as a defenseless baby; the people who are most despised are the ones we have the most to learn from; salvation required Jesus and his followers—including perhaps us—to engage in courageous truth-telling and community building that put him on a path to shame, torture, and death. There is nothing easy or intuitive about any of these statements. Yet over the course of two millennia, these ideas have been simultaneously normalized, sanitized, and worst of all, used in the service of imperial power. It is nearly impossible in the twenty-first century to comprehend the depth with which the essential Christian narrative is designed to shock us, to wake us up, and in shocking and awakening us, inspire us to co-create entirely new ways of living together.

On this score, Glitter+Ash both succeeded and failed. The liturgy was certainly an invitation to

gaze upon Christian scandal. I myself was at first shocked and yes, scandalized at the idea of mixing glitter into the ash. It took me a while to come around. But I think I let myself slide out of the discomfort too quickly. I wish we had explored it more thoughtfully. Scandal is very difficult to sit with for any length of time, especially if you are the one wearing it on your forehead. Scandal is simply too infused with shame to be comfortable. You have to be able to adopt the queer-on-steroids perspective of a drag queen throwing her shade, "You need me to be a scandal for your impoverished world view? Well, honey [snap], so be it."

In terms of manifesting scandal, Glitter+Ash succeeded. There was fierce backlash among people who were horrified at the thought of sullying ashes with glitter. Those who were scandalized were exactly the people who most needed to be scandalized: progressive mainline Christians who would have considered themselves exemplars of LGBTQ inclusion. No doubt the scandal continues to succeed in places where the liturgy is still practiced. But it also failed, for the same reason that Christianity often fails to sustain its inherent, unspoken scandalousness: it was too easy for people to roll their eyes with liturgical propriety and disdain for the new and different. The event, to my knowledge, was entirely ignored by conservative Christians and by the Catholic church. I say that the backlash was "fierce," but in fact my mainline kin largely expressed themselves in cutting comments whispered sotto voce behind the backs of us organizers. I recall only one Episcopal priest, a lesbian offended by the gesture, who came to me directly to question what on earth we were doing. Bereft of a clear "theology of scandal," it was simply too easy to dismiss Glitter+Ash, and thus to ignore it.

And here let me explain what I do not mean about scandal: I do not mean that queer liturgy must provoke simply for the sake of provocation. I suspect that's a common source of resistance to queer liturgy: fear that we'll wander into a land of over-the-top queer performance art never to be seen again.

Good queer liturgy may be comforting and sometimes must be comforting. Sometimes it must be intentionally provocative, and that's not just okay but important. Queer liturgy, for instance, is perhaps uniquely positioned to question the degree to which specific liturgical practices have become idols, not just gesturing to God but revered as if the gesture was God. But always, always, careful thought must be given to the question, "How can people enter this space and reside here for a time?" If our liturgy is to challenge conventional notions about "the way things are supposed to be," we must ask, "How can we endure whatever shame arises in this moment of scandal, process that shame, and come out in a new place?" Precisely because liturgy is fundamentally about stepping into the presence of the sacred, it always matters to ask, "Where is the hope? How are we connecting to God, with others, and how is this space accomplishing or thwarting those connections?"

If I were to revisit Glitter+Ash, or for others who are still enacting the ritual, that's an area that might bear some specific ongoing attention: using the liturgy not just to celebrate the joy and wonder of queer people, but also to sit with the shame of scandal. Perhaps in doing so, we really might touch the miraculous paradox of shame and joy, of captivity and freedom, that exists in the very marrow of the Christian tradition.

So, coming all the way back to the questions we started with—"Why does any of this matter? What does queer liturgy help us to do and to be?"—I offer you a final note.

At almost every speaking event I've done since the summer of 2020, someone has unmuted themselves to ask this question, "My church [diocese/presbytery/fill in the blank] has been open and affirming for years. What is crystal clear is that it is not enough. What should we be doing now?" It is exactly the right question, and there is no one size fits all answer. For any Christian community, the first step is to engage the question—to press it, explore it, walk around in it. For those communities brave enough to step boldly, I truly believe that Queering the Liturgy can help us find our way forward. Liturgy itself has a power to inspire and awaken like nothing else. Done well, queer liturgy invites us to dive deeply into an authentic read of Scripture and of the Christian tradition. Requiring that we look within our souls while cultivating an awareness of other perspectives, queerness demands accountability both of our individual selves and our communities. Making room for our bodies to move and to speak will free up wisdom that otherwise might go unheard and unheeded. And with specific, explicit attention to scandal, queer liturgy has vast potential to reveal what is most surprising, challenging, and vivifying in the faith that Jesus has

invited us into, intrepidly, wearing our desire and courage on our sleeves, bringing all the queer love we can to a world that needs it desperately.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 6.
2. Edman, *Queer Virtue*, 3.
3. During a Passover Seder, the story of the Exodus is told as if the events had happened to the people around the table. Passover liturgies, or Haggadot, are endlessly adaptable (see https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-haggadah), focusing on an array of Jewish experiences including The Stonewall Seder for queer Jews.
4. Triduum means literally "three days" and refers to the sacred time that falls between Thursday of Holy Week and Easter Sunday.
5. James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd Ltd, 2006), 64.
6. I wrote the questions myself and today am struck by the privilege and obliviousness in my assumption that people in our group would never have been caught up in the carceral system. Different perspectives really do make for liturgy that is truer, more honest.
7. Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn: Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978).
8. I will always be grateful to Parity, a Presbyterian-born organization, which immediately embraced this idea and came on board as organizational partner. Deep thanks especially to Marian Edmonds-Allen, Parity's executive director, who continues to make Glitter+Ash resources available to any community that wants them.
9. Elizabeth Edman, "The Price of Glitter," Beacon Broadside: A Project of Beacon Press, June 16, 2017, https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2017/06/the-price-of-glitter.html/.
10. Elizabeth Edman, "It's a Black Smudge," Queer Virtue, https://www.queervirtue.com/about-ga/.
11. Kimberly Winston, "'Glitter Ash Wednesday' Sparkles for LGBTQ Christians," Religion News Service, February 14, 2017, https://religionnews.com/2017/02/14/glitter-ash-wednesday-sparkles-for-lgbt-christians-and-others/.

Maria Fee
Divine Theater, detail, acrylic on paper, canvas, 2023

And Also with You: The Identity of the Worship Leader, and Why It Matters

Brian Ellison

The Presbyterian congregation in which I was baptized and grew up was a loving congregation of faithful folks, where I learned a lot of what was important about being a Christian. I'll always be grateful to Sunday school teachers and youth pastors who schooled me in Bible verses and Christian love. They also planted and fostered what would become a lifelong passion for crafting and leading worship; those weeks letting teenagers run the sound system or preach on Youth Sunday have more impact than we sometimes know.

But if I'm being honest, those early years left me woefully underinformed about some things that would later become critical in my spiritual journey. For starters, the congregation—for all its love and compassion—wasn't on the forward edge of LGBTQIA+ inclusion. I was a gay kid, and a Christian, but I never saw up close a version of faith and practice that would have allowed for the possibility I could be both. Surer of my religious affiliation than my sexual identity, I celebrated the former and suppressed the latter. My earliest experiences of leading worship were times when I gained experience and compliments, but I always held them in tension with the fullness of who I was. That continued—through years of an evangelical campus fellowship in college, and even in my years of seminary—until a bifurcation of my identity from my liturgical leadership presence became the only way I knew to preach and publicly pray.

The second thing I did not learn about in my home church was . . . robes. I learned about the joy and beauty and underlying theology of Reformed worship only once I was in seminary on the East Coast. But my West Coast Presbyterian church didn't even use the denomination's hymnal. I remember talk of "seeker-sensitive" worship that could reach "the unchurched." I don't remember saying a communal prayer of confession or singing the Gloria Patri. And mostly, I have almost no memory of ministers wearing robes. The first time I wore a black Geneva gown regularly, as a seminary intern, felt profoundly significant. And the thing I remember most was the stated reason someone taught me why Reformed ministers wear the plain black robe: to downplay the identity of the individual wearing it. No fancy suit or dress, no personality-displaying outfit to steal the show. The robe states plainly: this isn't about me; it's about God.

Looking back, I can now see the ways the bifurcation of my LGBTQIA+ identity from my sense of call to preaching the gospel was profoundly damaging, both emotionally and ecclesiastically. My work with the Covenant Network of Presbyterians[1] still introduces me almost weekly to examples of the aftermath and continuing impact of generations of ministers' exclusion, hiding in closets, and bringing less than their full selves to worship.

But even as we celebrate the progress of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and many mainline churches in opening the doors to ordination for those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, as our presence in pulpits is less novel, I wonder about that historic (metaphorical) commitment to the plain black robe. That is, how much *should* the identity of the preacher or worship leader actually matter to the congregation they are leading? As we speak of "queering worship" and strengthening the inclusivity of our congregations, do we risk making it "all about us" rather than about God? Or, rather, do we need to start viewing identity and worship leadership through an entirely different lens?

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"I Love to See You up There"

There's really no denying that whatever our Reformed theology or history may say about minimizing the personal identity of the worship leader, the modern congregation cares very much about who is leading them. The experience of hearing Scripture or song is and always has been about both text and context, about the speech and the speaker.

Consider what happens on Christmas Eve in the traditional Lessons and Carols service that the BBC broadcasts each year, when a single child soloist opens the service singing the first verse of "Once in Royal David's City" *a capella*. Or when an elementary-school-age kid in a clear and high-pitched tone reads Isaiah's pastoral vision of the wolf and the lamb lying down together and a little child leading them. Perhaps there are times when such a moment in worship is one of distracting cuteness and saccharine sweetness. But for the worshiper who gives themselves to the experience, there is a depth that may not otherwise be heard—the promise of deliverance through the leadership of one who begins as an innocent child, the hope of eternity held in one not so different from the stuttering, hair-slicked-back, new-Easter-dress-wearing beloved one—the one we all saw baptized just a few years ago. The Word incarnate.

Or think of another worship moment, one in which a recently widowed man rises and walks slowly to the lectern. The bulletin will declare he is about to read a psalm that speaks of God's faithfulness, but the congregation will be thinking only of his marriage of many decades, the sadness in his eyes, the shake in his voice. He will say, "You will not fear the terror of the night," and they will think of him lying alone in their big old house. He will say, "With long life I will satisfy them, and will show them my salvation," and the people will ponder the blessing of longevity in a new way. It's not just what the people are thinking based on their relationships that is significant. The reading will seem significant even to a first-time visitor, inflected with grief and faith unique to its reader. Anyone could have read Psalm 91, but only this man could have read it this way, on this day. This, we believe, is how the Holy Spirit moves in worship.

It is not such a surprise, then, that the LGBTQIA+ identity of preachers and worship leaders would matter. It always has, of course; queer folks have been serving the church since long before their identities were recognized, much less celebrated. But as the sexual and gender identity of those called to lead worship have come to be something that can be discussed more openly, we might ask what particularities their identity contributes to the experience of a worshiping community. Every individual obviously brings their own story, their own joys and traumas, their own barriers and triumphs. Even so, certain common experiences of the community might be instructive to observe.

Few communities have experienced a systematic exclusion of the sort that LGBTQIA+ people have in the church. Certainly, the church has a long history of oppressing and demeaning all sorts of people on the basis of their sex, race, ethnicity, language, age, and marital status; normative standards have long elevated those occupying particular places of power and privilege—and we still do, of course. But the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in modern Protestant churches, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is unique in both its nature and its recency. Unlike those who long suffered because of their sex or race in our churches, gay and lesbian people could be systematically and explicitly excluded from ordination as ministers, elders, and deacons because their lives were *sinful*.[2] The principle being invoked against allowing LGBTQIA+ people to preach the Word and call God's people to prayer was that of purity: queer folks had no business representing God to the people, because their lives were too divergent from God's intentions. They lacked the credibility, the worthiness, the integrity to lead God's people. Needless to say, this context presented a barrier far more difficult to overcome than by simply illustrating an inequity of access to the pulpit.

And of course, the church's emphasis on the sinfulness of LGBTQIA+ people's lives was still being proclaimed and enforced by the church's polity well past the time when other aspects of society were providing substantial legal and social protections for them. (Speeches on the floor of the PC(USA) General Assembly as recently as 2014, in debating a change to constitutional language about marriage, still invoked hateful stereotypes and false assumptions about the nature of same-sex relationships.) Only in 2018 did the General Assembly actually take action to celebrate the gifts of LGBTQIA+ people for ministry and to affirm the full dignity and humanity of transgender and non-binary persons.[3] For the LGBTQIA+ community, the history of discrimination is not a painful but distant

memory; rather, it has been a lived reality for almost every LGBTQIA+ person serving the church today.

These twin realities about LGBTQIA+ exclusion in the church profoundly shape the context in which any worship leadership offered by queer folks occurs. It is true that in some congregations, the ministry of the openly LGBTQIA+ pastor has now been celebrated for a decade or more. It may not be the first thing that either the minister or the congregant thinks about on any given Sunday. But these islands of uneventful full inclusion are the exception rather than the rule. And I would suggest that even in these spaces, there is still something going on beneath the surface that does not occur with straight, cisgender worship leaders.

For starters, the LGBTQIA+ preacher who stands before a congregation harbors an ever-present awareness that there is almost certainly someone in the congregation who has a concern, a problem, a misgiving about listening to such a person. The pastor of a congregation may know very well in whose chest that skeptical heart is beating; not knowing does not make it any easier to act as though all is well. The impact of this abiding wariness may have both benefits and costs. It may make the preacher more attentive to the details, surer of the citations, more careful in their articulations. But it may also lead to a greater hesitation, masked as sensitivity—a fear of saying what needs to be said so as not to "rock the boat" or "stir the pot."

In reality, the LGBTQIA+ preacher brings a lot of gifts and experience that any other preacher would not bring. The queer preacher has the opportunity to preach a word about God's faithfulness that is sharpened by hard experience—much as the newly widowed person reading about the promise of eternal life. The queer reader of Scripture can offer a vivid depiction when reciting Mary's declaration that the lowly will be lifted up or retelling the generous outreach of Jesus to those who society feared to touch—not so different from the child speaking in clear, uncynical tones about a peaceable kingdom. And when Scripture takes the congregation to difficult places—to the "clobber" passages that have been inappropriately used to victimize LGBTQIA+ people in ages past, or to Old Testament depictions of marriage and sexuality the modern listener finds troubling—it is often the LGBTQIA+ minister who can, by virtue of their demonstrated confidence in God's Word despite its historic use against them, redeem it with broader vision and new understanding.

There is, of course, diversity within the queer community. In today's church, the transgender or non-binary[4] person brings a particular set of perspectives and experiences that inform the interaction between worship leader and worshiping community. Trans folks were never explicitly prohibited from ordained roles in most denominations, but the exclusion—backed by social custom and comfort rather than by polity—has in some ways proven even more insidious. As contemporary politics has seized upon the trans community as a target for discriminatory laws for electoral gain, those trans and non-binary folks who would lead God's people may find the glare of the chancel lights a little harsher these days. A constant need to educate—about names and pronouns, about biology and culture—makes simply being present in the worship moment a challenge for many, even in the most well-intentioned congregational settings.

But here, too, the identity of the worship leader brings real opportunities. In some cases, the non-binary person may be a visible testimony that steers us away from oversimplified binary thinking. Reductionist readings of Scripture that portray moral choices as simple or temporal judgments as absolute are more difficult to retain when the one leading us is modeling the fluidity of God's creation. It is not so surprising that a preacher who has had to view life through an evolving lens of personal identity might show more grace and patience and agility in connecting with the varying perspectives of the persons in the pews.

Robes and Closets

While a modern focus on "queering worship" may cast new light on the identity of the worship leader, the reality is that recognizing the uniqueness of each new generation's voices and faces has always been part of the Reformed tradition. The pastor, in particular, has always been expected to bring all of themselves to the work, and our appreciation for what is included in that fullness has expanded through the centuries. We speak of vocation, provide housing, approve terms of compensation that include words like "so that you may be free of all worldly care and avocation"—all because we historically presumed that this particular office is somehow supposed to encompass all of its holder's being (for better and for worse). But what happens when the person leading worship is still struggling to name or accept their sexual orientation or gender

identity themselves? What about situations where they deem it unsafe, or premature, or disruptive to claim the fullness of who they are in the presence of the faith community?

Even today, more than a decade since the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) began permitting ordination of openly LGBTQIA+ individuals, I become aware almost every week of ministers, elders, and laypeople who are serving "in the closet" to varying degrees. They are certain enough of their own identity to be sharing that information with me and with other people they trust the most, but not confident about the impact it would have should they "drop a bomb on the congregation" and speak openly about who they are. Some fear for their jobs. Others worry about causing controversy and division. Still others believe they would be personally supported but, like a minister covering up a smart outfit with a plain Geneva gown, they can't bear the thought of the congregation paying more attention to them than to the gospel.

This was, in some ways, my own dilemma in the early 2000s when I was serving as pastor of a Presbyterian congregation. The church I served was lovely and welcoming, supportive of me and growing in faith and numbers. I was a closeted gay man who had only in the closing season of seminary really acknowledged my identity to myself. When I finally allowed myself the possibility of (semi-secretive) dating and entered into a relationship (with my now partner of twenty years), I found that the fullness of my identity now had to be dealt with in the context of my ministry. Coming out and expecting to continue in service felt likely to cause division or discomfort for a congregation I loved. Quietly walking away seemed unfaithful to the movement of the Spirit that was happening in that growing congregation. Breaking off the relationship seemed untrue to myself and my partner and in any case didn't really solve the problem. So faced with what seemed an impossible choice, I didn't do any of those things; I continued serving as a pastor and preacher, but without talking about my sexual identity at church. I remained in that parish until the denomination's policy changed and I accepted my current ministry role, at which time I also came out to the church.

I frequently question the choices I made during that time. There was a break in authenticity between my internal and external lives that took a toll, not only on my emotional and relationship health, but also on the connection I made with the congregation. Many of my most fervent supporters, when I eventually came out, shared their sadness and pain at the fact that I had not trusted them with my secret, and this spark of distrust may well have affected their broader life of faith. And I have to believe that the worship life of the church was, in fact, also affected adversely. What was I subconsciously omitting from my proclamation for fear of discovery or perceived hypocrisy? How did the anxiety inherent to the closeted life affect the creative process for those who planned and developed worship? What were congregants missing out on in our personal connection, longing for a fullness and honesty in the pulpit that just wasn't forthcoming? I may never know.

And unfortunately, the reality is that mere polity changes have not changed the fundamental situation for a lot of LGBTQIA+ people, in a season when many presbyteries still have zero openly LGBTQIA+ people serving congregations as pastors. Indeed, more progressive ministry contexts sometimes prove just as difficult for full authenticity, as complacency about a church's commitment to inclusion ("We settled that long ago") leads to an acceptance that is assumed rather than achieved, and to a community that lacks the vocabulary and emotional tools to process a pastor's surprising revelation about gender and sexuality. Among those who have attempted to walk that journey and continue in ministry, leading weekly worship and the rest of their pastoral life—including those I have walked alongside and those I have observed from afar—success has been the exception.

There are tangible ways our congregations can change, including in our worship life, that would enable a transition to deeper authenticity—a coming out—that not only is more comfortable and professionally sustainable for the minister but also results in a richer and deeper experience for the community.

To begin, we can rethink the symbolism and historical theological vestiges baked into our liturgy and worship leadership that may be unintentionally reinforcing the idea that the individual identity of the minister is to be suppressed rather than celebrated. Can we reimagine the robe as something that binds us to all the others who wear it and have worn it, rather than as something that diminishes who they were and are? Inspired by the expanding richness of liturgical resources that mine the depths

of imagery and language, reflecting the full diversity of biblical metaphors for God and the breadth of human experience, might we take the next step in our worship planning, relying less on pat phrases and rote recitation and more on the expressive voices of those who are called to lead? Worship planners should write from their hearts. Pastors and laypeople standing before congregations should speak with the passion and humor and honesty they use before the prelude starts. When every minister brings all of themselves to their praying and preaching, the queer minister's queer preaching and queer praying will seem a lot less, well, *queer* to those who once were uncomfortable. New doors in their hearts and spirits can open.

Any successful transition to deeper openness will also surely be grounded in the "ordinary" spiritual life of the faith community. Truth-telling requires fortitude, and Christian disciples find that strength in practices of worship. There is a reason those calling for social justice have sung hymns as they marched. It will be more difficult for believers to reject one another when they learn something they didn't know if they have spent the last three years of Wednesday mornings praying together at 7:00 A.M. Mission projects and education and coffee hours all matter, of course; but worship binds us together like nothing else, forging the bonds of trust and openness within which a more authentic understanding of each other will become not only feasible but enriching.

Perhaps more than anything else, the environment necessary for "coming out" in ways that become a blessing to the worshiping community is created by laying a solid foundation in that congregation's understanding of God and ourselves in the first place. A regularly preached gospel of love and grace builds Christians of love and grace. A focus on fences and fear forms Christians who withdraw and defend rather than embrace and expand. And in every age, worship is the most influential place for laying this foundation, through the message we preach and the prayers we offer. In baptism, and at the communion table, worship is where all of us, of every gender identity and sexual orientation, come to know who we truly are.

Meeting the Resurrected Christ

So now we return to where we began: Why does it actually matter who is leading worship? In Christ-centered community and God-directed prayer and praise, when it is God's Word and not merely a human word being spoken, what is the actual impact of the worship leader's identity? In my quarter century of ministry, the first half as a congregational pastor and the second doing work of advocacy and support among queer clergy and congregations seeking to expand their welcome and affirmation, I have come to believe that the impact is nothing less than critical. The very gospel is at stake. Only when we open ourselves to the leading of people of all gender identities and sexual orientations in worship will our worship do what our Reformed tradition insists it does: embody the risen Christ, alive and at work among us. Only when worship leaders are able and willing to be fully who they are can any of us experience the fullness of who God invites us to be.

I think of the example of K. As a seminarian, out as a gay man to only a few close friends, he attended a conference on how the church might live out its mission and ministry in the season after the church had opened its policies but not yet many of its pulpits to LGBTQIA+ people. At a closing worship service, an out gay man was celebrating the sacrament of communion. K. speaks of having a profound realization—a spiritual experience—where he came to understand that contrary to a lifetime of expectations, it really would be possible for him to live out his call to ministry and also be authentic and honest about who he was. He proceeded to come out to many others of significance in his life. He was ordained as an out gay man and became the first openly queer installed pastor in the presbytery of his first call. He served for years on the board of our organization and has been a friend and inspiration to many others. All of this, he would say, was in part because of a moment in worship where the leader's authentic self was allowed to speak the message of Christ's presence just as fully as the words of institution did.

There is the example of C., a young person who found the church and who, during years of growth in faith and in life, also came to understand himself as a trans man. There were no other trans people visible or out in that community, no map for such a journey in that space. But C. persevered and began to share his story. Standing before the congregation—of people who loved, even before

they understood—C. experienced in worship, and in the acts of community that surrounded it, the congregation's affirmation and—by extension—God's affirmation. In time, C. would be ordained as a ruling elder and would lead worship and even preach. The pastor of that church will tell you that the congregation has been as richly blessed as C. himself, understanding themselves more fully, opening their eyes to a previously unexplored aspect of the community's needs. They recognized the embodied presence of Christ among them, in time helping them more fully embody Christ's presence for each other and for the world.

There is another congregation that has long understood itself as affirming. It is a member of the right organizations, and rainbow colors adorn its signs and sanctuary. It has been a beacon and a haven for LGBTQIA+ people for years, led by allies and advocates. Recently, the congregation had its first out queer pastoral leader, first on an interim basis and now as a newly installed pastor. The service of installation for J. was an occasion of palpable joy and fulfillment. Now, her every Sunday sermon is a source of profound affirmation from the moment she goes to the pulpit, an assurance in at least one consistent way—they are a church whose actions match their values. Those sermons, fueled by the strength and wisdom of J.'s authentic journey as a queer person in ministry, are shaping that community's faith and inspiring new commitments to embrace the fullness of the community, LGBTQIA+ and otherwise, around them.

None of these examples should surprise us in the Reformed tradition. We have been bold to proclaim that community is the place we encounter the risen Christ. When we discern the mind of Christ, it is not through a solitary bishop or a static document, it is in the coming together of leaders to discuss together. When we partake of a sacrament that declares our Savior's presence, we declare Jesus to be there not on the table, but around it in the hearts of those who gather. We have always offered up community as the source of access to the divine, so it should not surprise us that who is facilitating our experience of the central practice of our community—holy worship—would matter. And if our worship leadership is limited to those of particular gender identities or sexual orientations while excluding others, it is separating those gathered, at least for a time, of the full presence of the risen Christ. That is a scandal to the gospel. But in seeking out God's full spectrum of identity to lead us at table and font and pulpit, we make the gospel ever new, and ever good.

Perhaps there will come a day when the queer community's shared history of exclusion and pain at the hands of the church will no longer shape their experience of authentically expressing their identity as pastors and other leaders. But we are nowhere near that day. In the meantime, as a church we have the profound opportunity to be blessed by the richness that a worship leader's queer identity offers us all. As congregations and councils of the church move with intentionality to expand the church's welcome, we will also be strengthened by attention to our worship life and leadership. We may even encounter, in a new way, the risen Christ.

Notes

1. The Covenant Network of Presbyterians is an organization that seeks to strengthen the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) by working for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in its life and leadership. Its ministry of education, engagement, and equipping occurs in councils and congregations across the country. For more information, visit www.covnetpres.org.
2. The constitutional provision that excluded gay and lesbian people from ministry, G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order*, specifically required "fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." Framed as about behavior rather than identity, this exclusion served only to emphasize the collective church's disgust and disapproval. To put it another way: LGBTQIA+ people were not merely unfortunate or lesser, they were *bad* because, in living out their identity, they did bad things.
3. Items 11-12 and 11-13, approved by the 223rd General Assembly (2018).
4. I use this language of "transgender and non-binary" with the intention of inclusivity. This is the language used in 2018 actions of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirming this community's dignity and humanity, but I intend it (as did the Assembly action) to represent the full diversity of gender identities whatever terminology a particular person or community might use.

“Do No Harm”: One Congregation’s Process of Revising Liturgical Language

Heather Gottas Moore and Stephanie A. Budwey

Introduction

Life within the baptismal covenant for Christians in the Wesleyan tradition, including United Methodists, is to be governed by John Wesley’s three general rules: do no harm, do good, and attend upon the ordinances of God.[1] The order is not incidental. One cannot engage in acts of grace—doing good—until one has turned away (repented) from sin—doing harm. Liturgical scholars have brought to our attention the harm words can do to members of marginalized communities, particularly the LGBTQIA2S+ community.[2] Several traditions, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Episcopal Church (TEC), the Mennonite Church Canada, and Mennonite Church USA, have attempted recently to address this problem in revisions to their liturgical and congregational song texts.

Liturgical language has the power to heal but also to harm, and part of queering worship is ensuring that worship is a place where LGBTQIA2S+ people are able to flourish and experience liturgies of livability instead of having liturgical violence inflicted on them.[3] In practice, this means that all aspects of worship—including preaching, visual art, prayers, and songs—recognize the existence of LGBTQIA2S+ people, assert that they are made in the image of God, and celebrate the diversity of God’s creation.[4] This article discusses the process used at St. Stephen United Methodist Church in their endeavor to queer the liturgical language of their community, providing examples from this process—including a congregational song, a Scripture passage, and a prayer from the Sunday liturgy—and offering some takeaways for consideration for other communities who might want to engage in the process of queering liturgical language and draw on the gifts of ecumenical resources to establish guidelines in their own context for language used in public worship.

About St. Stephen United Methodist Church

St. Stephen United Methodist Church (UMC) is a small, suburban, multi-generational congregation located east of Dallas, Texas.[5] It is not uncommon in the southern United States to find three- and four-generation families involved in the ministries of a church. Even as one of these churches, St. Stephen is a unique congregation in the geographical area. An integral part of racial integration in the local school district during the church’s first decade, St. Stephen UMC has been rooted in justice and equality since its inception. As the first United Methodist congregation in North Texas to affiliate with the Reconciling Ministries Network[6]—a network of LGBTQIA2S+ affirming churches in The United Methodist Church—St. Stephen has worked for many years for the full participation of their LGBTQIA2S+ siblings in the life and work of the church. At its leadership retreat in 2018, the church council identified the following values at the root of the ethos of St. Stephen UMC: love, justice, human dignity, openness, worship, community, and perseverance. With this background, St. Stephen was the perfect place to study the process as church leaders evaluated, edited, and reshaped its liturgical language to further live into its identity as an inclusive church.

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The Process

The nature of this work is both intellectually and spiritually challenging, even for those who we consider theologically astute and have a deep desire to be open, inclusive, and welcoming.

The nine-member team invited to this work was ready and willing to dive into the task at hand. Though predominantly white, the group varied in age, education, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and gender identity. Some were born and raised in Texas, others were transplants from Florida, California, and Kansas, all bringing a variety of valuable experiences and perspectives to the conversation. The lead pastor had identified a leader to guide the team through the conversations and met with him to establish a shared vision and mission for the work. Through a three-phase process, the team would (1) consider portions of several readings as a part of their education and discernment; (2) evaluate their own language use, develop samples of inclusive liturgical work, and draft policies regarding inclusive language for their congregation; and (3) design a plan to implement the changes and consider the implications of the changes made. While this would be a working group, it was important to the team to recognize that this was a process of discernment, which meant the team would be doing more listening—to the Holy Spirit—than they did talking. As such, the group took on the name Vox: Listening for the Liturgical Voice of the St. Stephen United Methodist Community.

In mid-February of 2023, the Vox team met and discussed the proposed readings and a plan for going forward. They received copies of the materials and determined they would meet monthly and work from a shared digital document. During phase one, Vox read portions of Stephanie Budwey's *Religion and Intersex: Perspectives from Science, Law, Culture, and Theology*[7] and the second edition of Ruth Duck's *Worship for the Whole People of God*,[8] making notes of what stood out to them or seemed important and necessary for the work they were doing in the shared document. Budwey's chapter looks at intersex from liturgical perspectives, including the experiences of intersex people in Christian worship and how some have felt excluded by the use of binary language. This example of exclusion leads to a discussion of the need for inclusive, expansive, and emancipatory language that moves beyond the binary, including in congregational song. The chapter also considers the notions of liturgies that contribute to the flourishing of intersex people (i.e., liturgies of livability) and those that do not, thereby inflicting liturgical violence. They also read the section "Expanding Our Liturgical Language" from Duck's chapter on "Vivid Words for Worship." She touches on multiple aspects of inclusive and expansive language, including the topics of gender (e.g., the use of the generic masculine to refer to all humans, such as "man" or "brothers"), ability (e.g., the metaphorical use of "blind" or "deaf" as being sinful or lacking understanding), and racism (e.g., the metaphorical use of "dark" as evil/sinful and "light" as good/pure). Duck also considers the challenges and complexities around naming God, the issues with only using masculine language for God, and different strategies to achieve balance in naming God and the Trinity.

In March 2023, Vox gathered again after having read Budwey's and Duck's works. For the Vox team, it was apparent that they needed to do some creative work in developing adapted versions of Scripture, commonly used liturgical texts, and favorite songs. The team acknowledged that the readings took time to consume and needed additional clarification. After some clarification, the team began to list ways in which they felt an inclusive language policy might look at St. Stephen in practice. Among the ideas suggested were amending congregational songs and anthems to have more inclusive language, intentionally rotating signifiers for addressing the congregation and roles for worship leaders, expanding descriptions for God to include feminine and gender-neutral language, and replacing terms like "Lord" and "kingdom."

The nature of this work is both intellectually and spiritually challenging, even for those who we consider theologically astute and have a deep desire to be open, inclusive, and welcoming. As such, it became apparent the process is less of a *lex credendi, lex orandi, lex vivendi* linear process, easily outlined in three phases, but more of a *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* cycle, where a community of people embody and pray the possibilities *continually*, shaping and reshaping what they believe, in order to create a policy by which to live, thus creating a perichoretic process whereby there is a mutual interplay between these aspects.[9]

Resources

Throughout the process, the Vox team engaged diverse models for language guidelines from multiple denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in their 2013 hymnal *Glory to God*,[10] the Episcopal Church (TEC) as part of their process of liturgical and Prayer Book revision,[11] and the Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA in their 2020 hymnal *Voices Together*[12] in order to help them refine the liturgical voice of St. Stephen UMC.

The *Glory to God* hymnal includes Appendix 2, "A Statement on Language," ratified by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song in 2009.[13] After acknowledging the power of language in worship—particularly how it can include or exclude people—the statement points to the theological framework of salvation history that was used for this hymnal to reflect "the full extent of the biblical narrative and also the full array of biblical language used for God—even if that leads us to use words and imagery that go beyond our natural comfort."[14] In discussing language for humans, the statement speaks of moving away from the use of stereotypical language and the "generic masculine" for humans. In discussing language for God, the statement calls for balance by using many metaphors for God—"who is wholly other and beyond gender"—while explicitly retaining the use of the word "Lord" and the Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[15]

The Episcopal Church passed a resolution in 2018, a "Plan for the Revision of the Book of Common Prayer," which led to the formation of the Task Force on Liturgical and Prayer Book Revision.[16] Part of their work was creating "Guidelines for Expansive and Inclusive Language."[17] They begin by stating the importance of language and the goal "to maximize rather than erase language from our liturgical lexicon."[18] The guidelines then discuss expansive language (language about/for God) and the need for many metaphors for God because "all of humanity is created in the image of God."[19] Inclusive language (language about/for humanity) similarly "should reflect the diversity of all humankind" while also highlighting that binary language can exclude those who are nonbinary.[20] After pointing to the problems with certain metaphors—for example, those which imply light is good and dark is bad—the document concludes with a reminder that while we can never "fully comprehend or completely imagine" God, God is revealed to us through language.[21]

The Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA have done tremendous work in thoughtfully considering the topic of language in their 2020 hymnal, *Voices Together*. The plan was for Vox to read three pieces related to the hymnal. The first, "Expansive Language in *Voices Together:* Gendered Images of God," discusses the decision to use expansive language for God, the process that was used in making choices about language for the hymnal, and the incredibly helpful appendices from *Voices Together: Worship Leader Edition*, "Expansive and Inclusive Language in Worship" and "Scriptural Ways to Address God in Worship."[22] The second article, "Our Journey with Just and Faithful Language: The Story of a Twenty-First Century Mennonite Hymnal and Worship Book," was written by Sarah Kathleen Johnson, worship resources editor for the hymnal, and Adam M. L. Tice, text editor for the hymnal.[23] This article discusses the case-by-case approach taken in considering the text of each song, their theological commitments to "who God is, who we are, and who God calls us to become,"[24] the document "Aspirations for Language Use," and three case studies that show how these guidelines were put into practice in the creation of the hymnal. The third article, "Lord as a Metaphor for God in the *Voices Together* Hymnal," was written by Sarah Kathleen Johnson and discusses the metaphorical use of "Lord" in the hymnal as well as its merits, drawbacks, and ways in which it was unchanged, juxtaposed, interpreted, or changed in the hymnal.[25] These documents all point to the power of language to "shape how we understand God, one another, and the world around us," as well as the need to be mindful of such issues as race, ethnicity, class, ability, gender, and sexuality in language.[26]

Examples

We will now explore three examples from the process at St. Stephen UMC: a congregational song, a Scripture passage, and a prayer from the Sunday liturgy. These three examples offer ways to consider how to queer liturgical language in that they disrupt normative understandings of and language for God while also striving to be inclusive of LGBTQIA2S+ people.

Congregational Song

The congregational song "For Everyone Born" exemplifies not only the reality of how language changes over time but also the need for the work of evaluating and editing liturgical language similar to

what is being done at St. Stephen UMC. Originally written in 1998 by New Zealand hymnwriter Shirley Erena Murray (1931–2020), this text speaks to the need for all to have "a place at the table."[27] However, as time has passed, the understanding of human sexuality and gender has changed, and therefore, many have found this text—that was originally meant to be inclusive—to be exclusive. As Dan Damon and Eileen Johnson describe,

> Murray's idea and intention was to write a text that imagines all people at the great feast. She thought she had listed everyone, only to realize that some groups had not been named. So she later wrote another verse for gay and straight people. But this binary naming still leaves out portions of the human race. . . . When we try to list the people invited to the great feast, we inevitably leave someone out.[28]

For example, the binary language of woman and man leaves out those who are nonbinary, and the binary language of gay and straight leaves out those who are bisexual or asexual. As a result, "[m]any people were seeing the need to alter this text."[29]

In 2022, Dan Damon was asked by Hope Publishing to revise the text because Murray passed away in 2020, and so he worked with Carl Daw Jr. to create an updated, nonbinary version.[30] The original language of "woman and man" became "all who share life," and the original language of "gay and straight" became "all who have breath." In the article "'For everyone born': A Hymnwriter Struggles to Address All People," Damon describes the process and email exchanges he had with Daw Jr. in considering different alternatives, just as the community at St. Stephen is wrestling with questions about liturgical language with the goal of being more inclusive. These conversations and Murray's text all point to the tension between the importance of naming specific groups of people that are left out, made invisible, and erased in liturgical language—for example, in Murray's original version, her use of the words "gay" and "straight" was incredibly prophetic at the time—and the desire to use language that truly includes *everyone*.

This song is a favorite within the St. Stephen community. Unsurprisingly, the revised version received mixed reviews. Ally members of the community deeply held the belief that "for gay and for straight" is a prophetic statement, and they bristled at the idea of replacing it. Even as a progressive congregation, their social location contributes to a sort of blinded allyship, clouding their ability to see how the language of inclusion has advanced over time—reflecting newer understandings of sexuality and gender—and, therefore, the language of community favorites constantly needs reflection and revision.

Of course, it is human nature for any congregation to bristle at a more inclusive model. As was seen in the response at St. Stephen UMC to the revised version of "For Everyone Born," and the adapted Lord's Prayer options, the deeply rooted fears of change can impact even a "progressive" congregation's willingness to see a need for work toward being *more* inclusive. This may be a space where congregations who are new to the work have the advantage. Progressive congregations, blinded by their own allyship, are more susceptible to the misunderstanding that they have "arrived" and have no more work to do regarding inclusion. At the same time, it is important to recognize the concern of moving from particularities (gay/straight, woman/man) to universality (all who have breath, all who share life). The former are binaries that leave out other marginalized particularities, and the latter are so broad and universal that the lyric seems to lose its prophetic edge. This is why it is important to keep the conversation rooted in the *why* of the work—all being made in God's image—and allow space to move between *lex orandi, lex credendi,* and *lex vivendi* with a reasonable amount of fluidity.

Because all humans are made in God's image, liturgical language needs to reflect the diversity of humanity. . . . Additionally, it is important for the people doing this work to remember that all language for God is metaphorical, along with the limitation of language to express the infinite mystery of God.

Because all humans are made in God's image, liturgical language needs to reflect the diversity of humanity. As Budwey says, "a limited vision of God leads to a limited image of humanity."[31]

Additionally, it is important for the people doing this work to remember that all language for God is metaphorical, along with the limitation of language to express the infinite mystery of God. One way to address this is to employ Sallie McFague's "piling up of images" strategy so that throughout the liturgy, multiple images of God are used (feminine, masculine, and nongendered). McFague writes that "*many* metaphors and models are necessary, that a piling up of images is essential, both to avoid idolatry and to attempt to express the richness and variety of the divine-human relationship."[32] This strategy is also reflected in some of the readings discussed, including the Mennonite Worship and Song Committee's "Expansive Language in Voices Together: Gendered Images of God," where they ask, "Are traditional male terms such as Lord and kingdom balanced with other expressions?" and then provide the appendix "Scriptural Ways to Address God in Worship," which offers examples of how to "address God in prayer in ways that are anchored in Scripture yet expand our language and images of God."[33] Resources like these are incredibly helpful in reminding people of the diversity of language used to address God in Scripture while also offering ways to broaden their imaginations and the language used to address God in prayer.

Scripture

Beginning in the summer of 2022, the lead pastor of St. Stephen UMC began adjusting the Hebrew Bible readings, removing the word "Lord" and replacing it with *Adonai*. Informed by the resources offered here, as well as *The Book of Offices and Services of The Order of Saint Luke*, the lead pastor felt it was congruent with the congregation's ethos to make this adjustment without significant additional consultation with the congregation.[34]

Adonai is the original Hebrew substitution for the Tetragrammaton, and while its meaning is literally "Lord," its genealogy is conceived within the reverent and covenantal relationship of God and Israel. When *Adonai* is translated into Greek, *Kyrios* is used; in Latin, *Dominus*. Unlike *Adonai*, the genealogies of *Kyrios* and *Dominus* find their roots in places such as feudal lords and earthly sovereigns such as Caesar. As such, they bring that meaning with them, which *Adonai* does not, as pointed out by Johnson in her article discussing the use of "Lord" in the *Voices Together* hymnal.[35] From a trauma-informed perspective, as we learn more about the extent to which the church has caused and perpetuated harm, words like "Lord" and "Kingdom" are artifacts of language that are foreign and inaccessible to those who have suffered harm by and through the church as well as those who grew up outside of the direct influence of the church. An example of this shift from "Lord" to *Adonai* can be found in *The Book of Offices and Services of The Order of Saint Luke* in their adaptation of Psalm 23, using *Adonai* in place of "Lord," and "You" in place of "He."[36]

Liturgical Prayer

Similarly, the lead pastor began making changes in liturgical language throughout the worship life of St. Stephen UMC. Informed again by the ethos of the congregation, the Lord's Prayer seemed like a natural place to start since the congregation had already modernized the language once in the church's short history, changing "thy" to "your." In March 2023, a seemingly simple shift from "Our Father," to "Our God," was made. There was some pushback about this change at St. Stephen UMC. The pastor received feedback from those who support inclusive language but felt that "God" was still masculine and suggested maybe "Our Shepherd" or "Our Pastor" might be better alternatives. Interestingly, during the 2023 Eastertide sermon series, the lead pastor offered a strikingly different version of the prayer, adapted for Marcia McFee's *Emerge* series, replacing not only "Our Father" with "Chrysalis of Creation," but much of the body of the prayer as well.[37] Unlike the earlier version, this new Lord's Prayer received no direct feedback. It is feasible that because the sermon series included the imagery of a chrysalis and metamorphosis throughout the series, the congregation, including the aforementioned congregant, was more accommodating to this *temporary* shift in language.

Because of the response—or lack thereof—regarding the temporary change in the Lord's Prayer, the Vox team decided to survey the congregation to gather data on the comfortability and thresholds regarding inclusive language using different adaptations of the Lord's Prayer. Along with assessing the congregation members' opinions on the current liturgical voice of the community, the survey included five sample prayers with instructions to read each prayer out loud before completing the survey questions for that prayer.[38] The Vox team brought together eight possible selections and curated them down to five, including two prayers written by members of the team, one

written by a ministry intern in the early 2000s, and the alternate version from the Night Prayer service in *A New Zealand Prayer Book*.[39]

Those surveyed were asked to assess the current liturgical voice of the community using the following Likert scale:

- not inclusive
- not inclusive enough and needs to be changed
- inclusive, but there are a few places where it needs to be changed
- fully inclusive, but there are a few places it could be changed
- fully inclusive and does not need to be changed

With each adapted prayer, the member was asked two questions:

First, select all that apply:

- I am uncomfortable with the names used for God.
- I am not represented in the language used in this prayer.
- I cannot recognize the original prayer in this version.
- I am comfortable with the names used for God.
- I am represented in the language used in this prayer.
- I can recognize the original prayer in this version.

Second, measure comfortability:

- I am uncomfortable with this version and would not want it used in our services.
- I am uncomfortable with this version, but I would not be upset if we used it occasionally.
- I am neither comfortable nor uncomfortable with this version.
- I am comfortable with this version and would be comfortable with its occasional use.
- I am comfortable with this version and would be comfortable with it being our standard version.

Upon analysis of the data, 66 percent of those surveyed felt the current liturgical voice of the community was inclusive or fully inclusive, but warranted some changes, while 31 percent felt that the current liturgical voice was inclusive enough and did not need to be changed. Interestingly, the respondents' feelings about the current liturgical voice did not significantly impact their consideration of alternate adaptations.

For all five adapted versions of the prayer, there was a positive correlation between those who were less comfortable with the language used for God and their feeling less comfortable with the version being used in worship at any consistency. Additionally, how closely the reader perceived the adaptation to be to the traditional version of the prayer impacted the comfortability of the reader regarding the prayer's use in worship. Only six people—12 percent of individuals surveyed—still indicated they would be comfortable using a prayer where they could not recognize the traditional prayer. Overwhelmingly, there was a positive correlation between the readers' answers to the first question and their answers to the second question: 95 percent of those surveyed who were more comfortable with the names used for God, recognized the traditional prayer, or felt represented by the language used in the prayer were more comfortable using it in worship on occasion. Conversely, only 34 percent of those surveyed who were uncomfortable with the names used for God, unable to recognize the traditional prayer, or felt they were not represented by the language used in the prayer were comfortable with even the occasional use of the alternative version offered.

Concluding Thoughts

Work like this does not come without significant complexities. The process of queering worship and creating liturgies of livability is an imperative task that demands careful attention to what is being conveyed about LGBTQIA2S+ people—both consciously and unconsciously—through preaching, visual art, prayers, and songs. While there may be common goals of inclusion across denominations, there will be different ways of putting it into practice related to questions such as who gets to make decisions as to what changes are allowed or not due to the different denominational structures and polities. Within the one denomination observed here—The United Methodist Church—there could be a range of desire for engaging with these questions as well as comfort level with inclusive and expansive language. Even within one congregation, the perceived need for work like this will vary as well. This speaks to why it is so important for congregations who feel called to this work to take the time necessary to include their community in the conversation throughout the whole process

A church community's liturgical language is both universal and particular. There is no one-size-fits-all model for communities that are looking to revise their particular liturgical language and identify their unique liturgical voice, and yet, there must be some universality in order for it to resonate as a part of the whole church.

through various tools, including, but not limited to, surveys such as the one used at St. Stephen. While it is unlikely any congregation will reach 100 percent agreement, the survey at St. Stephen UMC shows that people are willing to be in conversation, consider the experience of others, come to a consensus, and lean into any discomfort they may have on behalf of the larger community—especially those on the margins.

A church community's liturgical language is both universal and particular. There is no one-size-fits-all model for communities that are looking to revise their particular liturgical language and identify their unique liturgical voice, and yet, there must be some universality in order for it to resonate as a part of the whole church. As seen through the process at St. Stephen UMC, the community must be willing to do the hard work to grow and change, leaning into the discomfort of "new" and finding the ways in which queering liturgical language offers healing to people who have experienced harm by traditional language in the past. A community's engagement in a dialogue about liturgical language can lead to spiritual growth and change within the perichoretic relationships of the Christian liturgical traditions. As such, liturgical and ecumenical openness can heal bodies, hearts, and communities through mutual sharing and learning as denominations grapple with the topic of liturgical language.

Notes

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17. Task Force on Liturgical and Prayer Book Revision, 21–24.
18. Task Force on Liturgical and Prayer Book Revision, 21.
19. Task Force on Liturgical and Prayer Book Revision, 22.
20. Task Force on Liturgical and Prayer Book Revision, 23.
21. Task Force on Liturgical and Prayer Book Revision, 24.
22. Katie Graber, Sarah Kathleen Johnson, and Adam M. L. Tice, "Expansive Language in *Voices Together: Gendered Images of God*" (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020), accessed October 9, 2023, http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/

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24. Johnson and Tice, 18.
25. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, "Lord as a Metaphor for God in the *Voices Together* Hymnal," Menno Snapshots, February 1, 2021, accessed October 9, 2023, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/lord-metaphor-voices-together-hymnal/.
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30. Shirley Erena Murray, alt., "For Everyone Born," Hope Publishing, accessed October 9, 2023, https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159_16.aspx.
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35. Johnson, "Lord as a Metaphor for God in the *Voices Together* Hymnal."
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37. Marcia McFee, *Emerge*, Worship Design Studio, Eastertide 2023.
38. The anonymous survey was distributed to the entire St. Stephen UMC congregation (active members and visitors) through the church's regular email program. The questions were written and curated by the Vox team. We were advised by the Vanderbilt Human Protections Program that IRB approval was not needed to use this data in this article as it is a case study and is therefore considered non-research.
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Maria Fee
Emplacement installation view,
(foreground) *Cosmos*, acrylic on paper
(background) *Sanctuary*, canvas

Maria Fee
Emplacement installation view,
Sanctuary, canvas

Maria Fee
Emplacement installation view,
Aerie, acrylic on canvas

I'll Meet You There

Molly Bolton

> *Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,*
> *there is a field. I'll meet you there.*
> *—Rumi*

There is a person at the corner coffee shop
with purple eyeshadow and a mahogany beard,

with a crooked-teeth opened-mouth laugh,
who is so beautiful in their here-ness

—I mean, as natural as a mushroom on log after rain—that they planted me

square in the present moment. There is a person
at the afternoon street festival

with flowing sleeves and worn-in boots,
with eyes closed, face tipped up to the day,

who moves their body so freely
—I mean, stream into river, wind into oak leaves—

they shook loose a door in me
I didn't even know was stuck.

Can you dream it?
The field beyond the field.

The space beyond the space.
Did not Jesus answer a question

with another question?
We worship the Unfolding.

The Undoing. The Becoming.
We will no longer fall victim

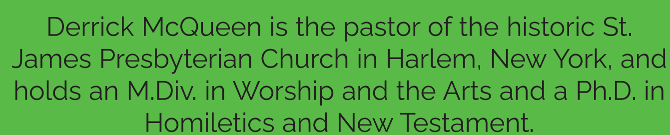
to someone else's narrow imagination.
We worship Expanse Beyond Expanse.

Molly Bolton is a writer, spiritual director, and teacher living in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Maria Fee
Invocational Fragments, acrylic on paper, 2023

The Work of Our Hands: Not So Churchy Queer*Arts*Worship

Derrick McQueen



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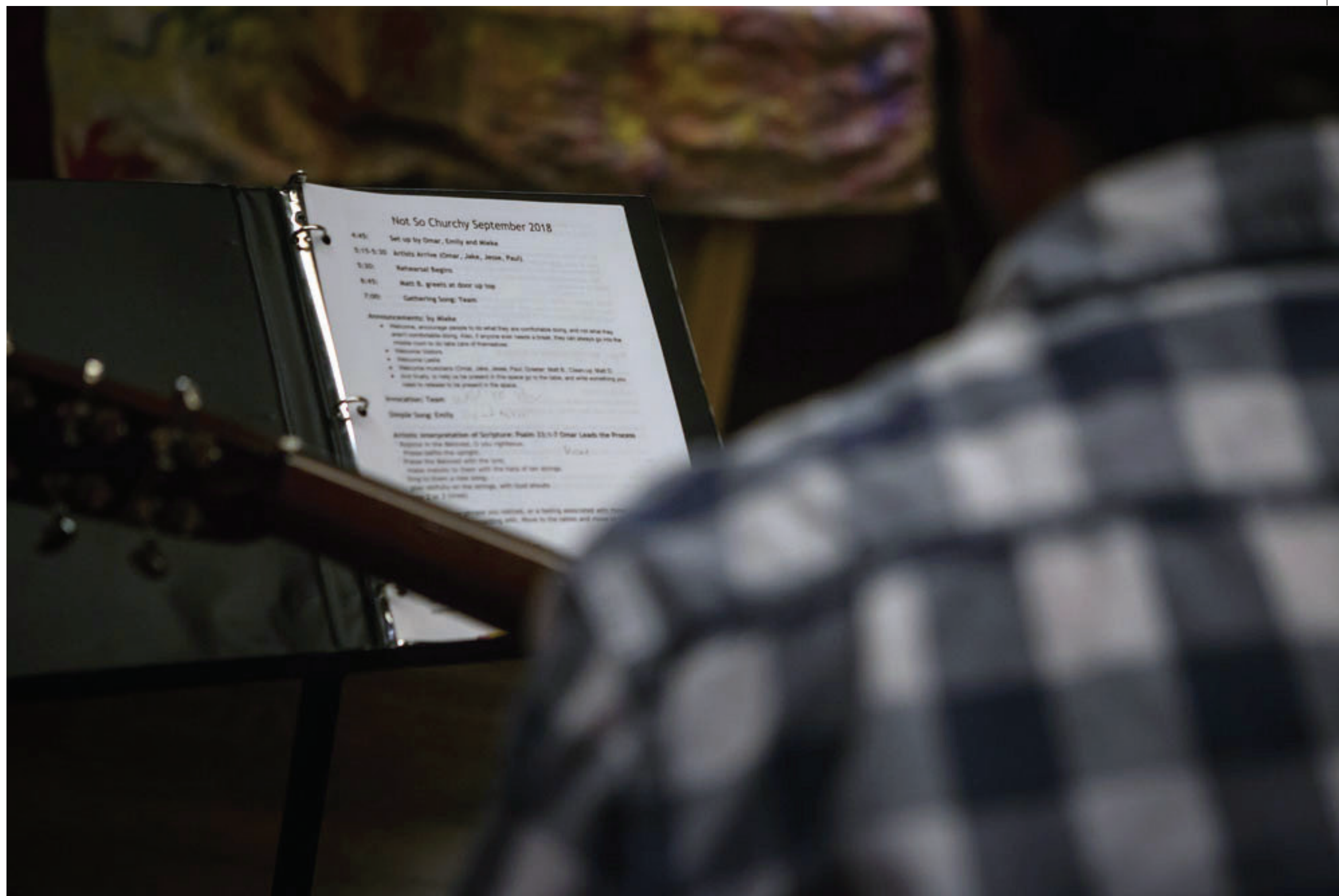
Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage.
Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness.
—Dr. Brené Brown

You have heard about or been invited to the worship experience of a community called Not So Churchy. As you walk into the space, there is a sense of comfort and ease that greets you as someone encourages you to write a name tag. Looking around, you see people unwrapping pieces of chocolate and inviting you to write something you hope for in the world on strips of paper. Mostly, you notice the calm anticipation of a group of people who are at ease with one another. Their smiles also extend that ease to you. You feel a wave of expectation that this just might be a place of healing, where you depart a little more whole than when you entered. And it starts for you—you catch yourself smiling, not at anyone or anything in particular. You



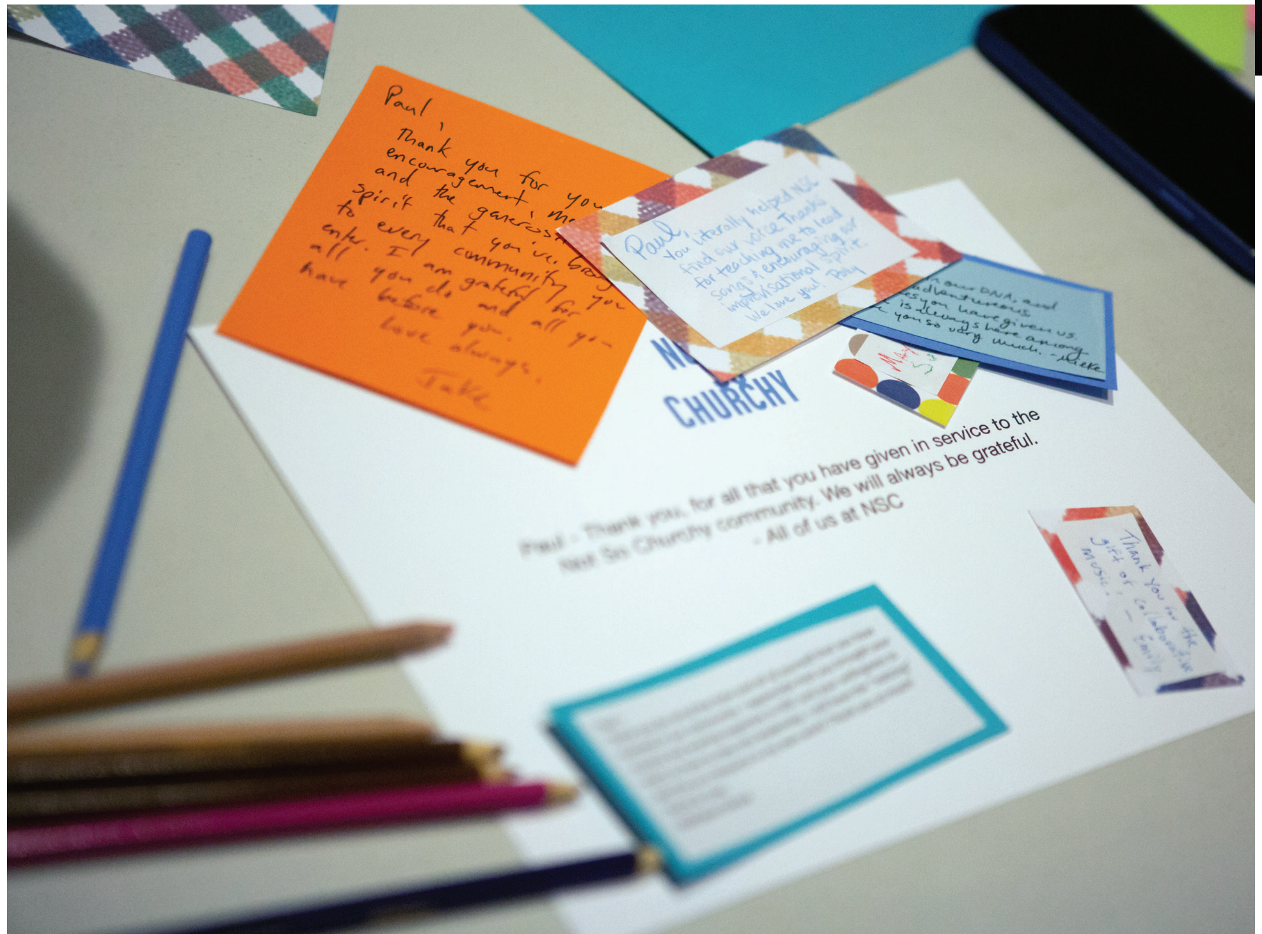
catch yourself smiling just for you. And then you realize from the very moment you walked in the door, you entered into worship.

Not So Churchy is a queer worshiping community, the brainchild of its founder, Rev. Mieke Vandersall. More than a decade ago, Rev. Mieke, ordained in the PC(USA), spoke to queer folk, musicians, artists, ritualists, ministers, and liturgists about creating worshiping community together that embraced all of their gifts. Yes, the idea of Not So Churchy was to create a place where the LGBTQIA+ community could bring their authentic selves; however, it was also designed to be an open space for all. This design challenges the notion that queer is simply a matter of sexual identity.

In its introduction to queer theory,[1] the guide for the libraries of Indiana University speaks of queer theory as

> an interdisciplinary field that encourages one to look at the world through new avenues. It is a way of thinking that dismantles traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities, challenges traditional academic approaches, and fights against social inequality.

Not So Churchy applies the basic tenets of queer theory across the liturgical arc of its worship. Why is this method of liturgical application different? It does not seek to fit its various elements into a standard. It aims to encounter the creative Holy Spirit's guidance to move in new and spiritually efficacious ways for its participants.


CHURCHY
Paul - Thank you, for all that you have given in service to the
Not So Churchy community. We will always be grateful.
- All of us at NSC

Not So Churchy has made significant the idea that worship does not start merely because there is a prelude, an opening prayer, call to worship, or even opening congregational singing. Whether online or in person, worship begins when one enters the space. One of the leading experiential tenets espoused by this community is holy hospitality. To create such a space, one must embrace what Obery Hendricks speaks of when he writes of one of the existential, grace-filled, and revolutionary gifts of Christ who "treats the people's needs as holy" in his work *The Politics of Jesus*.[2] Not So Churchy recognizes the needs of queer persons to be seen, loved, embraced, and celebrated through worship and the needs of the whole community to praise God's full inclusion of all of God's beloved ones.

The arts play a significant role in the queer expression of thankfulness and worship. "Arts" go beyond the media with which most are familiar. It is not the paintings on the wall; it is the communal creation of the art that binds the word of God to the heart. Art constitutes and is used as an element within the liturgy, giving an extended definition to what one may think is arts and crafts. It is the societal grouping of persons so that each can see and interact with others.

It is the commitment to bring the word of God to the community, possibly through a song created for that service or a more theatrical recitation of such. It is the tactile use of colored markers and posters to answer a question posed that will help shape the liturgy as it is repeated aloud by the community members who have become artists. Employing "paperless singing" to learn songs together brings one deeper into the grounding of one's spirituality.

The liturgical progression is planned with Not So Churchy, well not so much planned as creatively envisioned by worship leaders, community leadership, and, of course, the Holy Spirit. The liturgical planning is always done in recognition of the strength it takes, for many people, to simply walk through the door for worship. Whether it be former

church trauma; personal joy you cannot celebrate with the rest of the world; your own, sometimes closeted, love of God and the gospel; or just entering a new place with new people for the first time—the community recognizes that it requires vulnerability to enter the space, and vulnerability is recognized as courage, celebrated as God's persistent hold on our hearts. As you can see, LBTQIA+ persons' vulnerability and strength can be applied to many different subgroups. Queer and brave forays in worship teach us new ways of gathering for all. And this is where the qualities of queer theory come into play, in particular, in challenging traditional approaches that fail to recognize the very personal social inequity of spirituality.

Not So Churchy reimagines the elements of liturgy to create what I call a "new birth narrative" as a new and nuanced foundation from which to understand what is traditionally familiar. The pressing of grapes as part of the form that the community shares is as much a part of the worship experience in such an instance. That is often paired with the bread being made by someone within the gathering, sometimes with recipes shared. Not So Churchy embraces the power of artistic engagement with all senses, working to create a new spiritual imprint and understanding of ritual practice on familiar aspects of liturgical worship. The result is that this particular queer artistic worship is not a breaking down of the institutional norms but an infusion of creativity

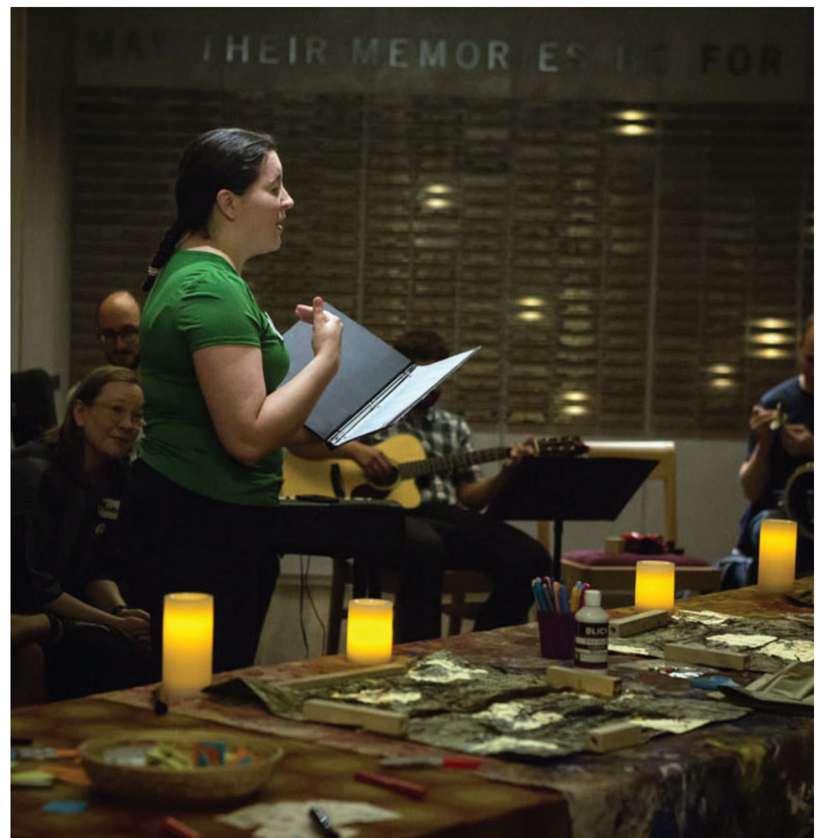
into those norms, breaking barriers and sometimes finding something new to claim.

It is an application of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17: "'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill,'" because the law or teachings, precepts, and so forth, like worship, has gifts for all.

I've aimed to provide a detailed description of the Not So Churchy worshiping community and its unique approach to worship, which draws from the principles of queer theory and aims to create a welcoming and inclusive space for all individuals, regardless of their sexual identity or background. I emphasize the following key elements of the community's life together:

1. **Vulnerability and Strength:** Not So Churchy recognizes the vulnerability and strength of LGBTQIA+ individuals, celebrating their courage in attending and engaging with worship. This acknowledgment brings to mind Dr. Brené Brown's work connecting vulnerability and courage.
2. **Holy Hospitality:** The community places a strong emphasis on creating an environment of "holy hospitality" where people''s needs are seen, loved, embraced, and celebrated. This aligns with Obery Hendricks's notion of treating people's needs as holy.
3. **Arts and Creativity:** Arts and creativity play a significant role in worship, extending beyond traditional forms of art to include interactive elements that engage the community. This approach allows for a more personal and emotional connection with Scripture and liturgy.
4. **Paperless Singing:** The use of "paperless singing" fosters a deep spiritual connection among congregants and promotes a sense of togetherness.
5. **Liturgy as a New Birth Narrative:** The community reimagines traditional liturgical elements to create a "new birth narrative." This approach seeks to infuse creativity into familiar aspects of worship, resulting in a unique and inclusive worship experience.
6. **Inclusive Approach:** Not So Churchy aims to be an open and welcoming space for people of all backgrounds, challenging traditional approaches to spirituality and addressing social inequity within the realm of spirituality.

Not So Churchy represents an innovative and inclusive worshiping community that draws inspiration from queer theory and seeks to provide a nurturing and creative space for all individuals to engage with spirituality and religious practices. They teach us the importance of embracing vulnerability and celebrating courage while challenging traditional approaches to worship.



Notes

1. https://guides.libraries.indiana.edu/c.php?g=995240&p=8361766/.
2. Obery Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

A Holy Discomfort: The Spiritual Work of Singing Welcome

Amanda Udis-Kessler

This article was originally presented as a sectional for the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada as part of its 2021 conference.

I'd like to start with one of my favorite jokes about Unitarian Universalists, a joke I feel comfortable telling because I spent thirty years with the UUs and still maintain a connection with them. The joke goes like this: Why are Unitarian Universalists such bad hymn singers? Because they are always reading ahead to see whether they agree with the words.

This joke, of course, has a seed of truth in it, and not just for UUs. When many of us encounter a new hymn or worship song, we scan ahead to see what we make of the text. And this makes sense. If worship music does not have integrity for us, if we don't assent to or agree with the claims or assumptions or language of the text, we may not be able to sing it comfortably. And when we sing during worship, we yearn to sing texts that we can sing with energy, passion, and commitment, which generally means texts that we can bring our whole selves to because we are comfortable enough with them. And there's nothing wrong with wanting our worship music to be comfortable—right?

Well, like all complicated situations, the answer is sometimes right, sometimes wrong. In this article, I'd like to explore the idea that singing welcome is often uncomfortable and that our ability to sing welcome with the same energy, passion, and commitment that we bring to those old beloved hymns and worship songs depends on our doing various kinds of spiritual work to get comfortable with discomfort. I should note that I'm focusing on texts, not on music, though we could have a related conversation about the music of hymns and worship songs.

Before we think about the discomfort of singing welcome to others, we need to start with the comfort of singing for ourselves. Comfort in the context of worship music tends to come from familiarity. If we already know the hymn text and find it meaningful and moving, we will be comfortable singing it. To go back to that UU joke, we don't need to read ahead when we know what lies ahead and we know that it works for us. If we don't know the hymn text but are able to give it a quick scan, we are likely to be comfortable with it if it tells stories, makes claims, and gives us images of humanity and the sacred that align with what we already believe and perceive. There's a place for comfort in our worship singing; comfort can create holy space. But there's also a place for holy discomfort.

Brian Hehn gave a Hymn Society presentation some time ago called "Breaking through the Traditional/Contemporary Divide" in which he differentiated between what he called pastoral and prophetic worship music. Pastoral church song, Brian said, pulls from the tradition and speaks to our common identity, whereas prophetic church song speaks to the future and shares a vision of who God is calling us to be. I mention this distinction because I believe that to some extent it correlates with our comfort levels with singing church music, and it offers a way to think about why singing welcome can be uncomfortable and what we might do about that. Pastoral church song is often comfortable, whereas prophetic church song may be less comfortable. So, let's consider a prophetic critique of pastoral comfort.

If the familiar is comfortable, for whom is it comfortable? Insiders. Those who have long sung these hymns and worship songs, those who are deeply steeped in the tradition. Those who, to quote

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Brian again, have a common religious identity. Singing traditional music is, in a sense, welcoming ourselves back, reminding those of us who are already in the worship space that we belong there. Of course, this is comfortable, and often comforting. The tradition from which pastoral church music pulls and the common identity it often forges can be beautiful, meaningful, and, profound. But they can also become exclusive. Pastoral church song leaves certain people out.

There are two different ways in which pastoral church song excludes people, and we need to draw a distinction between them because only one of those ways is likely to be worrisome to us. There are people who have no draw to our specific tradition, who do not assent to the creeds or values we find meaningful, and who may hold beliefs that we find problematic at a basic level. They are not looking for us, and while we will do our best to welcome them if they appear, we are not necessarily looking for them. We have different traditions, different common identities. Our pastoral church song may not be their pastoral church song, and that may be just fine. Speaking as someone who belongs to a progressive UCC congregation in heavily Evangelical Colorado Springs, I am very familiar with different church communities being meaningful and valuable to different people. I suspect that a prophetic critique of pastoral comfort is not really focused on people whose faith lives simply do not intersect with ours.

Where the prophetic critique of pastoral comfort becomes important, indeed urgent, is when our comfort turns out to exclude people who might find a home with us, outsiders who might become insiders. I think these outsiders tend to fall into two categories.

First, pastoral church song leaves out the outsider who has never been part of our religious community, who does not already share our common identity, and who might find meaning and hope among us but for whom our tradition is alien. I think of this person as the newcomer. I joined a UCC church after thirty years as a Unitarian Universalist and without any prior experience in Christian churches. I walked in the door as a newcomer, very aware that the traditions that were so comforting and comfortable to those in the room would be new and strange to me. Fortunately, I was able to bridge the strangeness and translate the language into words that made sense to me. And yet some of the hymns that most deeply moved the longest-time members made me very uncomfortable. Had I not been comfortable with that discomfort, I might not have stayed. This congregation's commitment to singing welcome helped me not only to stay but to be in relationship with the tradition in a way that has integrity for me. Singing welcome to newcomers means choosing at least some music that aims to reach the broadest possible audience with the gentlest and most hospitable understanding of what is beautiful and grace filled and gratitude invoking within the tradition. Light on the claims and creeds, heavy on the love and hope.

Pastoral church song can also leave out the type of person I would call the outsider within, someone who has grown up in the tradition or has a history in it, but has become alienated from it because they learned that it is not really for them or doesn't really value them. Women who grow up in patriarchal church traditions can be outsiders within, as can LGBTQ+ individuals who grow up in heterosexist, homophobic church traditions, though there are also other examples. Singing welcome to outsiders within means wrestling with exclusive or judgmental strands or practices within one's tradition, including within the pastoral church song. This wrestling can be very painful. Deeply beloved and profoundly comforting hymns that members have sung for decades may be among the worst offenders in signaling to outsiders within that they don't really belong.

Both newcomers and outsiders within can belong to socially and politically devalued groups in our society, and singing welcome sometimes means addressing directly the ways in which our church traditions have contributed to their devaluation. Here's an example of how our traditions can fail newcomers, focusing on race. Dr. King once called worship "the most segregated hour of Christian America," and indeed many white congregations wish to be more inclusive of people of color or, to use alternative terminology, people from BIPOC communities. There are many reasons, sometimes complex ones, why liberal, progressive, or inclusive congregations remain so white, but I'm pretty sure about one thing. When our confessional music speaks to our individual sins or failings but not to systematic inequality and our need to work against it, our ability to welcome oppressed groups of people to our communities and to demonstrate our commitment to their well-being is limited.

Church song can also fail outsiders within, and historically has often done so. When images of the sacred are exclusively male, those of us who identify

as female may experience the tradition as implying that we were not made in the image of God in quite the same way that men were. When our worship songs are neutral on matters of sexuality and do not explicitly celebrate and cherish LGBTQ+ people, such people, of whom I am one, may well be suspicious of whether we are really celebrated and cherished exactly as we are. If we don't find ourselves and our experiences in the liturgy, if we hear other people singing their realities while we do not get to do the same, how will we know that we are truly welcome?

None of this means to say that the pastoral tradition of church music is inherently wrong or that it should be jettisoned. It is only to say that the pastoral church music tradition poses challenges to singing welcome when it is the only church music tradition in use. Fortunately, we can always choose to incorporate prophetic church music, music that calls us forward into the Beloved Community that Jesus envisioned, a community where absolutely everyone is welcome to join in the feast of loving the holy, ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies, and of living out that love on a daily basis through acts of justice, kindness, and humility.

Where the pastoral music tradition comforts insiders, the prophetic music tradition reminds us that there is, to misquote John Robinson, yet more welcome to break forth.[1] That reminder can be uncomfortable, disorienting, and awkward for insiders. It can disrupt the smoothness and ease of our worship experience. Particularly when we sing welcome to people who are not yet in the room but who we aspire to invite, the whole exercise can seem strange, as though we were playacting or virtue signaling.

I recently saw a tweet by Marcus Harrison Green that read, "There is a significant difference between 'all are welcome here' and 'this was created with you in mind.'" Part of singing welcome is showing newcomers and outsiders within that their experience and perspectives are already valued in our worship lives, that we are engaging with those experiences and perspectives even if there are no newcomers or outsiders in the room with us yet. This too can feel strange. Can an entirely white congregation sing welcome to members of communities of color as a kind of preparation, as part of its outreach, as the worship side of its justice work? Can an entirely heterosexual, cisgender congregation (if such a thing actually exists) sing welcome to the queer and gender-bent, honoring both the now and the not yet of the congregation it yearns to become, the witness it seeks to offer?

In the spirit of answering those two questions with a resounding "yes," I'd like to share three pieces of my music before I turn more directly to the issue of our discomfort with singing prophetic welcome. In different ways, these pieces either address or incite discomfort with the ultimate goal of preparing us to welcome newcomers and outsiders within. These are pieces that can be sung by insiders alone as spiritual work, or they can be part of a larger mix of insiders and outsiders.

The first piece, "Oh, My Shepherd" (p. 39), is a confessional psalm for white people seeking to work against racism. It riffs off and troubles the Twenty-third Psalm, imagining it not as a prayer of oppressed people but as a prayer of privileged people who benefit from a form of systematic inequality that has destroyed and continues to destroy lives and communities. I've used it for spiritual formation in groups of white people of faith seeking to work against racism. The piece, which would normally be sung by a white soloist during a time of reflection or confession, does not directly welcome outsiders in but prophetically calls insiders to work for welcome by working for justice.

The second piece, "God the Soaring Eagle" (pp. 40–41), uses a wide range of biblical images for the holy to remind us that in fact we don't only think of God as male or majestic or even personal; those are simply the images that have received the most attention and focus within church tradition. The hymn intersperses various biblical images of the sacred with words of praise and gratitude, reminding us of what the Spirit moving in and among us does to enrich our lives. The final line is explicit about who can be in joyful relationship with the sacred, which is to say, everyone. And anyone, regardless of their gender identity or lack thereof, can sing this text as long as they are able to navigate the music.

Can an entirely white congregation sing welcome to members of communities of color as a kind of preparation, as part of its outreach, as the worship side of its justice work?

The final piece, "Queerly Beloved" (pp. 42–43), is published in the Hymn Society's collection *Songs for the Holy Other*, one of two pieces of mine that are included there. The title, of course, is a play on the phrase "Dearly Beloved," but juxtaposing queerness and belovedness makes the familiar strange, queering our expectations, as a queer theorist might say. The hymn pushes against centuries of Christian homophobia, heterosexism, biphobia, and transphobia by assuming that queer people are already in the room and are already and always fiercely loved by God, exactly as we are. The hymn celebrates our experience of that love and our understanding of its radical implications. When you hear the use of the term "we" in the hymn, you might wonder whether I wrote it only for LGBTQ+ people to sing or whether heterosexual, cisgender people should sing along. I promise, it is for everyone to sing. Even if it makes you uncomfortable to sing it. Perhaps especially then.

I hope these hymns make you think, make you smile, and, if appropriate, make you uncomfortable. Because confessing that we white people benefit from white supremacy and need to work against it is uncomfortable. Imaging God as female may be uncomfortable for people who have never sung a hymn to God the mother hen or God the midwife. And singing the line "We of every gender say amen" is a reminder that there are lots of genders out there, not only the two mentioned in Genesis 1:27, and a reminder that people of every and any gender configuration have a piece of that sacred spark in them. That reminder might be uncomfortable for people of more traditional gender identities and values. Singing the words "Queerly beloved, we" might be uncomfortable and alienating for heterosexual, cisgender people because the text centers the experiences of LGBTQ+ people while still inviting others to join in the singing.

My pieces highlight certain kinds of discomfort related to singing welcome, but there are many ways in which singing welcome might be uncomfortable. If we come from very theologically liberal white traditions, singing gospel music texts might feel awkward. If we grew up singing the traditional words of certain hymns, singing newly inclusive versions might feel wrong. If we've been immersed in justice-focused church music for years, singing welcome that invites our political opponents to join us by tempering the way justice language is used might feel strange; it might even feel like we are selling out our core values.

What, then, is the spiritual work of singing welcome? How do we learn to value discomfort as a sign of our humility and willingness to grow, our desire to be hospitable even at the cost of ease? How do we prepare ourselves for the prophetic invitation to imagine, sing about, and live into a world we've never seen and can barely imagine? How can we get ready to be the voice of the holy in the welcome we sing? I'd like to suggest some things we can do, alone and in community, to build up our understanding and resilience so that we sing welcome not just with our voices but with our whole selves. I'm focusing here on singing welcome to members of socially and politically devalued communities, but we could imagine similar work to prepare us for singing welcome to our political opponents.

First, though, there's one final distinction to make before I get to the spiritual practices that help us sing welcome. Toward the beginning of this article, I mentioned that there are people who are not part of our communities because they believe or belong or behave differently. We have not excluded them; we simply are not them. Our core claims and values are different from their core claims and values. We would be uncomfortable singing their pastoral songs and they would be uncomfortable singing ours. In what follows, I am not worried about those people, and I am not focusing on the discomfort of singing faith music that makes claims we simply cannot accept. As I said earlier, Unitarian Universalists are not the only churchgoers who need to agree with the text to sing it comfortably. In what follows, I'm focusing on three other types of discomfort. The first type is discomfort with the specific language or linguistic style of a hymn or worship song, language that does not come down to basic faith claims but that states or explores them or their implications in challenging ways. The second type is discomfort related to the group the text aims to welcome. The third type is the discomfort of facing up to the inequality that has made that group unwelcome, especially if it is a form of inequality from which we benefit.

My confessional psalm "Oh, My Shepherd" speaks to the last of these kinds of discomfort. It addresses directly the harm we white people have caused and continue to cause people of color and asks for strength that we might do better. As with all confessions, it is intentionally uncomfortable.

My hymn "God the Soaring Eagle" may cause the first kind of discomfort by using female language for God and may cause the second type of discomfort by

reminding singers of the variety of different genders in the world and possibly in the room.

And "Queerly Beloved" might evoke all three kinds of discomfort by its use of the word "queer," by its focus on the perspectives of LGBTQ+ people, and by its reminder that LGBTQ+ people have been treated badly by heterosexual and cisgender people. I should add that singing "Queerly Beloved" might also be uncomfortable to LGBTQ+ people who have been taught their whole lives that insofar as they are queer, they are not beloved and insofar as they are beloved, it is either because or if they are not queer. Being systematically devalued is traumatizing, and church music that challenges that devaluation can trigger pain and grief. There's a reason a lot of LGBTQ+ people who find themselves in a truly welcoming congregation may sit there and cry for a long time. I should also add that the use of the term "queer" in this context can itself cause pain to older lesbians and gay men, for whom the term was likely used as a hostile attack when they were younger. It is definitely a term with generational comfort differences, and a congregation that uses this hymn should be aware of that.

Much of the spiritual work that will help us sing welcome, especially when doing so is uncomfortable, begins with changing our relationship to discomfort. Specifically, we can practice sitting with discomfort without needing to either address or avoid it. We can do this through spiritual practices of silence, meditation, and prayer, alone and collectively. We can do it through psychological healing work, such as therapy and the individual exercises that we do in support of that therapy. We can get familiar with what discomfort feels like in our bodies, how our minds fight with it or flee it or freeze at its arrival. We can parse our discomfort to find out what exactly we are afraid of and why. Engaging with discomfort in general will help us learn how to sing welcome when the words are uncomfortable and will help us learn how to be a silent presence of love when we simply cannot sing the words.

As I mentioned before, I attend a church that sometimes incorporates worship music that makes me uncomfortable. I cannot assent to the claims of those texts, which seem to me to lift up a vision of the world and the holy that I find troubling. But because I see how meaningful those hymns are to other members of the congregation, I'm glad we sing them. I am grateful to be part of a congregation that makes different members uncomfortable at different times but makes all of us comfortable at least some of the time. Being willing to be uncomfortable at times so that others can be comfortable is, for me, part of the work of co-creating Beloved Community. We won't always be happy, but we will always be loved and we will always love one another to the best of our abilities.

When we confront our discomfort as it lives in our thoughts and energy and bodies, we will become deeply familiar with the difference between good and bad discomfort. Years ago, my massage therapist taught me how to distinguish between good physical pain and bad physical pain during a massage. More recently, writings by the brilliant trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem have taught me the difference between clean and dirty emotional pain. In the same way, discomfort can be productive or unproductive, healing or harmful, holy or unholy.

Unproductive discomfort, harmful discomfort, unholy discomfort is caused by poverty and prejudice, violence and cruelty, judgmentalism and exclusion, self-hatred and self-destructive behavior, devaluation and dehumanization: all the many ways that we can damage ourselves and others. Unproductive discomfort is, essentially, avoidable suffering. We cause unproductive discomfort when our culture and institutions and individual behaviors and interactions lead us to treat ourselves and others, individually or systematically, as anything other than beloved and beautiful. We experience unproductive discomfort when others treat us as expendable, inherently evil, or otherwise problematic based on who they perceive us to be. The people to whom Jesus chose to bring his good news were largely those suffering from the unholy, harmful discomfort that comes from being colonized, exploited, devalued, and disinherited.

Productive discomfort, healing discomfort, and holy discomfort is any discomfort we invite ourselves to experience in the service of co-creating Love's domain on earth, particularly where that means healing those who suffer from harmful discomfort. It is profoundly uncomfortable to acknowledge fully how much we who are white benefit from white supremacy and to commit to work against it even at our own expense. But this is productive discomfort. It is profoundly uncomfortable to realize that God's welcome table is a lot larger and messier than we thought and people we don't like or approve of are right there with us. But this is holy discomfort. Healing discomfort comes from stretching ourselves,

from risking ourselves, from doing the right thing or the best thing no matter how difficult, again, especially in service of the crazy vision that this guy had thousands of years ago and that we are still trying to put into practice.

Because of the ways in which inequality and religious exclusion work, healing and harmful discomfort exist in very specific relationship to one another. Members of socially valued groups are given the benefit of the doubt and are treated in good faith, which makes their lives easier. Members of socially devalued groups are not given the benefit of the doubt and are treated in bad faith, which makes their lives harder and sometimes leads to their deaths. It is precisely the bad-faith treatment of members of devalued groups, including religious exclusion and mistreatment, that causes them to experience unproductive, harmful, unholy discomfort. If we, as members of valued groups, want to sing welcome and show welcome to members of devalued groups, we need to be ready to experience productive, healing, holy discomfort ourselves as we push beyond our familiar, comforting pastoral church song traditions and do something new, something prophetic, something hospitable, something just. Our willingness to take on discomfort in order to welcome the newcomer and the outsider within can play a role in easing their discomfort.

Once we have a good understanding of discomfort in its many forms and some capacity to engage with it peacefully, there will be other things we can do to help us sing welcome boldly and joyfully. My concluding thoughts represent only the briefest introduction to some of these possibilities.

We can practice repentance. I mean that less in the sense of being contrite and sorry for our failures, and more in the sense of turning around and getting a new perspective. This may mean educating ourselves about a form of inequality for which we are not penalized and understanding deeply the harm it does. This work will ultimately help us sing welcome to anyone who suffers from this form of inequality. Alternately, repentance may mean doing the hard emotional work of realizing that we ourselves are not defective, immoral, inadequate, or less than human—we simply belong to a devalued group of people and were taught untrue, harmful things about ourselves. This work will help us sing welcome to ourselves and it will allow us the grace to receive the gift of others singing welcome to us.

If the people we wish to welcome are not yet among us in worship, we can learn about them—about their history, gifts, values, power, and suffering. This education, which we can pursue alone and with each other, will help us be ready for the presence of newcomers not yet among us by enabling us to begin acknowledging and honoring their experiences and perspectives. I asked earlier whether an all-white congregation could sing welcome to members of communities of color. This is one way we can begin to do exactly that. It is also a way to let outsiders within who have not yet revealed their outsider status know that they are wholeheartedly welcome.

We can shape our worship and our adult faith formation around extravagant hospitality. We can situate singing welcome as part of a larger project of making welcome manifest in the many aspects of our church life and our lives outside of church. Cornel West famously said that justice is what love looks like in public; we can assume that extravagant hospitality is another aspect of what love looks like in public and prioritize it accordingly.

Finally, we can put our gifts and our lives at the service of the people we are seeking to welcome. This may mean offering our financial resources, skills, time, and energy to justice organizations. It may mean showing up at protests and demonstrations, putting our bodies between the least of these and those who would hurt them. It may mean seeking out and listening to people whose stories and perspectives we are not already obliged to hear because they don't count as much as us, people who our social and political institutions treat with bad faith, people who are not routinely granted the benefit of the doubt. When we give such people our attention and follow their lead about how to support their work for justice, we are not merely singing welcome, we are living it, cultivating hospitality through humility. Any work we do along these lines will not only be useful for co-creating Love's domain of human well-being. It will resound through our voices once we are back at worship, singing in joy and wonder and gratitude.

Note

1. John Robinson, known as the pastor of those who traveled on the Mayflower to North America, famously told the Pilgrims that "[God] hath yet more truth and light to break forth from [God's] holy word."

Oh, My Shepherd: A Psalm for White People Working against White Supremacy

Amanda Udis-Kessler, copyright 2020; dedicated to the UCC racial justice communities that have nurtured and challenged me; inspired by Psalm 23

To be sung as a solo or in unison by one or more white people/people of European descent

Find music at queersacredmusic.com/all-scores

Oh, my Shepherd, lead me, guide me.
Haunt me, push me, move my heart.
When I ache for stiller waters, keep me on my feet.
Bring me to the street. Help me not retreat.

Lead me in the path of justice.
Send me to resist the violence.
Tempted as I am to silence,
comfort me and raise my voice.
Help me make the harder choice.

Oh, my Shepherd, I have walked through
whitest valleys far too long,
fearing what I thought was evil,
causing harm and doing wrong.
Help me sing a different song.
Where I stumble, make me strong.

I have lingered at the table,
safe and sated, unaware,
failing in my joy to notice
all the ones who weren't there,
all the ways the world's unfair,
all the times I didn't care.

Oh, my Shepherd, fill my cup with heartbreak so it overflows.
Pour the oil of deep compassion down upon me till I know
how to face the devastation, how to work to heal the nation,
how to strive for reparation.

Oh, my Shepherd, may I be a shepherd of my very own,
leading others into goodness, guiding others into mercy,
living proof that you have called us to rebuild your shattered home
as a place where all of us shall dwell as one our whole lives long.

God The Soaring Eagle

Amanda Udis-Kessler

♩ = 70

Dm F Gsus G | C D/C | C D/C

4 C D | C Em | F Em

God the soar - ing ea - gle, God the moth - er hen, ar - chi-tect and pot - ter,
God the gen - tle shep - herd, God the migh - ty king, cry - ing out in la - bor,
God the male and fe - male made us e - ven so. God the one whose gen - der

7 F G | Am D | C G

shel - ter, shield, and sun, com - fort - ing the peo - ple o - thers have con - demned:
an - gry moth - er bear, drunk - ard, nurse, and mid - wife, brood be - neath your wing,
shifts and twists and bends bles - ses us and frees us as we live and grow,

Biblical references: Genesis 1:27; Exodus 19:4; Deuteronomy 4:24; Deuteronomy 32:4, 10-11; Psalm 10:16; Psalm 19:1; Psalm 22:9; Psalm 23; Psalm 31:20; Psalm 47:7; Psalm 84:11; Isaiah 42:14; Isaiah 49:15; Isaiah 64:8; Isaiah 66:13; Jeremiah 17:13; Hosea 13:8; Matthew 11:19; Matthew 23:37

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10

Am Em F C/E Dm F Gsus G

you of ma - ny names, you name - less one. All our words of praise have just be -
fi - re, wa - ter, rock, you're al - ways there, tempt - ing us a - way from our de -
loves us in - to full - ness with no end. We of ev - ery gen - der say a -

13

1, 2. C D C D

gun.
spair.

3. C F/C C F/C

- men.

17

C D/C C

Queerly Beloved

Amanda Udis-Kessler

♩ = 174

D A/D G/D A/D D A/D G/D A/D

9

D A/D G/D A/D Gmaj7 D/F♯ Em7 D/F♯ G

Queer-ly be - lov - ed, we have as - sem-bled, join - ing in won - der, sing - ing in
Queer-ly be - lov - ed, we have been hat - ed, treat - ed as out - casts, rag - ged and
Queer-ly be - lov - ed, we have dis - cov - ered love that is per - fect, end - ing our

16

A A/G D/F♯ F♯m G Em7 F♯m7

praise. Lift - ing our eyes, rais - ing our voi - ces, trust - ing in hope, in
rough. Still we per - sist, joy - ous and grate - ful, trust - ing that grace is
fear. There is a truth wait - ing to claim us. There is a call so

Biblical references: 1 John 4:18

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23

G A D D/F♯ G Bm Em7

love, and in faith. Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le -
ev - er e - nough. Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le -
strong and so clear. Al - le - lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia, al - le -

30

D/F♯ A sus A D D A/D G/D A/D D 1, 2.

lu - ia, God is great!
lu - ia, God is love!
lu - ia, God is here!

1, 2. A/D

39

G/D A/D 3. A/D G/D A/D D

rit.

Maria Fee
Constancy, acrylic on paper, 2023

Queering Worship in Times of Collective Upheaval

Jess Cook

In the early stages of lockdown in 2020, I began to say what has now become a repeated refrain in my life, "If you want to know how to worship outside of a church building, talk to the people who've been told they cannot worship in a church building. Because it is among those folks that you'll begin to realize why it is we worship in the first place; you'll engage a level of authenticity that has been lost from much of our traditional worship these days." This was most often repeated as I talked with pastors struggling to adapt to new forms of worship and the limitations they perceived doing church so far outside their comfort zones.

It has been clear that getting back into our sanctuaries has not, indeed, done anything to improve church membership. The sharp decline in church attendance, already steep before COVID, has only continued since many congregations have returned to in-person worship. The energy in most congregations on any given Sunday morning vacillates between stagnant, arid, and woefully insufficient in providing worship goers what they need for this time in which we are living.

And it's not just in the church. The world is in a state of chaos unparalleled in our collective history. The systems so many of us have been told would keep us safe are failing. As they do, we are facing circumstances many of us haven't even considered, much less faced, before. News reels are filled with one overwhelming story after another. We are in a time of great transformation in the church and in the world unlike any we have experienced before.

When I think about the church today, I think about Peter's declaration in Matthew 16 that Jesus is the Christ. This is the moment Peter finally sees what Jesus has been trying to get the disciples to see since the start of his ministry. Just two chapters before, when Jesus walks on water, Peter is almost there, but doesn't quite yet understand—he trips himself up with his own doubt. It is only after Peter has seen Jesus feeding and healing people (both Jew and Gentile), defying the boundaries of religious and social norms and expectations and defying the religious experts, that he finally gets it.

Peter declares Jesus as the Christ when he understands the ministry Jesus models is about feeding people, healing people, and transcending boundaries put upon us, especially those enforced by the religious establishment. In his proclamation Peter is affirming that when we see these markers, we know Jesus is at work.

Jesus says, "Yes, Peter! You get it! You understand! And it is on this understanding that my church will be built."

At the moment Jesus gave Peter his name, a seed was planted. Peter's understanding is the living rock which is the seed and true foundation of Jesus' ministry. When Jesus was killed and came back, the seed had everything it needed to grow. Then Pentecost came, and that Spirit of understanding, so alive in Jesus, was given to all of us. Jesus showed us what it means to love God through true love to our neighbors and ourselves. In Christ, we have access to a way of being in right relation with one another. Those early followers of The Way understood what we are and what we can be when we live in right relation with one another. Acts 2:42–47 tells us that those first Christians lived as a united community and shared everything. Those who had more sold what they had in excess so everyone could live in abundance. They ate together and offered thanks

Rev. Jess Cook is the organizing pastor for Every Table, a new worshiping community in Richmond, Virginia, and was the first openly trans/non-binary person ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA).

to God for God's goodness and providence, and the community grew exponentially.

That small seed grew into a vigorous plant; and, like the Spirit that enlivened it, the plant could not be contained. It grew wild and became a serious threat to the status quo.

A few hundred years in, it was made into an institution. A proverbial layer of concrete was poured over the living foundation established by Christ. Concrete, however solid it may seem, is a fabricated material. It's toxic to breathe and makes the ground impermeable to water. Concrete pales in comparison to the sturdiness and steadiness of rock, which is just as much a part of this creation as humans are.

Yet that plant—that Spirit—is resilient and has continued to grow, often, despite the institution's best efforts to contain it.

The church's history can be traced by the relationship between this plant and the layers of concrete poured over it. There have been reformations and transformations and glimmers of the Divine breaking through. Yet, time and again, we've fallen into scarcity thinking, confused the institution with God, and forgotten that we have everything we need already within us. And each time, we've poured another layer of concrete.

The years of faulty foundations have finally caught up with us. We are no longer naive enough to avoid what is so clearly happening. The writing is on the wall; we can sense it in our hearts. We can feel the Spirit groaning with labor pains as we wait for all of creation to be set free. The foundations are crumbling, yes, but that ancient plant rooted in the life of Christ is still alive and is powerful enough to break through everything keeping us from living into who we were created to be.

The call of the church in this moment is to nurture the growth of that life breaking through all we've known. We are being invited to see that we are that living plant, that new life breaking forth, tearing through anything that does not serve our love of God, ourselves, and our neighbors.

So often when confronted with a crisis, we resort to scarcity thinking—we focus on budgets and bottom lines and do what we can to get through. So we do what we've always done because it's what we've always done. We cannot face the anxiety we feel underneath it all, so we lean on what's familiar, when what we need right now is exactly the opposite.

We need new ideas; we need to break outside the self-imposed barriers, both literal and metaphorical, that are keeping us from seeing the abundance happening all around us.

In short, we need to queer the church.

Merriam-Webster defines queer as "differing in some odd way from what is usual or normal; eccentric; unconventional."[1] While the word *Queer* can still make people uncomfortable, for many others, claiming the word has been a way of subverting the narrative by uplifting the value of unconditional ways of approaching the world. If we truly honor the unique image of God in every person, why would we celebrate normalcy and conformity above all else? Queerness pushes us beyond our comfort zones and beyond the self-imposed boundaries that prohibit us from living into the fullness of who we were created to be.

By "queering the church" I mean embracing the unusual, the unfamiliar, embracing that idea that someone prefaces with, "Oh, I know this may sound a little strange, but what if we try this . . ." Embrace that nudge that comes in the form of a neighbor expressing a need and the community that is built as a response to it. Ask the question everyone is afraid to ask. Show up for the difficult conversations, for the ones that challenge who we are individually and together.

Queering the church means trusting that part of you that knows you have to worship—not because it makes you good, but because it makes you whole.

When we started Every Table, a new worshiping community in Richmond, Virginia, with the focus on healing from the ways white supremacy and capitalism have torn us apart, we knew food would be central to the process. We decided early on to have one Sunday a month set aside to just share a meal. I can remember a brief moment wondering if *only* sharing a meal was legitimate enough to count as worship, only to remember that the exact thing Jesus was doing when he said "Do this and remember me" was breaking bread.

The question I've wrestled with since is whether the *rest* of the stuff we've grown so accustomed to doing in worship is legitimate. Scripture makes very clear that our worship needn't be fancy or decent and in order; it just needs to be authentic. Yet, how often have we fallen into a pattern of doing things because it's just what we do, never stopping to ask whether it does anything to encourage us to love God, ourselves, or one another? We may switch out

elements of worship, add in a new prayer, or vary up the way we serve communion, but we are still wed to the idea that worship has to be done in just the right way to be valid.

In our earliest days of Every Table, we didn't know what form worship would take. We learned to sit in stillness together. We leaned into being vulnerable with one another. We showed up for one another. We learned to show up for ourselves. We learned to be present with silence while waiting for the Spirit to move, to listen for her still, small voice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, once we were settled in our bodies, we found the Spirit's voice to be anything but small.

We have learned to trust the abundance of daily bread as we create a system of support for ourselves and one another. And we continue to stand in awe at all the ways the Spirit has shown up and illuminated the path ahead of us. The seeds we've planted are taking root in the garden of ALL THAT IS, and we are finding our rhythm as we learn to nurture the new life coming forth.

Starting a new worshiping community has reminded me daily that the institution is not the church. We are the church, all of us. We've learned to trust that we are being provided for and will have exactly what we need as we move forward. Starting a new worshiping community has also shown us that the most Spirit-led moments often happen when we are able to let go of control and claim what we already have among us. The Spirit moves most freely through an unobstructed vessel, when things feel almost effortless (even while getting things done). Yes, it is possible to have a church gathering that feels almost effortless.

The Holy Spirit seldom moves in a way that is decent or in order. Tremendous, often necessary, change always comes on the heels of chaos.

So, what happens if we honor the chaos and see it as the Holy Spirit tossing everything into a state of uncertainty so we will be jostled into a new way of seeing ourselves, one another, and God?

But what does that mean on a practical level? How do we learn to both honor the chaos and find the stillness within?

For starters it means

- Slow down.
- Create spaces for stillness and silence in worship and in your life.
- Share meals. Often.
- Encourage vulnerability—within yourself and the community.
- Look at all you're doing as a community and ask yourself *why* you're doing it. Be willing to toss out anything that doesn't nurture love of God, self, and neighbor.
- Have imagining sessions together to talk about what kind of world you envision.
- Look at how you use your money, and how much of it is going towards creating the world you imagine versus how much is being used to prop up ministries that have been dead for some time.
- Be spontaneous. Leave room for the Holy Spirit. Trust her wisdom. Trust your own. Make room for breath. Make room for wonder; make room for awe.
- Trust that God is making all things new and that you are being invited to participate.

May we all have the courage to answer the call.

Note

1. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2012), s.v. "queer."

Distinction Not Lost in Unity

Kallie Pitcock

I am the solo pastor and only full-time staff person at a rural church in East Texas. As an assembly, our life together revolves around planning and enacting worship. What we say and do in worship is formed in our beliefs about God, to whom we turn our devotion, and forms us as God's people. What it means to queer worship also has everything to do with what we believe about God and about our life as a community.

Any conversation about what it means to develop liturgy, and to queer it, must begin with who God is and how we understand ourselves. And as confessing Christians, a conversation about God begins with Trinitarian theology. Early church councils fought bitterly about how to define and describe the revelation of our triune God. These arguments centered on differentiation and unity. How can two things that are distinct also be unified? Today, we still need to practice working through this question together in our liturgical theology. In *Holding Faith*, Cynthia Rigby writes this about Trinitarian theology: "In the life of God, unity and distinction coexist, each wholly and without compromise. This is unfathomable to us, it seems, in part because, for us, 'individuation' and 'participation' stand always in conflicting relationship to one another."[1] In American capitalist culture, the concept of the individual and the whole may be in tension. But in worship, as in the life of God, the binary between the individual and the community breaks down as members become part of a corporate body, formed by a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three in one and one in three. The concept of the Trinity invites us to a deep understanding of what it means to be in community. Samuel Wells says it so well in *A Nazareth Manifesto*: "Being with is, before anything else, a description of what it means for the persons of the Trinity to be so eternally with one another that they are called one, and yet one in such a dynamic and creative way that they are called three."[2] In worship, part of how we profess our belief in this God is by being with one another.

Of course, our understanding of the person of Jesus, too, is a part of who we understand God to be. Not only were early church leaders divided on the Trinitarian nature of God, but also impassioned arguments about the humanity and divinity of Christ took place. Some church leaders walked away from the Council of Nicaea in 325 giving priority to the divinity of Jesus over his humanity, but Gregory of Nazianzus challenged this with a single sentence: "What has not been assumed cannot be restored; it is what is united with God that is saved."[3] Jesus united us with God by becoming human in the life of one distinct and particular person. As Barth writes, followers of Jesus look to Emmanel, God with us, as our primary lens for understanding who God is. Here again, God is about *being with*. We know God is with us because God became human. Though he was fully human, in Jesus' very being is the source of all being. Though we find God's expansive love in Jesus, we also find the particularities of a common human life. Cynthia Rigby says it well:

> The scandal of particularity, or the idea that the humanity of God, known to us in Jesus Christ, is some things and not others. Like all humanity, it is one gender and not the other, one ethnicity and not another, one height and not another, one race and not another. Jesus was a male and not female, Palestinian and not Anglo, 5–10" and not 6–2".[4]

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Enacting worship in real time and space with real materials is a way for us to say what we believe: that God is with us in the particulars of life. Ours is an incarnational theology. Wrestling with the relationship between unity and particularity also teaches us how to treat one another. God's identification with particularity begins within God's very being and is present through all creation. God's divine image is not just in some, but in all. Followers of Jesus have come to understand that because God has revealed God's self to us in the form of one particular person, particularity itself is sacred. All the particulars of life are called beloved, and in baptism, those particularities are made one without loss of distinction.

The flesh and blood humanity of Jesus, God-with-us, that theological cornerstone that we call the scandal of particularity, is an important invitation to understand the reality of queerness. Queerness is both particular and expansive. Mihee Kim-Kort writes so beautifully about the expansiveness of the language of queerness in *Outside the Lines*:

> Queerness has undergone numerous challenges and transformations. It began as a way to describe certain expressions of sexuality and gender, and now includes other markers of identity, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and more. It is rooted in matters of gender and sexuality, but queerness is not meant to be exclusionary. In fact, any kind of exclusion would be counter to queerness, because queerness is about bodies, and we all have bodies. We move through this world in our bodies, and we're constantly interacting with other bodies. This matters.[5]

There are clear similarities between the way queer theories negotiate the relationship between particularity and expansiveness and the way our conversations about the Trinity and the person of Jesus do. Both call us to be with and for one another, seeing our differences not as a threat, but as a gift. In Reformed theology, worship is a response to God's grace for all persons. In the act of gathering for worship itself, we affirm this good news, which is itself queer, not exclusionary, and lived out through particular embodiments and actions. The PC(USA)'s *Book of Order* says, "In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction" (F-1.0403). And the Directory for Worship of the PC(USA) reminds us that

> God has poured out the Holy Spirit on all flesh; Scripture promises that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The book of Acts and the New Testament epistles record the challenges and controversies of an emerging Church that would be "no longer Jew or Greek" (Gal. 3:28), but one in Jesus Christ. As the Church has grown and spread over two thousand years, it has taken root and flourished in cultures and lands all around the globe—bearing witness to the love of God for all the world and Christ's sovereignty in every place (W-1.0304).

Part of attending to particularity is about using inclusive language to reference humans and diverse language to talk about God in worship. Just as we affirm the importance of diversity in our communities and strive to be with and for one another in all our particularities, we also recognize the diversity in the names and images for God found in Scripture. This impacts the language we use in worship in our prayers, song, liturgy. Some ways to attend to language in worship include

- Seek to maintain a balance between hymns about God (Jesus), about individual relationship (me and Jesus), and about communal relationship with God (we and Jesus).
- Expand the language of the service to include both gender-non-specific language and gendered language in prayer and throughout the sermon. There is a balance to hold here between particular and expansive language. Using no specific language about gender or sexuality may flatten, avoid, or remove particulars that matter, but those particulars should not be exclusive.
- Look for hymns from other countries and languages than your own. There is a tension to hold here, since care must be taken not to misrepresent or appropriate from cultures or narratives that the congregation as a whole cannot claim as their own. Singing from diverse authorship can help us to develop empathy for our siblings in Christ and unite us with others around the world, but it's important to take time

to develop a conversation with the congregation about the nuances here.

- Look at the service as a whole when planning and be attentive to how much male, female, or non-specific gender language is used and and how often first person singular (I/me), first person plural (we/us), second person (you), third person singular (she/her/he/him/they/them), and third person plural (they/them) pronouns are used. The English language lacks a second person plural pronoun, which is used extensively throughout Scripture. Around here what we call our "Texas translation" substitutes these pronouns in Scripture with "y'all," which becomes a way to expand the language in the service while developing specific contextual awareness.

Whether you name for the congregation that these changes are meant to queer worship and break down binaries, or whether you carry out these changes across time, attention to language forms the assembly. Hearing, singing, saying, and praying expansively reflects our life in Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, the body is made up of many parts. The hand cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of you." Queering worship life and language is about particularity and unity.

As Jesus was a particular person and each individual in our communities is a particular person, so our congregations are particular communities in time, place, and culture.

As Jesus was a particular person and each individual in our communities is a particular person, so our congregations are particular communities in time, place, and culture. In planning and enacting worship, we hold the tension of our particular context with the reality of unity in diversity through Christ. Ruth Duck reminds us that as leaders develop liturgy, it is their task to foster "the congregation's understanding of God, one another, and themselves; and so it is important to consider whether words and worship form a wholesome theology appropriate to the denomination, time, and place. While building on the familiar, worship planners are also responsible for introducing material that may push the boundaries of faith and express the life of the Spirit more fully."[6] Determining what to include in a worship service should be done prayerfully and in community. Part of what it means to queer worship is to hold this tension between deeply contextual and highly inclusive. In worship, we engage the good news through the narratives of our faith in a way that both comforts and challenges, holding the inherent queerness of the paradoxes of our faith.

Our lives are formed and molded by the stories we attend to and the practices we prioritize. There are a million priorities vying for our attention, and our senses are pulled in many directions, but worship offers a unique and countercultural kind of formation. "Our gathering with other Christians in a participatory meeting constitutes the most basic symbol of Christianity,"[7] writes Gordon Lathrop in his book *The Assembly*. "Joining an assembly enables actual participation in this people who are being made people of God, actual reception of such mercy, and actual witness-bearing to God's mighty acts for the sake of the life of the world." The conversation about how to queer worship is a conversation about our liturgical theology first, which of course influences the specifics of what we do in worship. What does it mean to gather, and what do we believe about God? Queer worship recognizes at once the particularity of each of those gathered and the common life of the whole, affirms diverse language for God, and proclaims God's identification with humanity.

To queer worship is to affirm that it matters what we do on a Sunday morning and how we do it. Our faith itself invites us into the meaning of queerness, so many of the ways we might think about queering worship won't seem strange or even new. The following are some lived examples of what it might mean to queer worship in the specifics of a Sunday morning.

At the Font

There are many opportunities to approach the font in worship. Some include during the assurance of pardon following the confession, at a remembrance of baptism, or at a time of commissioning. On any of these occasions, a worship leader may dip their hand in the water and make the mark of a cross on their forehead or on the foreheads of others. One way to queer this practice would be to invite people to mark one another, recognizing our connection with one another in baptism. Congregants can be invited forward as if for intinction, and an usher

or the pastor can mark the first person, then that person can move and become the one who marks the one behind them saying, “You are a beloved child of God; you are claimed, loved, and belong.” These actions affirm that every person in the room has the power to speak the words and mark the forehead of another, giving each and every person voice and opportunity to give and to receive. This way of approaching a remembrance of baptism may also be carried out with anointing oil in a healing and wholeness service or service of commissioning, or during foot or hand washing.

Response to the Word

Following the sermon, the *Book of Common Worship* allows for an optional response to the sermon in addition to a spoken creed or confession. This could be a time for the offering of personal testimony. This requires planning and preparation. Offering the opportunity to the whole congregation while asking some persons directly to offer testimony often encourages greater participation. Take care to build an atmosphere of trust. If they are authentic to the individual, testimonies will follow different forms and may include grand changes and events or be unresolved. All will be a witness to the presence and power of the Spirit in each particular life and in the life of the community. Some prompts that can help to generate testimonies include

> Tell a story of a time you felt helpless.
> Tell a story of a time God surprised you.
> Tell a story of a time you felt cherished.
> Tell a story of a time you were overcome
> with awe.
> Tell a story of a time you felt set free.
> Tell a story of a time someone helped you.

The goal of testimony is to be yourself, fully naming the reality of your life without fear of rejection within a community of belonging. This practice may not be one that your congregation has practiced, but sharing testimony in the context of worship can be very powerful for a community.

Intercessory Prayer

There is often little opportunity for direct conversational engagement among those gathered during worship. The time of intercession is a wonderful opportunity to share joys and concerns. A regular practice of turning to someone near you and sharing a personal joy and a concern during a time of prayer in worship opens those gathered into meaningful relationship. The presider might also invite prayers to be shared aloud during a prayer, then close the prayer with the Lord’s Prayer, an opportunity for all voices to gather into one by the power of the Holy Spirit. This practice is one that can queer a very familiar practice with intention, upholding particularity that is not lost in unity.

At the Table

In congregations who use screens and/or printed worship guides, the guide itself can leave the people in the room divided, distracted, and not fully present. During important moments in the service like communion, a worship leader may invite the congregation to put down any paper guide and leave the screen empty while you gather at the table, just as you would at a dinner table at home. This may allow all to be as present as possible to the Christ who has invited them and prepared the meal. Without guides, congregants may be anxious, but liturgy can be written or sung in an echoed or repetitive format, using gestures or other indicators from the presider to guide the congregation. In her book *Pray, Praise, and Give Thanks*, Gail Ramshaw includes multiple eucharistic prayers with an echo format. For the echo to work, phrases need to be three words or less. Sharing the Great Thanksgiving in this way brings every voice and person to the table without distraction or distance. If your congregation uses name tags, saying a person’s name as they come to receive the elements would be another opportunity to recognize the particularities of those in the gathered assembly.

Charge

At the end of the worship service, a charge is given, sending the people out into the world to be the hands and feet of Jesus, taking with them all they’ve received in worship. This presents another opportunity to invite those gathered to look at one another. A leader may invite one side of the room to turn and face the other or invite each individual to turn to someone near them and charge them as printed in the bulletin, taking turns. This commissions the congregation not just through the voice of the presider, but also through the many voices gathered in their community.

“Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud,” hymn #11 in *Glory to God*, includes some of the many

names for God from Scripture. This is one example of a liturgical text that can be used in worship to recognize the ways in which, in the very identity of God, distinction and unity are not in conflict. God's identity shows us how to live into our queerness, where distinction and unity are not in conflict. The queerness of our Trinitarian God refuses binaries and resists neat boxes to categorize identity. Questions of queerness have been part of theological debate from as early as the first church councils in their discussions about homoousias between the persons of the Trinity and the hypostatic union in the person of Christ. In our conversations about queering worship, we are joining the long unfolding of God's self-revelation, affirming that God in Christ is indeed light from light, begotten not made. We must not succumb to erasure of particularities as worship leaders; no singular gender or image should be removed from our worship life as we seek to bring diversity to our language. One example of an effort to hold our inheritance and unity with the whole church while expanding our language is the Riverside baptismal formula that many use: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all." This formula gives space to allow for a more expansive understanding of our living God without constricting our language. Using Mother and Father may still present a gender binary, but we can also recognize these two names for God as parts of a spectrum, not exhaustive but suggestive of the many names and metaphors we can use to describe God. The materials, language, and ritual actions used in worship are formed first and foremost in who God is. This forms us in the image of the one in whom we know our own belovedness. We church leaders must remember that worship is about being with God, in communion with our Creator. God meets us in worship to experience wonder and beauty and to cry out for intervention in the brutality in this world and in our lives. Jesus was born into particularity that we might know exactly who we are, precious in our own particularity, and made one without loss of distinction in the body of Christ. All glory and honor, power and might be to our God forever and ever, Amen.

Notes

1. Cynthia L. Rigby, *Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018).
2. Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 195.
3. Rigby, *Holding Faith*, 94–96.
4. Rigby, *Holding Faith*, 94.
5. Mihee Kim-Kort and Rachel Held Evans, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2018), 3.
6. Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 82.
7. Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Assembly: A Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2022), 1.

Maria Fee
Sanctuary, canvas, 2023

An Invitation to Make and Share

Reed Fowler

On the night he was handed over to the Roman authorities, Jesus shared a meal with his friends. The Twelve named, yes, including the one who betrayed him with a kiss, the one he called beloved, and the one who would deny his name. They shared a meal together, like many nights before, knowing but not wanting to believe that that night was different. They shared stories of healing, of loss, of miracles. Jesus took the bread they shared, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. "This is my body. This bread that you can buy on every corner, make on every fire—this bread that nourishes you is my body. It is for you. Take it and eat. Remember me."

When the night was winding down, stars blinking into existence overhead, friends leaning back and into each other, quieting in the darkness, Jesus picked up the cup they had been passing around. He blessed it, as he often did, and said, "This cup is my blood. A new promise, a new covenant, which is given for each of you, and for all of creation. Drink. Remember me. This bread and cup weaves you together, entangles you with God's creation, binds you together with your ancestors who were, and who are still to come, and who are with us here. Keep loving, keep blessing, keep sharing meals together. Remember me."[1]

These words echo in my bones. My bodymind[2] remembers each act of communion. A simple meal, a celebratory meal,[3] it is an act that connects us, through God's Spirit, across time and space.

I took communion for the first time on Pride Sunday at a church beside Stonewall in New York City. There were already celebratory crowds gathering outside, and we would join them at the end of the service. There was a small mural of a dove, descending, above the altar. The congregation was small enough that we all gathered in a circle to receive bread and wine.

Even amidst breaks in my memory from trauma and medication, I remember that moment of communion so distinctly in my bodymind. The words—*This is my body, this is my blood, given for you*. The elements—broken and handed, steadied and sipped. The Spirit—called into that place, called through our breath and our togetherness and our faith and our questions. Connected to creation, to the ancestors, to each other, to God, we were woven together, intertwined. My bodymind remembers, even as my memory holds gaps.

This is an exploration in weaving—weaving ideas together from textile craft, queer theology, domestic practice, communion, liturgy, and community life. I am pulling threads from the depths of forgetting and from the fire of creativity, longing to make and share and make and share. I hope this longing resonates in the core of your spirit. This is an exploration of relationships among often disparate fields, but most importantly, it is an invitation to make and share our very lives, creative and whole, becoming and beautiful, transformative and sacred. This is an invitation to dwell in the ordinary, honor the handmade, and embrace the imperfections. This is an invitation to embodied creative practice, since we are creative beings made in the image of Creator God.

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Reed Fowler
An Offering, mixed-medium weaving, 2022

If I were to pull out a single connective thread from the fabric of my life, textile craft would be one that stretches back and forward, back and forward. Textiles are a tangible way for me to piece memory together, to piece existence together. I sewed from a young age. When my grandma and aunt, both quilters, learned that I was gluing fabric together to make pouches, they got me a sewing machine I still use to this day. I remember sitting on my basement floor where carpet changed to tile, teaching myself how to use it. I remember my mom's surprise at how quickly I picked it up.

Then I began knitting. Here, memory blurs—I don't think I taught myself. I think my grandma taught me. My across-the-dirt-road neighbor was the first in a long line of women who tried (and failed, through no fault of their own) to teach me to crochet. For a decade or so I didn't knit, but I turned back to it as an anchor, to reground myself in the midst of change. When I moved halfway around the globe for college, I felt unmoored, and, depression flaring, I picked up knitting again.

Four years later, while I was working on a piece of theater I devised for my college thesis, I stayed late in the studio I shared with a few other arts-practice seniors. For some reason, I decided 2:00 A.M. was a good time to start watching Martin Scorsese's 1988 epic, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The film prompted an image that struck me so clearly, so profoundly, that it changed the structure of my thesis and shaped my theology—the image of Christ, kneeling, arms outstretched, not carrying a cross, but carrying a frame loom. In the final piece, titled *FEMME*, the performers wove a bandage on the loom, which was warped and carried throughout the duration of the show, a bandage which was then cut off and used. The process of making and performing the final piece attempted to explore the question, "Is wounding masculinity removed, transformed, or cemented after its collision with femme embodiments?" and the proposition that a loom can stand analogous to a cross. We defined wounding masculinity as the way that masculinity is often culturally conditioned towards violence, stoicism, and harm in ways that can harm people of all genders, including those who claim masculinity. In the process of collaborative creation, we each brought our own experiences of masculinity and femininity, and all the experiences that resisted an easy binary, and pieced together this exploration of potential transformation. The show became a queer retelling of the stations of the cross, where we used the stations to explore gender, masculinity, and relationship, with the loom at the center. Jesus, a carpenter, an artist, carrying a loom—an instrument of creation and transformation.

Reed Fowler
FEMME, performance documentation, 2015
Pictured: Isabella Peralta, Valentina Vela, and Attilio Rigotti
Photo by James Hosken

Many in my artistic community that year were exploring how objects hold memory, asking, "How do objects change through use, time, and narrative?" A stole passed down from preacher to preacher, for example, holds a different energy than a new stole at the beginning of its journey. There are times when it is important to invoke tradition and continuity and times when it is important to start fresh, making new pathways for memory and meaning through use. The objects we hold, use, pass on, and gift are entwined with our stories woven through actions. Ritual objects are one way we make meaning, pass on memories, and share stories. They weave us together with our ancestors in faith, who were, who are here, and who are still to come. Even when an object used in worship or ritual life is new, the form often echoes with sacred memory or sacramental function. Here, a plate for bread; here, a cup for (fermented) grape juice.

I deeply value sacramental objects that find their origins in the simple and domestic—such as an everyday plate and cup. The objects we use make theological statements. Just as the vessels in the upper room were specific to the context of Jesus and his friends, the central physical elements of the Christian faith are everyday objects with forms particular to the contexts in which they function. To invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit in ordinary objects, recognizing that she is always there, forms us in incarnational theology. God is at work in these objects, in our lives, and in our domestic and communal spaces.

The liturgies many Christians follow on Sunday mornings create ritual space and time set aside for worship, for meaning making, and for remembering. Liturgy creates space to invite the Divine into our lives, noticing and naming the ways that God is present in us, in our community, and in our relationships. It is a practice—practice, here, akin to an art, a skill, or a discipline. Worship is not playing pretend, and it is not a rehearsal. It may be set apart from everyday life, but it is not compartmentalized or separate from, our daily lives. In worship we are practicing ways of being together. Taking the time to practice being together in this way, patterning our lives in relationship with each other and with God, allows us to carry this practice into our lives. This frames worship as a workshop in which we embody a countercultural way of being together that is intentionally disruptive. This is intentionally different from the busyness, the consumerism, and the alienation that the larger social and political structures we live in press upon us. Before anything else, we are God's beloveds, made in their creative, relational image. Our lives are consecrated for the sacred, and that extends far beyond Sunday mornings. Centering our weekly communal practice around the everyday declares the everyday as sacred, embodied through the cup, the plate, the font, and our lives together.

Depending on your context and faith practices, the objects and essences that evoke a ritual space or a eucharistic space are likely different. Some congregations offer both fermented and non-fermented grape juice. Some congregations offer wafers, a boule, or tortillas. The clothing worn by presiders will vary depending on a whole host of regional, denominational, and personal practices. The objects on the altar or table share common threads but also invoke a large range of hyper-local traditions and histories. For some, communion might be found in sharing a meal with friends or family, and not (just) within the walls of a church. A plate. A cup. A staple grain, and a celebratory drink.[4]

These forms, at their core, embody making and sharing. At its core, communion is a moment of making and sharing. For Jesus and his community,

olives, grapes, and wheat were abundant and domestic. And so there are stories of anointing oil, and of wine and bread. Stories of water and fire.

Before the words *This is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you and for all of creation* are spoken, the elements need to be brought to the table. And before they can be shared from the table, they need to be made. A staple grain, planted, tended, harvested, ground, packaged, sold, baked. A celebratory drink, grapes planted, tended, harvested, crushed, filtered, aged, packaged, sold, poured. Our communal lives and survival are tied together—we are interdependent creatures, and we are woven together more closely than we can ever really know.

Reed Fowler
Beehive chalice, ceramic, 2018

When I think of the many threads that make up the tapestries of our lives, encompassing infinite emotions, experiences, contexts, and histories that include harm, grief, joy, and connection, I put making and sharing, entwined, at the heart of it all. And we are all invited into those practices of making and sharing.

> Making and sharing, like hosting a family
> dinner party.
> Making and sharing, like a child offering you
> part of a mud pie.
> Making and sharing, like a brief conversation
> at the grocery store.

We make and we share. We make food, we mold our lives, we take pictures. We tell stories, we give gifts, and we share who we are with each other.

We are artistic beings, made in the image of a God we may call a potter, a weaver, Creator. Each one of us is creative and imaginative. I believe this wholly, and fully, and without exceptions. There is poetry in a grocery list written to nourish a household. There is beauty in a doodle drawn next to meeting notes. There is artistry in making a home, a life that holds meaning and beauty, however we each may define that.

It is undeniable that we live within systems that discourage us from embracing our creativity, imagination, and curiosity. In the United States, though children and youth may be encouraged to make art, few adults are able to keep an art practice that isn't commercially driven. Systems-as-they-are often do not encourage making for the sake of making, or making for the sake of sharing freely. It's hard to carve out space for play and creativity when many of us are living paycheck to paycheck with a stagnant minimum wage. I fear this is an intentional move by the systems we live in and the people who contribute to them—that society is designed to suppress our capacity for creativity because our creative potential is powerful—so, so powerful.

One of the reasons I return again and again to creative practice, striving to make, mend, or tend to something each day, is that creating is an antidote to despair. With all of the intertwined oppressive systems that we each navigate and all the isms we face, from classism to racism to ableism, with all of the scary things we read about each day—climate change, war, violence—it is too easy to fall into despair.

Creating something new-to-us, or renewed, or reworked, is a way to resist despair. These moments of creative resistance, however small, declare that we are artistic beings who do have the capacity to

make different choices for the sake of ourselves and creation. And sharing these moments of creative resistance with each other multiplies them.

Even in the midst of increasing anti-trans and anti-queer violence, I can weave a set of place mats for the LGBTQIA2S+ centered intentional community I live in, making place settings for the meals we share together, protecting the table passed on through generations.

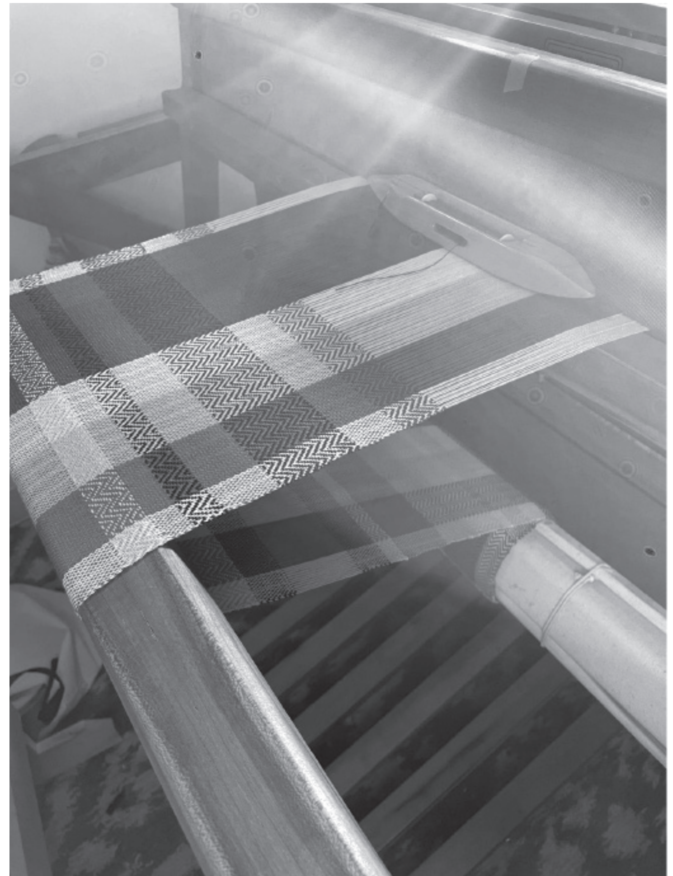
Even in the midst of systemic harm, an ongoing pandemic, and structural refusals to sustain accessibility, we can still practice new ways of being together, creating the conditions we want to live in and that we want our children's children's children to live in.

Even in the midst of it all, we can return to God's table week after week repenting of the ways we are perpetuating harm, letting the body and blood of Christ strengthen us and shape us. We are beloved as we are and as we are becoming in response to God.

One of the reasons I am drawn to weaving again and again is that the structure of weaving can help us embody a framework for healthy community, in which we can make and share of ourselves and our lives. In weaving, there are the warp threads and the weft threads. The warp threads, or the vertical threads, need to be structural. They need to be strong enough to be put under tension. If you're weaving on a floor or a table loom, the warp threads need to be resilient enough to be put under tension and released many times over in the weaving process. The warp threads provide support and structure. The weft threads, or horizontal threads, do not need to be structural. This is where you can get extra creative with weaving materials, using things that could never hold the tension of the warp. The weft threads can provide texture and play. The pattern is built on the interplay of the warp and the weft—how the loom is threaded, what threads are raised or lowered each time, the color of the threads, and how tightly the piece is woven.

The edges, or selvedges, represent one of the hardest parts of the weaving process. This is where the threads wrap around each other, forming a boundary between The Weaving and Not The Weaving. It is easy to pull the edges too tightly, narrowing the weaving over time. It is easy to leave the edges too loose, leaving little loops that catch and snag. Setting this boundary in weaving requires a balance between tension and breathing room. The boundaries give the weaving shape and form.

Among other things, much of weaving is an exploration of tension. This is necessary, making the relationship between warp and weft one that means the weaving stays together once it's cut off of the loom. As a white person who grew up in predominately white spaces, emotional or interpersonal tension is something that feels uncomfortable in my body and is culturally minimized or avoided. In predominately white spaces, there can be a lot of silence, a lot of saying nothing to diffuse tension when it does arise, which has the potential to weaken community and weaken the ability for a community to thrive on the other side of conflict, change, and transformation. Too much tension in a weaving creates an inflexible cloth or causes broken threads. Not enough tension causes the piece to fall apart. I have learned to find the right amount of physical tension for the specific weaving project through experience, mentors, other artists, and experimentation. Along with the process of learning the right amount of physical tension, I find this balance situated in my gut and heart.



Reed Fowler
Rainbow place mats warped onto a floor loom, 2023

Tension and conflict are inevitable when humans gather together. Using weaving as an embodied framework, for me, helps to reframe that tension, pulling me towards transformation through making and sharing. I know I am closer to my favorite self[5] when I have an active arts practice. Intertwining threads remind me that we are created for relationship and community. When I carve out time to create, I do that with intention, which helps me be less susceptible to doom/hope scrolling.[6] There is a rhythm and pattern, often echoing the seasons, to the needs of my heart. I weave or spin when I want to meditate and pray on interconnection. I knit in anticipation of the winter cold. I sew when my body wants to move around more. In all these cases there is a process to follow. I gather materials, set an intention for the project, take time to make, and share progress, drafts, and results with others in community.

The process of making creates ritual space, and ritual spaces are filled with rhythm and pattern and making and sharing. When considering this definition of ritual space in dialogue with my own queered notions of domesticity and creative work, some practices stand out to me that can translate to liturgy. These are dwelling in the ordinary, honoring the handmade, and embracing the imperfections.

My arts practice lives in the space where ritual life and ordinary life intertwine. The work I make is meant to be worn, washed, and used, softened and shaped over time. We each live abundantly ordinary lives and breathe through finite existences, striving to find and make meaning. Ordinary time makes up the bulk of the liturgical year and includes changing seasons alongside many different kinds of ritual moments—expressions of joy, experiences of grief, celebrations of daily bread, confessions of sin, and proclamations of mystery. The ordinary is overflowing.

Where in your beautiful, ordinary life are you already making? Can you practice noticing and naming these places and moments as holy and sacred? Like the experience of picking a wildflower, putting together an outfit, making a meal, or trying a new craft. There is something so powerful about making by hand. I define "making by hand" broadly—this could be shaping a lump of clay, using a stylus on a screen, or speaking into the world. Expanding our understanding of what it means to make, honing our skills, and developing a practice all takes time.

A really common question I get when I share something I've made is, "How long did that take?" This question reveals our disconnection as a culture from ourselves as creative beings. We are so used to thinking of our lives in terms of hours of labor instead of the beauty inherent to the process of making. I have worked to disconnect my arts practice from a wage labor framework. For me, a point of making something yourself, by hand, is that it takes time that isn't often measurable. It takes time to learn, to gather materials and information, and to carve out the time you need to make. This will feel countercultural. We live in urgent times. There are many times we need to act urgently for the sake of justice, *and*, a false sense of urgency can also further bind us to white supremacy culture. In her 1999 article "White Supremacy Culture,"[7] Tema Okun gives a list of characteristics of white supremacy culture that can be observed in organizations. These include perfectionism, a sense of urgency, and either/or thinking. Okun recently wrote a response to her own article titled "White Supremacy Culture—Still Here"[8] to address the nuances of the topic and make revisions and responses to concerns in its reception. I find it helpful to think about the ways in which perfectionism and sense of urgency can hinder us in both creative practice and justice work.

We can allow ourselves the spaciousness to develop a new creative practice. One of my favorite quotes about hand making is by Ali Crockett Moore, who writes on her Instagram feed: "Sometimes the point is that it takes time, unmeasured." Just as we enter kairos time—suspended, nonlinear time—during worship, we enter kairos time when we make.

What would it look like to carve out fifteen minutes a week to work on a project that might take you years? Or to explore a hobby you set down earlier in life that gave you joy, without a productivity goal in mind, listening to your desire to hand make something?

Our creative practice, our worship, and our relationships will never be perfect, just as we will never be perfect. And yet, I often feel a bank of fog rolling in, shrouding me and whispering in my ear that if I'm not perfect, I'm not doing it right. I'm not enough. If my art has a flaw in it, that means I should be ashamed, and not share it. That rolling fog of compulsive perfection is a demonic and idolatrous force, for we are not God. Imperfection is inherent in creative practices—evidence of the hand, testimony that we are not machines. Especially when we're learning a new, specific craft, it will take time to discover basic proficiency, and we will never reach

perfection, and that's beautiful. We're learning! We're playing! We're trying a new thing! Those dropped stitches, failed flavor combinations, and the words you have stumbled over are signs of vulnerability to embrace. This is how a process of making becomes a process of spiritual formation, as well.

Where can you embrace the imperfections of your creative expression? What can you share with others without apology? Where can you lean into the beginner's mind[9] and try something you've been too scared to try because you were worried about failing or running out of time?

A picture of the author's imperfect and functional studio space, with communal art supplies, an iron, and a hand-decaled spinning wheel in the midst of a project, 2023

The practices of dwelling in the ordinary, honoring the handmade, and embracing the imperfections can invite us into a space of deep communal liberation through a framework of making and sharing.

I am inviting you into this space. Come, make, and share. Just as the invitation we receive always and again to God's table, this is an invitation to make and share of our very lives, creative and whole, becoming and beautiful, sacred and transformative.

There are so many threads that make up the tapestries of our lives, weaving us together, with creation and with God. Making and sharing is at the heart of it all.

With great joy and curiosity, let the invitation settle into your bodymind. When we make and share, make and share, make and share, we discover God's abundance in the holy ordinary.

God of All, Potter, Weaver, Creator,
we call you by many names.
You knit us together before we were born.
The divine spark we carry comes from you.
You have made us to make. Help us to carve out time.
Guide our hearts towards imaginative practices
that will transform our lives, and,
slowly,
ever so slowly,
the world.
Bless our making, and bless our sharing.
Weave our lives together,
that we might delight in the abundant ordinary-ness of it all. Amen.

Reed Fowler standing beside woven place mats and pottery mug at the "Unraveled: Telling Queer Stories in Cloth" exhibit, Squirrel Haus Arts, 2023

Notes

1. This adaption of the Words of Institution was inspired by the Rev. Toni Castañeda Carrera and ADORE LA, and Rev. Erik Christensen and St. Luke's Lutheran Church of Logan Square.
2. *Bodymind* is a term I was first introduced to through the writing of Eli Clare, and encompasses the interrelation of our mental and physical experiences.
3. This description of communion originates from Gordon Lathrop.
4. This description of communion originates from Gordon Lathrop.
5. I have been really drawn to the framework of trying to be my favorite self—not my best self, not my perfect self, but my favorite self. To me this includes aligning my words with my actions and living out my values.
6. Doom scrolling is when social media scrolling takes you further towards despair (looking for the next crisis), whereas hope scrolling is when social scrolling takes you towards moments of connection and joy. Some of what differentiates the two is your intention when you engage with social media, some is curation/the algorithms. Personally, I find too much scrolling either way to be a less healthy choice than others I can make with my time.
7. Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Culture," 1999, https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf/.
8. Okun, "White Supremacy Culture—Still Here," May, 2021,https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XR_7M_9qa64zZ0o_JyFVTAjmjVU-uSz8/view/.
9. Beginner's mind is a Zen Buddhist concept of our orientation when we are first learning something—when we are a beginner—curious, learning, making mistakes, paying attention to every detail, experiencing the world with wonder and newness.

Call to Worship

Ideas

A Prayer for after Someone Comes Out

Jess Cook

God of our baptism,

We thank you for the ways in which you claim us as your own. We thank you for this community, for your Spirit woven through each of us individually and drawing us together as a whole.

God, we thank you that before **N** was born, you knew what you had in store for *them*.[1] You knew as you knit *them* in *their* parent's womb all of the challenges and celebrations that would come in *their* life. You knew there would be a time when *they* would answer the call to share this part of *their* identity with this community. We thank you for **N's** desire and willingness to invite us along this exciting part of *their* journey, and we celebrate with *them* today.

We pray that you would help **N** see the mighty shoulders on which *they* stand, of all the saints who've come before and paved the way and opened doors to this moment.

Like Lazarus being called out of the tomb, or Mary Magdalene whose eyes were opened to the resurrected Christ upon hearing her name, we know you have called **N's** name and claimed *them* as your own.

When things get difficult, remind **N** of this community who loves *them* and has promised to walk through life with *them*. May the people who surround **N** today be a source of nourishment for them along this journey—a reminder that *they* are not alone on *their* path. In a world where most people go their whole lives without asking questions about their gender or sexuality, remind **N** of the strength and resilience *they've* shown in claiming their beloved identity as *their* own.

We pray that you will open the eyes and the hearts of family or friends who may not have as much joy in **N** coming out as we have here today. If the need is there, may you remind **N** that family is not just defined by blood, and community is not only defined by space or time.

Remind **N** always that *they* are seen by this community. Continue opening our eyes and our hearts to one another. Keep us all grounded in the understanding that we are loved beyond measure by a God of infinite abundance.

Note

1. *They* is used as a neutral pronoun throughout this template. Another gender pronoun may be used throughout the prayer.

A Service of Re-Naming and Reaffirmation of Baptism

Jess Cook

This liturgy is for people who wish to change their name to align with their gender identity and wish to make a public proclamation and receive support from a community. Functioning also as a reaffirmation of baptism, it should take place by the baptismal font with water. The presider may wish to use oil to anoint the head of the candidate.

PRESENTATION

A designated person presents the candidate to the community present.

At this time, would N please join me by the baptismal font?

[*to the congregation*]: N is presented to the community to reaffirm their baptism and to celebrate *their* new name in Christ within this faith community.

Presider [*to congregation*]
In the Presbyterian Church, many of us were baptized as infants. We baptize infants as a visible sign that God's grace is extended to us even when we do not have the ability to ask for it. God's grace covers us through every passage of our lives. When we baptize people into the community, we promise to nurture and teach them in the faith, to celebrate their uniqueness as a part of the collective body of Christ, of which we are all a part.

Today we remember our own baptism and reaffirm with N their baptism as they publicly claim their new name.

[*to candidate*]
N, as your church family, we rejoice with you in this decision to take the next step in living into the person God has created you to be.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH/CLAIMING NEW NAME

Presider [*to candidate*]

N, what is your full name?
My name is [candidate states their new name].

Trusting in the grace, mercy, and abundance of God, do you recognize the goodness inherent in your very being, and that God loves you even when you do not have the capacity to ask for it?
I do.

Do you believe there are things in this world that can prevent you from seeing yourself and others as beloved children of God?
I do.

Do you affirm the way modeled by Jesus, who ate with the outcast, who saw those deemed invisible, who touched those deemed impure, and whose faithfulness, even unto death, models a way to understand our own salvation?
I do.

Will you do what you can to follow the way set forth by Jesus, to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, to love yourself, and to love your neighbor?
I will, with God's help.

Will you let yourself be cared for and nurtured by this community, who will certainly mess up from time to time, but who will do their best to show up for you?

I will.

AFFIRMATIONS FROM THE COMMUNITY

Presider [*to congregation*]

Will you love and nurture N, affirming the inherent goodness in their being, as celebrated and affirmed in their baptism?

We will.

Will you create spaces for N to grow into the fullness of who they were created to be?

We will.

Will you use N's claimed name and pronouns?

We will.

Will you do what you can to learn about the systems of oppression directly impacting N as they claim the fullness of who they were created to be, and seek to eradicate those systems as they manifest in this world?

We will.

PRAYER

Good and gracious God, we thank you for the gift of this life and for the goodness of these bodies. We thank you for the journeys you lead us on. Some seem very direct while others are filled with twists and turns. Yet all have led us here, and we trust that all our roads, no matter how circuitous, lead us to a fuller understanding of who we are as your beloved children.

We thank you for the gift of names and for the power of a name. We thank you for the certainty that you have called each of us by name, even if it isn't the name we were given at birth.

We thank you for our ancestors in the faith whose lives were so transformed they were given a new name. Like Sarah, Abraham, Israel, Peter, and Paul, we thank you for marking N with this new name and for the opportunity to celebrate with them today.

We thank you also for their old name (*unless explicitly named by the person being celebrated, do not use their old name here, but simply say "old name"*), which we release here with gratitude and grace. May we know that all things have been working in good and perfect timing, and that so too has this name served N well, even as they have now outgrown it.

We thank you for those who gave N their old name and ask that the Holy Spirt make room in all our hearts to see N's full journey as one toward wholeness. May N's journey be an invitation for all of us to see the holiness within ourselves and the myriad ways your steady beckoning voice is always calling us toward freedom.

We thank you for Jesus, who showed us how to love. May we trust him enough to embody that love today and carry it into the world.

Amen.

LAYING ON OF HANDS/ANOINTING

The candidate may kneel. If it is so desired, people from the congregation can come forward and lay their hands on the candidate's head.

N, like so many of our ancestors, you have been called to live into a name different than the one you were given at birth. Like those prophets and parents in the faith, your journey has brought with it many unexpected twists and turns, yet you have listened to the voice of love and life that has called you and held you and led you here. We are grateful to be part of the journey with you and we rejoice with you today.

The presider may make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the candidate, saying to them:

N, remember your baptism and be grateful.

Always know that you are a beloved child of God, and of this community.

All: Thanks be to God!

Recognition and Blessing for Chosen/ Intentional Family

Kenneth L. Cuthbertson

The terms chosen family *or* intentional family *(etc.) refer to those people in our lives who we acknowledge as "family" regardless of any biological or legal link. They fulfill for us the role of family as a relational support system, and may or may not include some or all members of our families of origin or our marital/ blended families. They have existed throughout human history, but increasingly so in recent times as people move more and more from place to place, often far from family and traditional community ties, forming new circles and bonds of affinity in the places they are living. This liturgy may be used informally within the circle of chosen family members, or more formally in the context of communal worship. It involves no particular vows or promises, but simply offers recognition, blessing, and celebration for relationship.*

A leader begins with selections from the following Scriptures, or others.

Listen for God's Word:

From Proverbs (18:24): There is a friend who is closer than a sibling.

From the book of Ruth (1:16–18): Ruth [the foreigner] said to Naomi, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Holy One do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

From Mark's Gospel (3:32–35): A crowd was sitting around Jesus. "Look," they said, "your mother and siblings are outside, asking for you." But Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and siblings?" Looking at those seated in the surrounding circle, Jesus said, "Here are my mother and my siblings! Whoever does what God wants, is my brother, my sister, and my mother."

A leader continues:

Beloved, family is perhaps the most universal and basic social unit that exists in our world. We think of it as biological and marital, nuclear, blended, and extended. But family also exists beyond genetic, genealogical, and legal categories. It is created through intention and choice, through the recognition of deep affinity among and between individuals in various settings and situations by those (of us) who share life, lifestyle, faith, purpose, mutual caring and support, and mutual affection. Such "families of choice" are gifts of God, from whom, we are told, "*every* family in heaven and on earth takes its name" (Eph. 3:15).

We are gathered here now to recognize, celebrate, and bless *the choices of N.(s)/our choices* to identify *themselves/ourselves* as family together, not to the exclusion of others, and not necessarily for all time, but as a present affirmation of the bond that currently exists among *them/us*. As the psalmist says:

> How very good and pleasant it is when
> kindred live in unity!
> It is like precious oil on the head and face,
> the head and face of Aaron, the first among
> priests,
> oil running down over the collar of the
> priestly vestments.
> It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on
> the mountains of Zion.
> For there the Holy One ordained blessing, life
> forevermore (Psalm 133).

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A leader then asks:

N.(s), do *you/we* regard and affirm one another as members of *your/our* chosen family?

Those named may respond together, or each in turn:

I do.

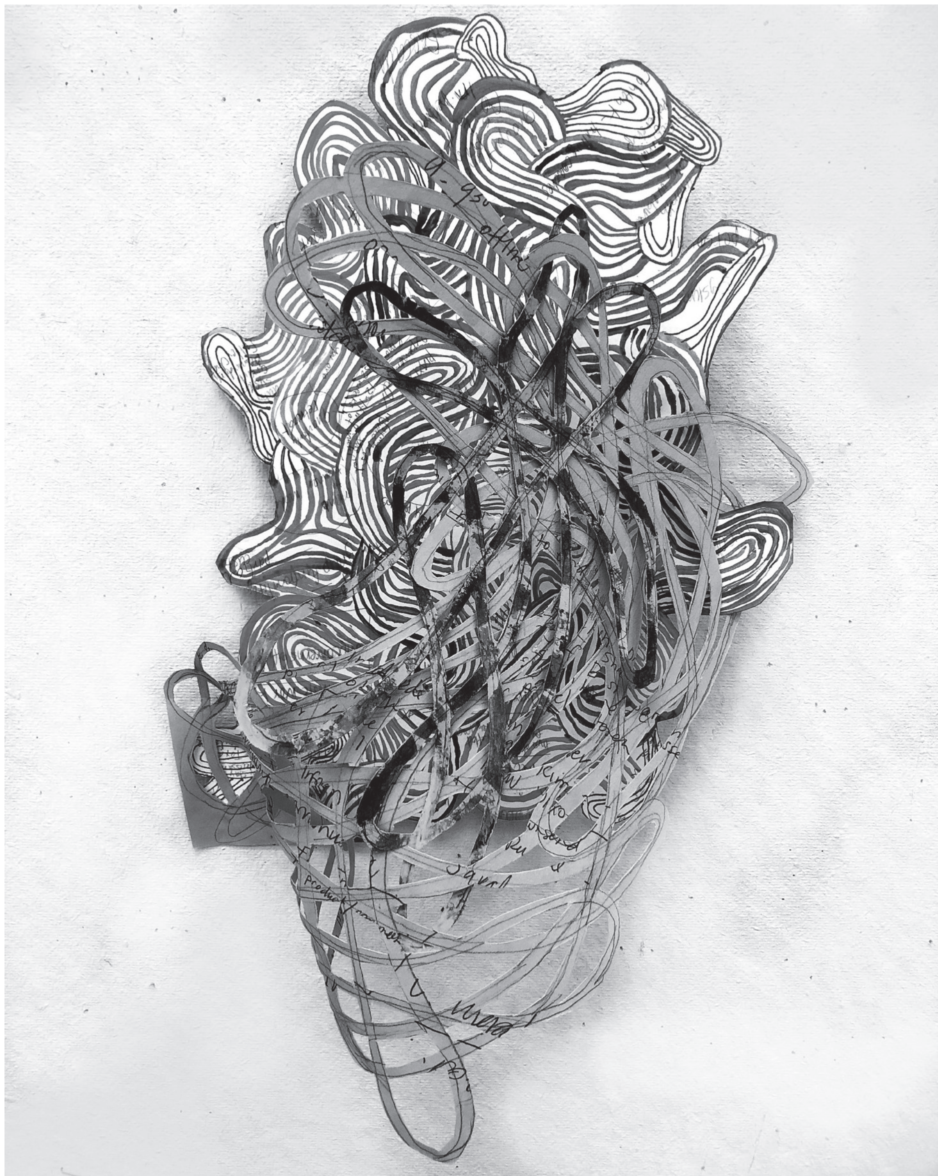
A leader continues:

Let us pray. God of all; God of strangers, friends, and family; of given family and chosen family; God of our differences and our affinity; thanks be for all who love, support, and care for one another, and thanks be for leading *these/us* gathered here to be able to say together today, "We are family!" May *they/we* be surrounded and sustained in holy love and caring today and all *their/our* days, we pray. **Amen.**

May the Holy One bless and keep *you/us.*
May the Holy One be kind and gracious to *you/us*.
May the Holy One regard *you/us* with favor and give *you/us* peace. **Amen**. (Num. 6:24–26)

The family may exchange signs of peace with one another, and then all who are gathered may do so.

(Possible song resource, in addition to hymns, psalms, etc.: "We Are Family!" by Sister Sledge)



Maria Fee
All Progress Is Precarious,
acrylic on paper, 2021

The Jesus Prayer: An Interpretation

Amanda Udis-Kessler, 2022

Love, sacred mystery at the heart of all things,
    holy are you.
May your domain spread out across the world.
May all have what they need, today and all days.
May we forgive ourselves for our failings and
    strive to do better.
May we forgive others for their failings and
    invite them to do better, even as they forgive
    themselves and us.
If we must face difficulties, may we do so
    with courage, humor, humility, and grace.
If we must face evil, may we not be overcome
    with it but may we overcome evil with love.
For love is the measure of all things and the
    hope of humanity, now and forever. Amen.

Call to Worship

Columns

On Liturgy: Queering Worship

Derrick McQueen

There are no new ideas, just new ways of giving those ideas we cherish breath and power in our living.

—Audre Lorde

This writing comes at a particular time when, at least in the American landscape, exploring the idea of queerness in familiar, some would say normative, sacred spaces can be seen as a political act. This conflation of politics and theological aspiration is not the focus of my thoughts around queering worship.

Setting the stage, worship as a form of holy hospitality is the lens through which I imagine and realize these ideas. To be clear, I think of hospitality as more than an encounter of welcome in a church. Holy hospitality invites all to see themselves as loved by God, personally gifted by Christ with grace and mercy, and to feel the Holy Spirit in their lives. In worship, the church strives to be a place where all who come are free to see themselves as God sees us, the beloved.

The idea of "queering worship" is first an application of queer theory to church community life. Queer theory helps critique what is often thought of as essentialist views on sexuality and gender.[1] The PC(USA), in its approved resolution of the 221st General Assembly, agreed upon compromised language to affirm marriage as a "u*nique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.*" It expresses the expanded notion of an "essentialist" understanding of marriage. And true to the application of queer theory, it recognized that "queering" is not always about imposing queerness but about utilizing the lenses of queer theory to imagine new, previously unidentified possibilities.[2]

Queer theory relates to worship because in it we can hear echoes of our understanding of the Holy Spirit to inspire new possibilities for worship and reach the hearts and souls of people. In essence, it affirms our Reformed tradition and embraces the idea that God is still speaking to people who yearn to be touched, moved, and even changed by the worship experience. Another way that queer theory can be applied to worship is found in the particular theological work of reclaiming the relationship with the imago Dei and our understanding of God, recognizing that the image of the Trinitarian God cannot be reduced to binaries, that LGBTQIA+ identity exists within the image of God.

We can more clearly imagine worship as an opportunity to provide and encounter holy hospitality. Queering worship is the joy of hearing the Spirit's guidance toward new possibilities to reclaim our relationship within the image of God. This practice is inclusive of everyone because it is expansive. This is a lens by which to create the elements of the liturgy. And yet, it is quite a basic foundation of worship that we seek to be in relationship with the Divine in the community. Looking for new ways to inspire worship does not mean abandoning tradition, formality, or structure. One of the more exciting aspects of worship planning is infusing the form of a given community's worship pattern with the Spirit. Jazz aficionados know that the musician's skill in that genre is to know the form of the song and composition and improvise within it. In most jam sessions, every musician has at least sixteen bars to include their voice and express their gift with that song. This artistic model is a way to think about what it means to engage worship actively and creatively.

Liturgy and the arc of a worship service in its most basic form is the composition of prayers, music, and Scripture. Perhaps one question to start with as we ask how to queer worship is to look at the composition of the service and ask how to open it up for others to find themselves within it. Let's take a look at a few practical applications.

Language

We can start with language, since it is at the core of much of the liturgical framework of worship. For instance, the language for God has traditionally been represented as masculine. The natural inclination to be more inclusive may involve representing God in the feminine. Queering language for God would move us beyond the binary that God must be either masculine or feminine. An expansive notion of God might lead us to think of the qualities God represents in our lives, like healing, liberation, and so forth, without assigning gender to those qualities. In the First Testament and the Psalms, God the shepherd evokes dedication, care, love, safety, and provision among other things. Thinking expansively about how we name God shifts us away from reducing God to the binary of gender. God is our rock and the canopy of treetops that shelter us from the sun and rain. We might even blur the boundaries between binary expectations of gender by claiming the fierce protection of our mothering God or the tender care of our fathering God. We can even be grateful that God defies all binaries as we lift up who they are in the Trinity.

Music

There are many ways to reimagine the possibilities for music in worship. However, exploring music, like exploring language, may challenge the familiar sensibilities of a worship community. The classic hymn "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" is set to a tune labeled "Hymn to Joy," more commonly known as Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." The hymn was written by Henry Van Dyke in 1907, and it is an entirely separate piece of writing from Beethoven's, inspired by a sense of jubilation. It should also be noted that Beethoven changed the words to the ode or poem that inspired his piece, which can be considered a process of queering based on a personal encounter with the piece. In most hymnbooks, there is an index of tunes. It is a wonderful tool for helping a community hear the message of a song in new ways. "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" can also be sung to several different tunes, as listed in these indices. It is a totally different experience to sing "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" to the tune of "Beecher" (commonly known as "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling") or the hymn tune of "Abbott's Leigh" ("God Is Here.") Of course, the introduction of other genres of music, instruments, and other variables is also a way to expand the vocabulary of music. But the act of queering music may involve simple juxtapositions from within what we already know.

Prayer

Who do we pray for and with? Who do we leave out? Neither of these questions presupposes intentional inclusion or exclusion. However, we can shift the language in the questions to ask: "What are the prayer needs of those we know? What are the prayer needs of those we do not know?" These two prompts help shift us to, as the hymn writer Dottie Rambo suggests, "look beyond the fault and see the need." Sometimes in the prayers of the people, we lift the prisoner.

If we were to empathize with the prisoner who is a parent separated from their child, we would work towards being a people who see the complicated human experience and, no matter what the offense, give love. This brings us closer to encountering one another how God encounters us, praying that all may reclaim and embrace a relationship with the imago Dei.

Preaching Moment

The preaching moment in worship is perhaps one of the most focused opportunities to queer worship. Yes, that can include expanding sermonic moments to include LGBTQIA+ experience or perspective. It will always mean engaging with sacred texts to share the gospel's good news with all, and there are several ways to bring this about in the preaching moment. Imagining ways toward inclusion is a creative exercise, but it is most important that the preaching moment be one in which the community embraces what it means to "do no harm." Understanding the power dynamics for which one is responsible now means reflecting on the power of words to hurt and exclude, the power of words to heal and include. For many in the LGBTQIA+ community, a commitment to do no harm is the first step in being welcomed in a community to reclaim the imago Dei.

The practice of queering worship offers a liberating gift that includes all the gathered community. Worshiping together gives us an equitable opportunity to learn how God works in our lives, in all our lives. And like many other approaches to worship influenced by liberation theologies, queering, at its best, does not seek to exclude anyone. It is a chance for the community to

see new possibilities for building a relationship with God and to recognize the gifts that come from the LGBTQIA+ community for the church at large.

Notes

1. "Introduction to Queer Theory," Libraries of Indiana University Bloomington, https://guides.libraries.indiana.edu/philosophyguide, accessed October 30, 2023.
2. "Introduction to Queer Theory."

Maria Fee
Untitled nest and *Ardor I,* acrylic on paper, 2023

On Music: The Queerness of Church Music

Amy Cerniglia

Queer musicians have always existed within the church. Throughout history, music has served as an avenue for queer people to engage with their faith and express themselves authentically. In general, musical arts can provide liberating opportunities to depart from rigid gender expectations. Today, church music programs can model inclusivity to all children of God.

In his article "Music, Essentialism, and the Closet," Philip Brett described music as an opportunity for people to deviate from typical gender norms.[1] Gay author Wayne Koestenbaum believed that music allowed an important outlet for expressing emotions and experiences that cultural restraints prevented queer people from verbally communicating. He wrote, "Historically, music has been defined as mystery and miasma, and implicitness rather than an explicitness, and so we have hid inside music; in music we can come out without coming out, we can reveal without saying a word."[2] Perhaps this explains the number of queer musicians in the conservative religious culture of the southern gospel music industry.[3] A 1996 article titled "King of Instruments No Longer?" in the *New York Times* claimed, "A disproportionately high number of organists are gay, for reasons no one seems able to determine."[4] Regardless of the reason, queer people have contributed extensively to music in the secular and sacred world.

As one of the earliest musicians whose works still exist today, Hildegard von Bingen was canonized and named as a Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012 for her enormous contributions to the music of the Catholic Church. Hildegard has received much scrutiny from scholars for her intensely affectionate letters to another nun, Richardis. Regardless of the extent of this relationship, nuns in the medieval period lived a relatively queer lifestyle by modern definitions.[5] Monastic communities appealed to people of all genders seeking an alternative to the traditional expectation of a heterosexual marriage.[6] Oxford Languages defines *queer* as "the quality or characteristic of having a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms." Stated another way, historical musicians in monastic communities shared experiences that can be understood as queer regardless of sexual behavior. Some individuals assigned female at birth even entered all-male monastic communities as monks. Whether celibate or engaged in secret relationships, clergy in these queer monastic communities wrote much of the earliest known compositions for services of Christian worship.

Through music, queer people have found safe places in the church to worship and connect with the triune God. The article "King of Instruments No Longer?" in the *New York Times* noted that gay organists often expressed their artistry in faith communities long before those communities would have formally welcomed gay members.[7] As David Person affirms in a 2011 NPR article titled "For Gay Christian Musicians, Work Balances Faith, Art, Love," within the contemporary Christian music industry, gay Christians have faced particular scrutiny.[8] While the tradition of hymnody tends to focus on the experiences of a whole worshiping community, modern songs from the contemporary Christian music industry frequently center around an individual's experience of God. In contrast to church organists, popular Christian music leaders can attain celebrity status and heightened attention to their personal lives. Popular praise and worship artists like Jennifer Knapp, Vicki Beeching, and Troy Pearson lost their careers as their queer identities

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were discovered. However, shifts in popular culture have increased acceptance of openly queer Christian musicians. The queer artist Semler, child of an Episcopal priest and practicing Episcopalian, climbed to No. 1 on the Christian music charts with their debut album. In an interview with Baptist News Global,[9] Semler said, "I started writing music as a coping mechanism. If I could set what I was experiencing to music, then somehow it didn't hurt as much."

Without glorifying or requiring pain in order to live a Christian life, Christians believe that God can transform and redeem our pain. People marginalized for their gender or sexual identities can deeply connect with that message. Paul writes,

> We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
> More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,
> knowing that suffering produces endurance,
> and endurance produces character, and
> character produces hope, and hope does not
> put us to shame, because God's love has been
> poured into our hearts through the Holy
> Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:3–5).

Sublime music can model this transformation, lifting the hearts and minds of the most downcast soul entering the concert hall or church sanctuary. As Christians work toward a more just and inclusive world to ease the suffering of LGBTQIA+ people, we give thanks to God for the healing power of music created in affirming community.

Popular Christian music organizations like Hillsong and Bethel explicitly oppose rights for queer people and promote therapies that claim to change sexual orientation or gender identity. Affirming church leaders may reconsider their support of these organizations that receive royalties from performances of their music in worship services. Artists such as The Many and Q Worship Collective offer contemporary Christian music for worship from an affirming, inclusive perspective. Churches can also witness to inclusion by hiring openly queer musicians and selecting hymns with inclusive texts. While boys may not feel safe singing in their schools due to social pressure, a phenomenon noted by Amanda Franklin in *Gender and Singing in the American Classroom*,[10] the church choir can provide a place for musical expression.

The gospel message has long welcomed marginalized people, and queer musicians are no exception. The church has benefitted throughout history from queer people offering their whole hearts in praise to the triune God. At its best, the church provides a safe space for all people, and music in worship opens a new dimension of authentic expression in praise to God.

Notes

1. Philip Brett, "Music, Essentialism, and the Closet," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006).
2. Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 189–190.
3. Douglas Harrison, "Southern Gospel Sissies: Evangelical Music, Queer Spirituality, and the Plays of Del Shores," *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (June 2009), https://books.apple.com/us/book/southern-gospel-sissies-evangelical-music-queer-spirituality/id485318936/.
4. Sarah Bryan Miller, "King of Instruments No Longer? *New York Times*, June 30, 1996, https://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/30/arts/king-of-instruments-no-longer.html/.
5. Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
6. Roland Betancourt, "The Overlooked Queer History of Medieval Christianity" *Time*, October 7, 2020, https://time.com/5896685/queer-monks-medieval-history/.
7. Miller, "King of Instruments No Longer?"
8. David Person, "For Gay Christian Musicians, Work Balances Faith, Art, Love," NPR, July 30, 2011, https://www.npr.org/2011/07/31/138782702/for-gay-christian-musicians-work-balances-faith-art-love.
9. Rick Pidcock, "How Did an Openly Queer Artist Climb to No. 1 on the Christian Music Charts?" Baptist News Global, September 27, 2021, https://baptistnews.com/article/how-did-an-openly-queer-artist-climb-to-no-1-on-the-christian-music-charts/.
10. Amanda Franklin, "Gender and Singing in the American Classroom," (honors program thesis, Rollins College, 2019), 86, https://scholarship.rollins.edu/honors/86.

On Preaching: Queering the Liturgy through Language and Performance

Lis Valle-Ruiz

God is queer. God's original pronouns are we/they. Genesis 1:26 states that God said, "Let **us** make humans in **our** image, according to our likeness. God incarnates in Jesus a female wisdom in a male logos. As biblical scholar Tat-siong Benny Liew analyzes in his essay "Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John's Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds,"[1] the Gospel of John presents Jesus as a drag king. Jesus is Sophia in drag. As theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid argues in her book *The Queer God*,[2] God the Trinity is a queer concept that can be interpreted as God the orgy.

If God is queer, then we worship a queer god. A queer god deserves queer worship. Feminist theology has challenged liturgists to use inclusive language for humans and expansive language for God as it relates to gender. Queer theology calls us to do the same as it relates to sexuality. Moreover, given that gender is performed, Queering the Liturgy needs to go beyond language and address the doing of worship and preaching.

In *The Queer God*, Althaus-Reid defines her approach to theological queering as "the deliberate questioning of heterosexual experience and thinking which has shaped our understanding of theology, the role of the theologian and hermeneutics.")[3] Transferring that approach to liturgy, the act of Queering the Liturgy may be defined as the deliberate questioning of heterosexual experience and thinking which has shaped our language and practice of worship. Questioning the normative heterosexual ethos of worship leads to worship language and practice more reflective of the queer experience. Some ways to go about this task include recovering biblical imagery that connects spirituality and sexuality, recovering erotic mysticism for queering the language of prayers, and welcoming queer performances as valid preaching genres.

Biblical Imagery

The most evident resource in Scripture that provides imagery that connects spirituality and sexuality is the book of Song of Songs. The book provides language that can be used in worship, and its reception history also models how to use the sexual experience to describe mystical union with the Divine. Queer the liturgy by reading from it or queer the liturgy by writing in a similar style.

Queer Prayers

In recovering the tradition of erotic mysticism that uses sexual language and imagery to describe mystical union with God, queering the language of prayer may look like the following prayer in preparation for participating of the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion.

> Word that was in the beginning,
> as we pray for these elements to be holy,
> separated for this mystical moment,
> we would like to feel your breath
> over our necks,
> over our ears,
> over our faces,
> over our noses.

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We would like to feel deeply
when you blow life's breath into our nostrils
once more
so we can come to life.
Word that was in the beginning,
we would like to feel your flesh inside of ours.
As we eat bread together,
we would like to taste the flavor of your most
delicate skin.
We will eat your flesh. We will drink your blood.
We will let your body enter ours.
Cannibalism; Eucharist; Communion.
We take in your flesh.
We give ourselves and share our flesh.
It's so erotic.
It is so mystic.
Mystic. Erotic. What's the difference?
We enjoy God-given gifts.
We reach the point of praise.
We exclaim,
O, God! O, God! O, God!
Erotic. Mystic. There is no difference.
We pray. We praise. We love.
We share. We are. We become one,
One with you, One with each other,
as we share the bread of life and the cup
of salvation. Amen.

In centering queer lived experience of latines in the United States, a version of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples may look like the following prayer.

Our Queer Parent que estás en todas partes,
promiscuizados sean tus nombres.
Thy Eros come.
Your love be made on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us each day our daily pleasure.
Forgive us our -isms,
as we forgive them that exclude us.
And lead us not into suicidal thoughts,
but deliver us from heterosexism and
binary thinking.
For ours is the kinship, the power, and the glory.
Forever and ever. Amen.

Queer Performances

Preaching through burlesque and drag is a thing now. When in 2017 I preached through a burlesque dance with no words, I had never seen or heard of a burlesque sermon. I had seen a burlesque show featuring several pieces, all about religion and theological themes, but that was not in a worship service. Now, in 2023, preaching through burlesque is a thing. I have seen and been invited to a worship service in which the sermon had the shape of a burlesque piece. Granted, the preacher did not take off any clothes. He used the rhetorical strategies of burlesque of teasing and ending with a big reveal to shape the sermon.

I have also been invited to worship services in which the sermon had the shape of a drag show. These seem to be more prevalent, and the drag performances are indeed drag performances. What makes these performances a sermon? The same things that made classic Roman oratory a sermon: repurposing them. Preachers repurpose an accepted form of communication to proclaim the good news of the gospel, to interpret Scripture, to bring people to Christ or to edify the body of Christ, the church. To go about this task, most homiletic theories teach preachers how to exegete the biblical text, how to exegete the congregation, and how to compose a message that puts the two in conversation. That is exactly what needs to be done to preach through burlesque or drag or any other means of communication that is familiar to the congregation.

Whether the preacher borrows the rhetorical strategies or the grammar of burlesque or drag, or the preacher performs the genres, the important thing is to preach the good news of the gospel, to share one's interpretation of Scripture through the lens of a chosen genre or form. Preaching through burlesque and drag is a way to queer liturgy that gives visibility to queer ways of being, challenges heteronormativity in the pulpit, and embodies the queerness of God, incarnated as female Wisdom in male Logos, fully Divine made flesh.

Notes

1. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2003).
2. Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 2.

On the Arts: Rupture, Art, and Queering the Liturgy

Maria Fee

The work of artist Rachel Barnard titled *Wisdom Pavilion* is situated in a dreary office of the City of New York Department of Probation. In this unlikely location, she suspended hundreds of sparkly cobalt blue pinwheels from the ceiling of a meeting room for parole officers and young parolees. Barnard is also the founder of Young New Yorkers (YNY), an arts-based initiative for teens in the adult criminal court system. These strategically placed pinwheels cause the pavilion to gently sway, and the whirling wheels magically transform the space. But there is more. Blue whimsy becomes the effective means to disrupt antagonisms and shift the mood of weekly interviews. "Glittery things are the secret weapon of social justice, where you can interrupt people's genuine grievances to focus on what is possible," explains Barnard.[1]

The *rupture principle* is the subject of this reflection. *Wisdom Pavilion* demonstrates it, the actions of queering often use it, and Christian liturgies can host it. To rupture is to interrupt what may be expected by the incongruous, absurd, or rival to engage new ideas. The principle is evident in many of Jesus' parables about kingdom values, which challenge the unjust regulatory forces of governing institutions. Rupturing norms, whether through art, queerness, or worship, subverts narrow estimations of God's creation, thereby preserving the glory of marginalized bodies, sites for hard conversations, and seemingly inconsequential things like glittery pinwheels.

To endorse and better understand the rupture principle, let's turn to queer theory. Historically, queer ideas and practices have looked to disrupt binary thinking about bodies, gender, and sexual identity. Queer theories are important for all people because queering broadens, opens, diversifies, complicates, and upsets dualistic, reductive, or mutually exclusive summations of Western standards. This includes theological assumptions ignoring or flattening human experiences, including life with the Divine.[2] By attending to the real, queering deflates abstractions to discover God in strange places, incongruous things, and unruly bodies.[3] Like Jesus' kingdom lessons, queering eschews conformity, comfort, and control to embrace intricacy, fluidity, mystery, and faith in ceaseless becoming. The artist activist ALOK outlines this bumpy journey. "We don't just want to be safe, we want to be free, to create the capacity to author lives that are . . . magnificent, triumphant, exuberant, flamboyant."[4] Queering honors growing pains, and in doing so prepares individuals and communities to face the unknown *and* celebrate! The queer theological enterprise looks to an unsettling figure, a unique body, one that is human *and* divine, crucified *and* risen, a body scarred confronting dehumanizing factors, including death itself. Queering the Liturgy emulates a christological model necessitating vulnerability to reconsider what victory looks like.

This pattern is illuminated in the art of *Wisdom Pavilion*, where the lie of invincibility is blown away by the breeze of pinwheels. The poetic has the power to "resurrect dead things like hope," maintains ALOK.[5] Hope delivered by art ruptures despair, opening pathways previously blocked. One of art's rupturing methods is juxtaposition. "Force relationships between forms that seem

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incompatible," advises the painter Kerry James Marshall.[6] We see this in *Wisdom Pavilion* with the positioning of playful things alongside court mandated meetings. The juxtaposition evokes all types of feelings, eventually giving way to meaningful interactions. "When two contradictory emotions are made to confront each other and are required to have a relationship with each other," writes literary critic Lionel Trilling, there is a "felt awareness" of new occurrences working upon "old forms," adding depth and complexity.[7] This process is mirrored in the "social dramas" that anthropologist Victor Turner studies. The term refers to conflicts between people groups. Mutual ritual performances mediate social dramas belonging to law, religion, or the arts. According to Turner, collaborative enactments advance a liberative moment—"a liminal gap"—where participants transcend known order to grasp alternative "social arrangements." Liminal experiences are so significant, notes Turner, they explain why tribal societies issue taboos while industrial societies legislate the subversive elements of art.

For this reason, Turner maintains religious rituals reformulated or reframed hold power to revitalize aspects of society.[8] Take for example the artist Nicolás Dumit Estévez's pilgrimage and baptismal performance certifying his Bronx identity. The life-art water ritual of *Born Again: A Lebanese-Dominican York Is Born Again as a Bronxite* made use of the symbols and gestures of the artist's faith (he also studied theology) to launch a series of artistic collaborations. Working with local people groups and institutions, Dumit Estévez galvanized their commitment to the Bronx while locating contemporary art activity therein to disrupt old stereotypes of the borough. Aesthetically cementing connections between identity, spirituality, and the politics of locality, Dumit Estévez's queering of baptism also complicates, in a good way, sacred-secular bifurcations.

Water flows out from liturgies. When it flows in, it carries associations that burst open when juxtaposed with the person of Jesus. It seems he, too, defies the sacred-secular binary. Liturgies host rupturing possibilities when words, localities, utensils, people, gestures, and symbols are intentionally positioned to garner new insights. Juxtaposition proposes a thick living grace held in tension with ancient biblical texts.[9] This is because divine love is more than doctrinal. Liturgies that adopt radical truth-telling and negotiate methods used in art, like rupture and juxtaposition, become queer liturgies, supplying practical and profound ways to bring into conversation God's ethos *and* human pathos. These liturgies expose radical love[10] undeterred by human fragility. Imagine the possibilities erupting from this liminal place! Dumit Estévez's Bronx baptism is one example. On that day, the water drawn from the Bronx River compounded in significance. Indeed, rupturing proposes a radical *more*.

Notes

1. Rachel Barnard, "An Artist Finds Wisdom in NYC Probation Department," A Blade of Grass, Fieldworks, accessed October 5, 2023, https://abladeofgrass.org/fieldworks/artist-finds-wisdom-nyc-probation-department/.
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6. Kerry James Marshall, *Letters to a Young Artist*, ed. Peter Nesbett (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2006), 27.
7. Lionel Trilling, "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," in *Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (New York: St Martin Press, 1989), 528.
8. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, digital ed., 2018), 7–8.
9. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1998), 23, 33.
10. Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 22. "Christian liturgy transforms and empowers when the vulnerability of human pathos is met by the ethos of God's vulnerability in word and sacrament," writes Saliers.

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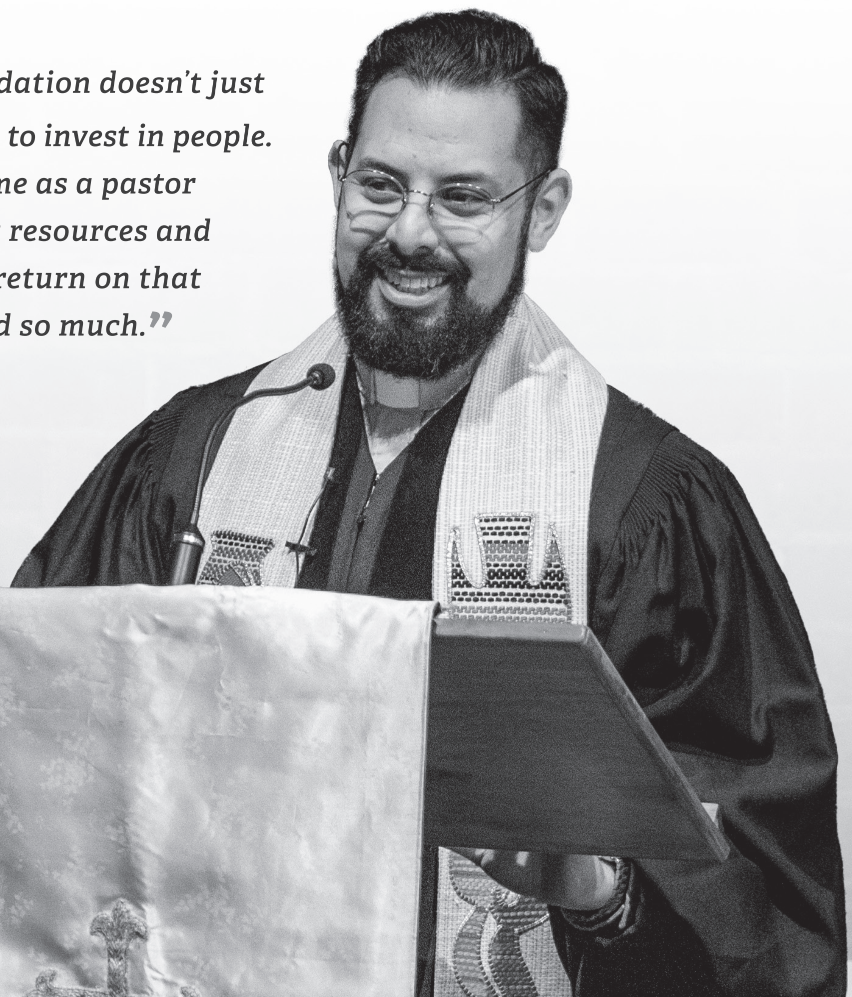

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