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## Engaging the Senses to Occasion Thin Space and Transformation: Gleanings from a Congregation's Experience of Playing in Theological Aesthetic

Kimberlynn McNabb\*

*Church is in its making; it is an organically growing community in movement. It draws us with it, forward and upward. Although, it also melts down to earth like a candle. It rises up and sinks down itself. Here is a built environment, a place, for the encounter of divine and human. Some beautiful day when the new heaven and a new earth are created it may not be needed any longer. Then, it will have melted down into the earth below, and the Creator will have become one with the land.<sup>1</sup>*

Sigurd Bergman

Mainline Christian worship might be described with words from a camp ditty, *here we sit like birds in the wilderness, or bumps on a cedar log*; congregants occasionally moving from a stationary safe place to experience God through worship, yet, never being so transformed that lives dance a renewed passionate dance. Perhaps for a fleeting moment a song may have brought one to tears, a sermon elicited an *Amen*, and Eucharist warmed the heart. Western Christianity has leaned heavily on spoken Word and the intellect, while Eastern Christianity has continued to embrace sensate knowledge. René Descartes' famous statement, "*I think therefore I am*," along with scientific empirical study, has created a Western culture of thinkers, not feelers. There is a disconnect between thinking and feeling; intellect knowing and sensate knowing; in faith practice an imbalance of mind and heart.

The basis of this essay is a D. Min. thesis that wrestled with the idea that creators and practitioners of Western liturgy, weaving the Word and ritual in unique and unpredicted ways, could, by drawing participants out of their comfortable thinking mode, and through engagement of the sensate senses, create an environment where thin space becomes accessible.<sup>2</sup> Note the word accessible, encountering the Holy, experiencing a thin place, cannot be forced, regulated, or designated to a particular time and place; however, that should not stop practitioners from preparing and opening potential possibilities. The experience of thin space is described not as a selfish experience, but, rather, as a possibility that shakes a person to new perception and a transformed life.

The methodology for the thesis project was of a qualitative nature exploring via an interdisciplinary hermeneutical circle – a union of "utmost importance," as Braaten and Jenson described as Aquinas combining Aristotle and Augustine where everything found a place in the system: "intellectual thought and mystical piety, biblical exegesis and philosophical speculations."<sup>3</sup> Research design included engaging the senses in the liturgical setting of Sunday morning worship and purposefully setting a time to reflect theologically on the experiences.

Before delving into the phenomenological research of a congregation's experience of purposefully engaging the sensate senses (along with theological reflection), this article

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considers a biblical example of preparing a people through sensory engaged ritual to potentially occasion thin space, and continues with brief highlights from history to set the stage for the research conducted. The article holds in tension intellect and sensate knowing, and through lived experience, offers applications for worship leaders and congregational teachers. The final section offers thoughts on developing a theology of aesthetics within communities to assist in fostering relationship between modes of knowing.

## Setting the Stage

Thin space, although impossible to fully articulate, is a moment of 'betwixt and between' where the veil between the material world and a deeper reality becomes transparent, such that a holy encounter occurs. It is a moment marked by a whelming of the spirit, the enhancement of the senses, and is transformational in nature. Reflecting on thin space occurrences one might think of the experience of Moses and the (non) burning bush, or Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. Both describe encounters of thin space that happen outside of ritual and liturgy.

There are moments in scripture that are created moments; moments that foster experiences of the holy, and transformation in the lives of the participating people. Consider the third stage of Israel's return from exile under Persian rule in 538BCE; as written in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. As part of the reestablishment of the community, the Temple was rebuilt and liturgical practices were initiated (rediscovered from previous times). The assembly of people gathered around a wooden platform by the Water Gate, and heard the word of the Law publicly read from early morning through mid-day (Neh.8:3-4). The assembly was so taken by the hearing of the word that they wept. The day was marked as holy and included feasting, with portions of food and drink set aside for those who had need. Other parts of the drama included: rejoicing, silence, and the practice of creating tangible booths from gathered fragrant woods (olive, myrtle, palm) – booths that were lived in for a number of days. Seven days of ritual ended in a solemn assembly, with fasting and the wearing of sackcloth, Through the seven days of senses being engaged in ritual, people's hearts changed such that confession and rededication to the covenant were made on the eighth day (Neh. 9: 1-6). People were absorbed in the hearing of the word (engaged intellect), and turned to worship and exaltation (engaged heart). Their experience culminated in a transformation; promises were made as to how they would now live as God's people (Neh. 10). Roman Catholic theologians claim that a supernatural act or state, for instance a mystical experience, is a moment when "by some wondrous 'coincidence,' our heart space, our mind space, and our body awareness are all simultaneously open and are nonresistant [to holy presence]." <sup>4</sup> This cannot be humanly produced; however, there is faith that, should one wish to produce an experience, "grace is never refused." <sup>5</sup>

The history of communicating ideas, values, and meaning in Western culture is on a continual pendulum: moving from images to word, word to images; ornamentation to austerity, austerity to ornamentation; sensory inclusion to sensory exclusion, exclusion to inclusion. Ideologies have long been fueled by the power of ideas, with words – rhetoric, discourse, metaphor, and slogan – legitimizing or challenging the perceived truth. <sup>6</sup> Determining the amount of phenomenological input and knowledge allowable for the benefit of society has been decreed both from inside religious entities and from outside in the form of political powers and academia. Historical evidence illustrates extremes of attitude

towards the senses – Manicheans, for instance, resented physical values and experience preferring reason and matter, while Panegyrist exalted carnal life.<sup>7</sup> Aquinas considered sight to be the godliest sense and it developed religious authority because of its intellectual nature and striving for perfection (ultimately a vision of God). In contrast, Ignatius of Loyola taught that faith was the basis of truth because eyes could be fooled.<sup>8</sup> The foundation of Plato's philosophy was sight; for Aristotle the basic sense was touch.<sup>9</sup> Although Plato and others philosophized about beauty, the science of aesthetics as an academic pursuit did not exist until the Nineteenth Century.<sup>10</sup>

The Protestant Reformation focused on the written word and admonished against sensualism to the extent that a grand shift removed sensory involvement from worship including: the removal of incense, altar bells, the use of oil, reverent kissing, icons, and practicing less frequent Eucharist, in order to focus on the reading and hearing of the Word.<sup>11</sup> Over the centuries such practice reinforced the trend in the Western Church to be head/mind oriented. Juxtaposed to this, at the same time that the Reformation affirmed hearing and intellect, art began depicting emotions to evoke emotive responses. Here ethical values moved artistic renditions from bourgeois still-life to the intimate hope found in ordinary representations of everyday life.<sup>12</sup> To temper emotion, works became “pregnant with symbol,” so that interpretation was necessary for understanding art.<sup>13</sup> A connection between hearing Word in church and seeing art of symbol in the everyday was not developed for some time. In practice this translated into contained emotion in church worship, as even that which was seen by the eye was considered a serious thinking affair.

Senses have been perceived to be in opposition to cognitive theological functions of faith. Scholar Sigurd Bergman argued that the engagement of the senses was key to holistic access to the faith and life of the church. He commented that not only can the synaesthetics experienced through sacred building accomplish awareness, so too, can liturgical modes and rituals that include the whole body and participation of the whole community. Synaesthetics is described as ‘the synergy of the senses’ and can be accomplished through embodied worship.<sup>14</sup> Père Boulogne considered that educational systems and values often lacked breadth, depth, and objectivity. He observed that humans have a propensity to limit attention to basic knowledge requirements, rather, than, to explore avenues to deepen thought process, enlighten the mind, and cultivate imagination. Purposefully engaging the senses in discovery has the ability to transform one from a state of relative ignorance to a wholeness of personhood.<sup>15</sup>

The shift from Modernity to Post-Modernity illustrates the tension between head and heart knowledge. The paradigm shift from Modern to Post-Modern transformation is a movement from prove-it-to-me to show-it-to-me; institutional to organic; intellect and knowing to experience and sensing.<sup>16</sup> Anthropologist Ashley Montagu believed that there is a growing awareness in Western culture that technology has neglected the senses and produced a deprivation of sensory experience.<sup>17</sup> Reflecting on this observation, historian Mark Smith utilized the phrase, “the great-divide” – defined as “a thesis that exaggerates the eminence of eye and denigration of other senses under Modernity.”<sup>18</sup> Senses, except for sight, are decreasingly accessed and engaged. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa suggested that the reality of one sense favouritism causes the environment to have less impact on the human body – a sense of relationship between body, imagination, and environment is stunted, resulting in humans losing a sense of being.<sup>19</sup>

## Acting out the Drama

Before describing the sensory events that a congregation was invited to participate in, it is important to mention the existing framework from which the events were grounded. The events were specifically chosen to enhance the themes, symbols, and rituals of the liturgical church year; as the liturgical calendar has been a traditional means to journey through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – a way to engage the intellect and the senses to potentially encounter thin space. The congregation involved follows the Revised Common Lectionary, uses a traditional Lutheran service liturgy, changes paraments/banners by Season of the church year, and participates in weekly Eucharist. Senses are engaged simply by following the liturgy and rituals of the church: sight is engaged in the changing of seasonal colours, liturgical dance, and watching the drama of sacrament; hearing is engaged in singing, listening to the Word, and bell ringing; taste is engaged in eating bread and drinking wine; smell is engaged with the use of candles and incense; touch is engaged in sharing the peace, and folding hands in prayer. Consider the engagement of the senses when there is a baptism and water is poured, the growing of light on the Advent wreath, on Ash Wednesday when ashes are imposed, at a healing service or on Maundy Thursday when anointing oil is used, the bare sanctuary of Good Friday, the laying on of hands at confirmations. Yes, the drama is acted out in a sensory way, yet, sometimes a church becomes comfortable in the very ritual that was created to open possibilities for an occasion of thin space. Thus, the impetus to push the perceived comfortable boundaries.

Through five sensory events executed during worship, followed up by theological reflection circles, a congregation bore witness to the role that sense and reflection play in encountering thin space and the transformation of one's perceived thoughts. The sensory events experienced were: Prayers of the People read into the sound of a singing bowl during the Season of Advent; the use of incense and thurible at Epiphany; hymn books covered with coarse sandpaper during the Season of Lent; the reredos draped in fluorescent orange and yellow material for Pentecost (changed to Trinity Sunday); and Eucharistic elements of champagne and cinnamon buns for Easter.

The astute reader will note that the experiential events added sensory stimuli. This was intentional due to a fear that deprivation (as it is so contrary to North American culture) would inhibit people from being open to participating in the events. When a person describes having a transformative or mystical experience, brain studies show that the neuro-system has reacted to an extreme of stimuli. One experience is subject to sensory deprivation which expands mental experience through a hallucinatory state (an expansion of mental experience) – for instance, austere monastic practices. The other is sensory overload which can lead to a 'reverse' hallucination (a shortage of mental experience) that weakens body-self.<sup>20</sup>

Words frequently used by participants to describe the various worship experiences were: *different, unusual, memorable, unchanged, enhanced, and more focused*. Although these words are articulated, when asked if the person was changed by the experience or transformed, the consistent answer was *no*. Numerous respondents offered a version of, *not that I'm aware of*, allowing for the possibility to remain open. It fits with Dennis Fakes' words reflecting on Lutheran liturgy:

The service was not necessarily entertaining or enjoyable (although it may have been). The worship the people have experienced was not thrilling and fun

(although it may have been). It was not comfortable and predictable (although it may have been). It did not provide for peoples' fellowship needs (although it may have). The service lifted the participant from the ordinary to the sacred. God and God's presence seemed somehow more real.<sup>21</sup>

Despite comments of *no*, when asked if the experience was transformative, upon reflection there were significant moments of changed perception and learning. The experiences left the congregation with a desire to participate in subsequent sensory events and reflection circles on a regular basis, realizing that encountering God is a lifelong affair.

Specific gleanings of interest from the sensory events are as follows: The congregation's experience of the sound of the singing bowl changed from week to week; sometimes it was heard as a resonating sound drawing one into oneself in a centring way, and other weeks as a *bursting outward*. Participants commented that after four weeks the sound had lost its effectiveness in eliciting vivid emotion; being most transformative in *the surprise of a haunting sound*.

Despite a general dislike of the incense event at Epiphany, there remained an openness for future experiential events designed to lead participants *outside of our comfort zone, to challenge in healthy ways*, and lead one to be *vulnerable*; the theological reflection circle determined that this is where growth happens. A visual connection was made through the rising of smoke, prayers rising as incense (Ps.141:2). An interesting observation was that the smoke from the incense burner was like *being blanketed by God, a reminder of Presence*, which left the participants with *a sense of fullness*; yet, even though this feeling was experienced participants did not wish to repeat the event.

The hymn books covered with course sandpaper during the Season of Lent was considered a painful experience. The theological reflection circle noted that humans, and worship leaders, try to avoid experiences deemed to produce discomfort. Worship events, like sandpaper on the hymn books, forced people's participation and thus, the possibility of a new understanding. Respondents reflected that *a small change can shift awareness*. The tactile nature of the event led some participants to reflect that *being always comfortable can make me (us) complacent*. The sandpaper event produced in the congregation a mindful approach of place within the worship space, as the sandpaper picked clothes and took the stain off the pews. Worshipers connected more fully to desert texts, the grittiness of life, contemplating sin and confession, and entering suffering, their own and that of Jesus' passion.

One will notice that elements of surprise and actions of discomfort led to deeper struggle in meaning-making and reflection, producing profound 'aha' moments. The reredos draped in fluorescent orange and yellow material for Pentecost was intentionally changed to Trinity Sunday to study further the element of surprise. It left participants grasping, searching for the meaning of the colour. Through conversation there was realization that congregants interpreted the event in various ways. A concern was articulated that worship leaders determine how to craft worship and may be *quick to jump to conclusions about how others experience God*. Sensory events when connected to Church Seasons or lectionary readings enhanced the experience – *the words I heard had more meaning, more connected to the scripture readings, I was able to feel the Holy Spirit present*.

Of all the events, it was the Eucharistic elements of champagne and cinnamon buns for Easter that became a yearly practice. The theological reflection circle concluded that the

elements helped focus the sharing of the Lord's Supper, offering nuances to meaning when regular elements are substituted by another. The elements enhanced the experience, as *champagne always indicates it's a special occasion we're celebrating*. The event was *memorable—we experience the sense of taste every Sunday as we have Holy Communion [this is] 'Special' because [it is] the holiest of festivals*. Participants articulated that whether the event was liked or disliked, it was *being together with the people of the congregation* and sharing Christ's meal that was important.

Five specific events, occurring once or for a short period of time, allowed participants to enter the experiences unconcerned that the events would become regular practice. Introducing sensory elements may require a clarification that the elements are not static, remaining forever as part of a community's practice; rather, the elements are aids in encountering thin space for this time and place.

A subsequent event, spurred by the congregation requesting continued opportunities to encounter thin space, was presented on the Reign of Christ Sunday. Congregants created finger paintings, "painting out" the chaos of the world by moving their fingers through the paint until one captured a feeling of release. The paintings created in blue were hung side by side, at seated eye level, around the entire worship space (including the chancel). As one sat in this space during Advent, the walls moved, as the paintings of chaos seemed to vibrate. Into this atmosphere the Word of the Lord through the voice of the prophets of old was read. The prophetic Word became Living Word. The experience of the finger paintings and the Word vibrating together, is articulated in the theology of Joseph Sittler (whose theological schematic was steeped with eco-theology and centred on the Cosmic Christ). He articulated that there is a relationship between nature and grace. Sittler described a matrix (field) of grace, – a thin space – as the occurrence of the doctrine of grace being played out in the theatre of the actual relationship of all things.<sup>22</sup> Sittler's understanding of the universal scope of grace allowed him to consider all things imbued with grace; thus, secular art and poetry were seen as occasions of the expression and experience of God's grace. Art was a medium to explore the relationship between humans and the natural world, and the relation of both to the Creator.<sup>23</sup> For the congregation, the experiential events – the objects used to engage the senses – were the art and medium, through which grace was received on the edge of thin space.

## Stage Notes

It was apparent in the research that participant's aesthetic judgement played a prominent role in the events, categorizing the focus sense experience as *good* or *bad*, preceding thoughts of *like* or *dislike*. Anna-Maria von Bondsdorf, an art educator specializing in aesthetics, theorized that aesthetic judgements are made based on the feeling of pleasure that is aroused by a person's perception of an object. Individuals perceive and experience space through an aesthetic mode, determined by openness and understanding to different spaces encountered in daily life; this makes people more or less sensitive to sensory nuances. Von Bondsdorf continued by suggesting that one's aesthetic mode, whether to an object or a space, is conditioned by cultural knowledge, past experience, acquaintance, perceived qualities, and the projected meaning thereof.<sup>24</sup> Aesthetic judgements can derail communities, or paralyze leaders, particularly if boisterous individuals unwilling to engage in sensory experience try to inhibit the rest of the worshipping community from doing so.

Thesis survey responses alluded to a Western Christian tendency to focus on concepts, ideas, and beliefs, and questioned the concern for worship to engage the senses through sensory events. Surveys articulated thinking, rather than, feeling statements. (Feeling statements were eventually drawn out by facilitation during theological reflection).

It was noted and discussed that although one sense was focused on, participants experienced senses working in tandem; a synaesthetic experience where the focus sense activated different complementary senses to varying degrees. Boulogne commented in, *“My Friends the Senses,”* that odours trigger memories and remind people of other times, places, sensations, and events; the memory of an odour actually conditions the mind and memory to colours (sight) and sound.<sup>25</sup> Researchers, sampling a group of two thousand people from various cultures, discovered that in ascribing colour to sound, most participants described low sounds as dark and high sounds as light and bright. The study observed sound to be translated through a perfume and then perfume to sight. Although shared senses seemed to be experienced by all, participants recommended that in introducing experiential events, opting to focus on one sense at a time would be beneficial, as supplementary items might be perceived as chaotic. It is worth noting that synaesthetic research indicates that there are an equal number of people (often the indelibly creative) who experience sensory overload as invigorating.<sup>26</sup>

An overview of the theological reflection circles gleaned a desire for created space to incorporate the interweaving of “thinking time” and “feeling time.” Each reflection circle recognized that sensory events are individual in nature and normally remain simply an experience without an opportunity for further reflection. Participants genuinely wanted to hear the interpretation of others and relate that experience and their own to their faith. Whether by survey or in a group, the opportunity for reflection lead to a new place -- a new place where God and God’s presence seemed enhanced. Arrow© leadership material affirms that opportunity for reflection increases the ability to effectively leverage new information and insights, which impacts the growth of the community.<sup>27</sup>

## Director’s Notes

At the outset of the thesis project, colleagues were dismayed by the openness of the congregation in allowing and participating in the experiential events; several commented, *that wouldn’t happen in my church.* Through diligent practice, congregational leadership had over the years fostered a climate that honed and embraced skills of observation, as well as, attentiveness, playfulness, creativity, wonder, and surprise – the art of experiencing. Educators proffer that incorporating sensate experience is to approach life as an aesthetic being where the wholeness of body, mind, and spirit, are integrated. This practice is an attitude – an intuitive cognitive skill that can be taught and learned. Parsons and Blocker, art educator and philosopher respectively, state that “part of the art of teaching aesthetics is to structure situations that will present the learner with problems,” wherein the response is a discipline of aesthetics that attempts to find solutions to situations that do not fit one’s assumptions or current understandings.<sup>28</sup> Aesthetic being involves the mental capacity to think and act perceptually and cognitively; “Aesthetic development is the progressive growth of one’s ability in thinking about, and responding to aesthetic objects.”<sup>29</sup> American educators, Sprague and Bryan, defined aesthetics as an “education of the senses to recognize beauty,” where, “deriving pleasure from beauty can be greatly improved with education.”



They wrote that recognizing and creating beauty are essential to achieving full potential of an adult mind and spirit.<sup>30</sup>

Worship preparation and leadership is a space wherein practitioners can develop and work out of an aesthetic theology, one that moves in the expression of chaos, to moments of hope, to encounters of the Ultimate.<sup>31</sup> When contemplating an aesthetic theology, individual and corporate in nature, effective dialogue includes theology related to: the cross, on the boundary, art and the senses, the where of God, and space/place. Applying aesthetic theology involves fostering and awakening aesthetic sensibility in congregations, so that, participants bring beauty to transform space, especially those places that seem to have no merit. Theologian Jeremy Begbie coined the phrase, “horrible beauty,” to speak of the dissonance found in art, primarily using music as an example. It is through the horrible (the cross) that voice is given to beauty (life), and from death emerges healing and ultimate transformation. Horrible beauty allows humans to wrestle with God and their reality, so as, to radically take evil seriously and not placate life with sentimentality or kitsch. Too often, Begbie noted, humans (church leaders) move to create a harmonious whole, when dissonance has the potential to create a space for the renewal of spoiled creation and ultimate transformation.<sup>32</sup>

Aesthetic living, as described by philosopher Calvin Seerveld, refers to being rooted and mature; the opposite lifestyle is considered immaturity or “kitsch,” defined as sentimentality, cheap emotions, hurtful, and evil as it de-natures ordinary life. Aesthetic leadership is a shared office of educators exploring ways to incite people (assembled congregations) to catch God’s vision from creation. It is living life in “the playground of the Holy Spirit,” where ‘imaginative feelers’ are grown and go out to serve the world with God’s love.<sup>33</sup> Characteristics of this approach embrace: an openness to alternatives, a search of new ways of self-expression, an eagerness to explore new ideas, a preference for tasks that use the imagination, a generator of creative solutions, intuitive, flexible in action, a sensitivity to beauty, and an affinity to aesthetic characteristics of the world around.<sup>34</sup> Seerveld taught that there are four elements to aesthetic living pedagogy and curriculum: surprise, precision, formulation, and experiment.<sup>35</sup> Teachers and leaders can craft possible occasions of thin space by incorporating these aesthetic elements. The element of surprise includes pioneering, detecting, imagining; precision introduces discipline and communal analysis; formulation integrates perspective; and experiment allows for relationship between teachers, students, and elements to create a communal enterprise of learning and growing.

Aesthetic being entails practicing a functional theology that generates creativity, the imaginative use of space, and engaging the community to design space and place that is appropriate for their mission and authentic to their faith.<sup>36</sup> Aesthetic expressiveness, which comes from one’s aesthetic theology, has the power to stabilize and transform, or to do the opposite. Church leaders and traditions have long held control and influence over people, mission, and what is produced through corporate worship; such practice has tried to manipulate and control the manifestation of the Ultimate.<sup>37</sup> Placing responsibility of aesthetic expressiveness and theology upon an entire congregation, through education, experiential events, and theological reflection takes seriously a passion to risk beyond traditional materials, patterns, and conformity. Aesthetic expressiveness driven from an ideal aesthetic theology aims to find the Ultimate hidden in tradition, manifested in new creation, and to encounter Ultimate reality.<sup>38</sup> Openness to, and participation in aesthetic expressiveness, affirms the Spirit and gives credence to allusiveness as the quality and function of art (sensory events).<sup>39</sup>

## The Final Curtain

History of the senses, knowledge, tradition, architecture, theology, et cetera, illustrates an interaction between disciplines. Congregational leaders can foster conversation in congregations between the disciplines to deepen experience and understanding. Conversations may include wrestling with the relationship of buildings and practice, tradition, and new creation. To be a community that engages senses and desires to provide thin space occurrences, requires continued intentional efforts to experience, interpret, and reflect upon theological aesthetic. Re-visiting the relationship of building, liturgical practice, and art, in a manner that questions whether the relationship exhibits the Word and creates opportunities for congregants to encounter the Word is important. It may mean incorporating pre-reformation practices, incorporating the spiritual disciplines of the mystics and contemplating bouts of austerity. Church communities have the opportunity to be “creative third waves,”<sup>40</sup> open spaces that reflect on praxis and wrestle with the tension experienced in cultural questions. Herein is an opportunity for the church to be leaders and visionaries who offer the world much needed connections, in this case aesthetic inclusion, accomplished through a synthesis of Christ theology, spirituality, tradition, and liturgical practice – in essence re-making tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Within method and praxis, a balanced use of the senses is of importance. As stated before, Pallasmaa described imbalance of the senses as the dominance of the eye and the suppression of the other sensate senses in today’s culture. Congregants come to worship in various states of this imbalance. Worship space and experience therein, have the potential to realign one’s sensory system with the possibility of addressing detachment, alienation, isolation, and solitude (often brought on by technology and the way life is lived).<sup>42</sup> The church has the ability to challenge the ocular centrism of Western culture by providing balance through other sensory experiences not designed solely for the one-sided cultural emphasis of intellect and the visual; and provide a home for the other senses, the body, memories, and dreams, that have been left homeless by Modernist design.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, it behooves liturgical artists to be attentive to the sense of balance within a congregation. When a sense of balance is established, it may lead to a sense of comfort as the congregation is able to fill space by claiming it in some way.<sup>44</sup> The findings of the research suggest that when balance is found, a surprise – an event that creates discomfort and places one on the boundary – is essential for continued growth and transformation to occur within the community.

Balance is important in the relationship between ways of knowing. The experiential events as a whole, highlighted the importance of reflection. Scholar John DeGruchy argued that the church has a responsibility to reflect on praxis, as the church exists to transform the world.<sup>45</sup> If praxis fails to accomplish working change than an alteration in praxis is necessary for transformation of people, church, and the world. Congregations can incorporate, via reflection and evaluation, an ongoing assessment of where the community is on the pendulum of knowing and sensing.

Congregational worship leaders possess a rich opportunity to create and foster a broader definition of thin space that allows for a myriad of expressions and experiences. Engaging the senses only has the capacity to take a person to a point, a boundary, where an encounter with the Divine may occur. Within planned space, aesthetics, and practice, lies the possibility of encounter. In engaging the senses to open this space, the body converts energy

from mechanical or sensory touch to electric impulses; such an experience is one of transcendence, meaning beyond language, yet, registering in the senses, “where perception is itself a form of grace.”<sup>46</sup> *White light speaks to the intellect, while the miracle of light refracted is sacramental and is received by the unconscious; God becomes visible in the ordinary.*<sup>47</sup> In another expression, thin space can be a movement from buildings that surround worshippers in “old” theology to a place where liturgy holds the possibility of surprise, and the action of the people becomes and defines sacred space. Some authors suggest that such experiences emerge when leaders take a prayerful approach and are willing to work at creating environments that promote wonder and an awareness of God’s transcendence.<sup>48</sup> Marcus Borg posited that transformation happens when a shift occurs from belief-centred Christianity to one where focus and attention is on relationship with God; such transformation requires re-education with a focus on practices that incorporate the physical body into the experience of worship.<sup>49</sup> This is the church employing a sensory hermeneutic and developing a theological aesthetic that has people intimately experience Living Word as living.

Leaders who apply this work will focus on creating space wherein boundaries are broken and individuals or whole communities are presented with the uncomfortable, so as, to encounter the Holy: *there is a need, both Wolterstorff and Seerveld argue, to recover Christian aesthetic (something of great importance), but also a source of glorifying God and for the sake of the just transformation of the society.*<sup>50</sup> As this author likes to say, #forthehealingoftheworld.<sup>51</sup>

Go craft spaces and liturgies, sensate experiences, and theological reflection circles; balancing cognitive knowing and intuitive knowing; opening the eyes, unstopping the ears, inhaling deeply, touching sensitively, and tasting intentionally. Live a theological aesthetic that awakens relationship to oneself in body, mind, and spirit; relationship to others; relationship to creation, place, and space; and ultimately fall into an encounter and relationship with the Holy. Be transformed and made whole, compelled to go, to live and move and have being in the Living Word, for the healing of the world.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sigurd Bergman, ed., *Exploring Religion, Architecture, and Design: Theology in Built Environments* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Pub, 2009), 304.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberlynn McNabb, “Engaging the Senses to Occasion Thin Space and Transformation” (doctor of ministry thesis, Acadia University, 2004), <http://openarchive.acadiau.ca/cdm/singleitem/collection/Theses/id/713/rec/1>

<sup>3</sup> Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1:34.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rohr, “Mysticism in Religion: Three Ways to View the Sunset,” *The Huffington Post*, November 2, 2011, accessed January 2014, [http://uffingtonpost.com/fr-richard-rohr/three-ways-to-view-the-su\\_b\\_822092.html](http://uffingtonpost.com/fr-richard-rohr/three-ways-to-view-the-su_b_822092.html)

<sup>5</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Contemplation,” accessed November 16, 2012, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102006.htm>

<sup>6</sup> John DeGruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Charles D. Boulogne, *My Friends the Senses*, trans. Jane Howes (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1953), 190.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Smith, *Sensory History* (New York: Berg, 2007), 28-29.

- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 28.
- <sup>10</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), 114.
- <sup>11</sup> Smith, 24.
- <sup>12</sup> Seerveld, 206, 221.
- <sup>13</sup> Phrase coined by the German art dealer and editor, Paul Cassirer, circa 1871-1926.
- <sup>14</sup> Bergman's philosophy anthropomorphised sacred building by attributing to it the ability of synaesthetics, held in the tension of being the presence of heaven on earth where the walls "present hell in a sharp contrast between the divine and demonic." Bergman, 295.
- <sup>15</sup> Boulogne, vi.
- <sup>16</sup> Gary and Kim Shockley, *Imagining Church: Seeing Hope in a World of Change* (Herdon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), 20.
- <sup>17</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2005), 205, 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Smith, 125.
- <sup>19</sup> Pallasmaa, 40.
- <sup>20</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 59.
- <sup>21</sup> Dennis R. Fakes, *Exploring Our Lutheran Liturgy: How and Why We Worship* (Lima, OH: CSS Pub. Co. Inc, 1994), 143.
- <sup>22</sup> Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace*, eds. Peter Bakken and Steven Bouma-Prediger (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2000), 28, 85.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Sigurd Bergman, ed. *Architecture, Aesthetics/ethics and Religion* (London: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2005), 118-119.
- <sup>25</sup> Boulogne, 79.
- <sup>26</sup> Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 290-291.
- <sup>27</sup> Carson Pua, *Mentoring Wisdom: Living and Leading Well* (Pickering, ON: Castle Quay Books, 2011), 72.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Parsons and Gene Blocker, *Aesthetics and Education – Discipline in Art Education: contexts of Understanding* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 13, 20.
- <sup>29</sup> Jo Chiung Hau, "An Examination of Theories of Aesthetic Development with Implication for Future Research," *Journal of Taiwan Normal University: Humanities and Social Science*, no.42 (1997): 13.
- <sup>30</sup> Marsha Sprague and Sandra Bryan, "Aesthetics and the Middle School Learner," *Clearing House* 75, no.1 (September/October 2001): 41.
- <sup>31</sup> This idea is expanded upon in Paul Tillich's discussion on theology of art and aesthetic: *On Art and Architecture*, eds. John and Jane Dillenberger, trans. R. P. Scharleman (New York: Crossword, 1987).
- <sup>32</sup> David Ford, ed. *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 721.
- <sup>33</sup> Seerveld, 63, 70.
- <sup>34</sup> Gonzalez, "The Learning Styles: Adapted from, 'Learning Styles and Strategies,' Silver and Hanson 1996," *Chimacum School District, WA*, 1996, accessed February 19, 2004, [http://www.educatoral.com/learning\\_styles.html](http://www.educatoral.com/learning_styles.html).
- <sup>35</sup> Seerveld, 148.
- <sup>36</sup> DeGruchy, 216-217.
- <sup>37</sup> Tillich, 161.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 202-203.
- <sup>39</sup> Seerveld, 129.
- <sup>40</sup> This idea is drawn from conversation by architects and philosophers reflecting on secular concepts of public space, and the sense-making of spatial elements. Further reading: John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place: Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Ltd., 2003).
- <sup>41</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 34-35.
- <sup>42</sup> Pallasmaa, 19.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, 17, 19.
- <sup>44</sup> Arthur Soesman, *The Twelve Senses: An Introduction to Anthroposophy*, trans. Jakob Cornelis (Worcester: Hawthorn Press, 1990), 48.

<sup>45</sup> DeGruchy, 178.

<sup>46</sup> Ackerman, 307.

<sup>47</sup> Tillich, 206.

<sup>48</sup> Shockley, 105.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Schwarzentruer, ed. *The Emerging Christian Way: Thoughts, Stories, and Wisdom for Faith of Transformation* (Kelowna, BC: Copper House Pub., 2006), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ford, 712.

<sup>51</sup> This hash-tag was created from the theme of the Lutheran World Federation's tenth Assembly, 2003.