

Doctoral Project Approval Sheet

This doctoral project entitled

PRESENT CHURCH: ECCLESIAL ADOLESCENCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY AND ANNUAL RE-APPRAISAL AT NORTHLAND VILLAGE CHURCH

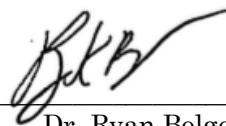
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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
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Date Received: June 5, 2020

PRESENT CHURCH:
ECCLESIAL ADOLESCENCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
AND ANNUAL RE-APPRAISAL AT NORTHLAND VILLAGE CHURCH

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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JUNE 2020

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ABSTRACT

Present Church: Ecclesial Adolescence in the Twenty-First Century and Annual Re-Appraisal at Northland Village Church

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2020

The goal of this study was to consider a small worshipping community, Northland Village Church (NVC), as it enters its second decade, and whether and how it can pursue a commitment to reconciliation in the US in the twenty-first century. NVC's seed verses, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, claim that God has reconciled and is reconciling the world to Godself through Christ. Within the ongoing nature of that work, a worshipping community is given the ministry of reconciliation whereby to participate in, and be subject to, God's activity in Christ through the guidance of the Spirit.

In order to do this with integrity and coherence, this study outlines a theology of being present, such that a worshipping community, in a spatial, temporal, physical, and relational sense, is present with God, neighbor, and the worshipping community itself. Furthermore, it argues that being present requires a continuously reforming posture, wherein the worshipping community is attentive and responsive to the impact of being present with those three entities. A theology of being present is the way by which a reconciling community can allow itself to be reconciled, and, therefore, this transitional existence is both the means and the goal of faithful commitment to the role of God's people. Approaching this with attention to the needs of the community specifically and humanity generally and a Spirit-led liberative and creatively disruptive hermeneutic of Scripture ensures that the progression will be in keeping with God's Kingdom's advance.

This study concludes that a reconciling worshipping community will allow its understanding of itself, its neighbor, and God, as well as its actions and principles, to be continuously subject to God's work of reconciliation. A regular re-appraisal session for NVC is thus proposed and included.

Content Reader: Ryan Bolger, PhD

Words: 284

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Northland Village Church for their contributions to this project. They've provided ample room to learn, attempt, misstep, grow, and enjoy. Without them I'd likely have dropped off long ago; with them I'm intrigued and compelled. To borrow Pasternak: "The succession of these open spaces tuned you to a vast scale. You wanted to dream and think about the future."

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PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT

Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

– Maya Angelou

INTRODUCTION

Her aim was to “reconcile us with our history; but also to reconcile us with ourselves.”

– Maureen Freely

Northland Village Church (NVC) is a small PCUSA worshipping community founded in 2009 in Southern California. As of the fall of 2019, it is a congregation of about sixty adult members, with Sunday attendance ranging from twenty to forty. These sixty adults are saddled with twenty-five children, whose weekly attendance ranges from five to twenty. Of these twenty-five children, twenty are under the age of seven (my pair included). Thus, during the more well-attended Sunday worship gatherings there can be sixty persons gathered with a third under the age of ten, and on the lower end of attendance there can at times be as little as two dozen bodies, 20 percent of which are children. The congregation is predominantly White, with approximately 10 to 20 percent persons of color. It is predominantly hetero and cis-gendered, with approximately 5 to 10 percent queer and gender-nonconforming. Worship gatherings begin shortly after 4:30pm on Sundays, and typically end shortly before 6pm. An offering is not part of the liturgy, and Eucharist is served weekly. There are three members of staff: the organizing pastor (myself), the Director of Community, and the Audio/Visual Technician. Presently there is also a Children’s Ministry Consultant and a few paid nursery assistants. In late-2016 NVC moved from Atwater Village to its current location in Pasadena, meeting at Harambee, a historic outreach center in northwest Pasadena founded by John Perkins.

In the first decade of its existence NVC settled into liturgical, congregational, and theological grooves as would be expected of any new worshipping community. These

grooves, though, are in flux, to greater and lesser degrees, in large part due to the worshipping community. That is to say, NVC has, since its inception, been a moving, morphing entity because the community itself is similarly fluctuating. A significant underlying and sustaining component of NVC is its emphasis on community, marked specifically by authenticity and relationship. As such, NVC's characteristics have been shaped as much by the membership as by PCUSA considerations and the focus on reconciliation in its seed verses and mission statements. It is a community deeply shaped by community, rather than by a defined liturgy, theology, location, tradition, or denomination.

As with any worshipping community, ongoing challenges abound. And, as with any church plant, there is a point at which the entity must advance to its own standing rather than remain perched on the support of the parent organization. To say that NVC crossed the bridge of the latter and successfully settled routes through the former might imply that it became at some point something dramatically different from its original profile. One might expect to find a worshipping community that passed from infancy to adolescence and then moved into mature adulthood. One might also expect to find a worshipping community that gathered in certain ways during its formative years and then matured into new mannerisms. This, however, is by and large not the case. The worshipping community has progressed, certainly, but in a kind of perpetual working out of its own maturation, rather than in phasing from one plateau or project to the next. Because NVC is not centered on a building, a doctrine, a centralized leadership, or even a firm size of membership or budget, its permutation is ongoing. It resembles, as it were,

adolescence, but in a perpetual manner. That this has become the goal and not the means to a further goal is, admittedly, rather unusual.

While this mode of existence has, for better or worse, allowed NVC as a worshipping community to survive, and very often thrive, over the years, it has always occurred in an informal manner. Recently, however, there have been major changes to staff, congregation, and culture, and these factors, coupled with entry into its second decade of existence, make it both appropriate and necessary for NVC to engage formally in a program of self-appraisal. Were the congregation to still be comprised of charter members, who had navigated the successes and failures of the worshipping community's history and its particular way of doing things, this formal effort would be somewhat unnecessary. In that hypothetical situation everyone would have a common understanding of where the congregation has been and why it comports itself the way that it does: things like the centrality of the Eucharist table to the worship gathering would be understood as deliberate and ritualistic; things like the decentralization of leadership would be understood as stemming from purpose rather than paucity. The congregation is not, however, replete with charter members (for acceptable and regrettable reasons, to be discussed below), and thus many of the attendees and even long-time members are somewhat ignorant of the decisions that preceded their tenure.

Many of the changes the congregation has undergone over the years have been gradual and subtle, such as demographics and political affiliations. Some changes have been deliberative, such as the decision to become formally open and affirming to the LGBTQ community or the location changes. The current congregation has varying degrees of understanding of those changes, and because of this paucity there is a

pronounced lack of awareness of how decisions are made, how changes occur, and what rules and guidelines are in place in decision-making processes. For the congregation to continue and to be adaptable, a formal re-appraisal would help the laity and leadership to take stock of itself and its past as well as who it hopes to be in the future. The necessity of such a re-appraisal has been avoided thus far only by providence.

NVC's foundational Bible verses are those centered on reconciliation from 2 Corinthians 5. Particularly influential has always been the 5:18-19 pericope, wherein Paul characterizes God's project of reconciling the world through Christ as both complete and continual: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."¹ Reconciliation itself can be variously defined as bringing into harmony or compatibility, or settling, or creating amicability. It assumes two entities that are at variance, and, in the case of the infinite Divine coming into right relationship with the finite cosmos, it implies a coming alongside of the other by the greater entity. While there is the overarching sense in which God is reconciling the world to Godself, there are also innumerable, distinct sites where this reconciliation is expressed in the bringing into accord of non-infinite entities, such as persons to other persons, individuals to their own senses of self, or individuals to their understanding of God. In this light reconciliation can be categorized as the forward-moving work of God to bring the created order into

¹ I will use NRSV unless otherwise noted. Also, I tend to prefer non-gendered language for God.

harmony with Godself, work that, though only the work of God, is work to which God's people are called to pursue and in which they are called to participate.

When taken as prescriptive for a worshipping community, this ongoing reconciling work entails continuous change, which, it is hoped, is more a venue for the categorically-positive movement of the Spirit than an opportunity for entropy or rupture. Yet the Spirit's work is not always or even typically simple and unobjectionable, for, as the poet Emily Brontë submits,

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears²

That this "wide-embracing love" carries the possibility of creation and dissolution is at times a difficult truth to accept, especially in an institutional setting. For NVC it is central to its existence, premised as it is on authenticity and relationship rather than indurate materials like building or endowment or doctrine. One might here think of the old *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* adage but with an atypically fervent emphasis on the latter rather than the former. The dynamic nature of an authentic and relational community dovetails with the ongoing nature of reconciliation found in Paul's second epistle to the church in Corinth such that NVC is continuously shifting in its efforts to pursue and be pursued by reconciliation. In this way a formal re-appraisal of what reconciliation has happened, is happening, and is being sought is entirely consistent with Paul's understanding of the Spirit's operation and agitation.

² Emily Brontë, "No Coward Soul is Mine," in *Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 40.

The permutation of culture is also ongoing, and theology's response to it necessarily follows. Things like the ubiquity of social media, the encroachment of advertising, the digital revolution(s) in entertainment and commerce, the rapidity of financial gains amongst the extremely wealthy, and the dissemination of news and fake news are things that even ten years ago could not have been foreseen as having made such a tremendous advance. To wit, as I write the Democratic Primary is occurring, with more than twenty candidates vying for the nomination and gearing up for (what will be advertised as) debate; a slate of more than twenty would have been unthinkable until only very recently. While this is not to imply that theology has changed, or philosophy or sociology for that matter (obviously such issues are well outside the purview of this paper), it is to say, simply, that culture itself is continuously changing, and theology is—at the very least—continuously seeking to address and attend to those changes.³

In particular, the time NVC was founded in 2009 until the present has seen a number of distinct cultural alterations. These include the better part of Barack Obama's tenure as the first African-American President of the United States, history-defying as it was; the pendulum swinging back toward populism and nationalism with Donald Trump's election and first years in office (as well as similar global movements, such as Modi, Bolsonaro, Orban, Salvini, Le Pen, Wilders, Farage/Johnson, and others); the #MeToo, #BLM, and #Occupy movements; and any number of other formidable national

³ Here I am reminded of Francis Schaefer's salient chronology of shifts in thinking in Western culture, where he places theology last in line after shifts in philosophy, art, music, and general culture; theology, the perennial late-arrival, shifting only in response to prior shifts elsewhere: "It was in this order that the shift in truth affected men's [sic] lives." Perhaps he was employing cynicism or perhaps it was stratagem, but, in any case, I have always generally considered him here to be basically on the mark. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 28-29.

and international upheavals (the US's glad-handing of abject destruction in Yemen and Libya comes to mind). One of the paramount and perennial questions for theology being "What does God (and thus the Bible and the Spirit) have to say about this?" means that theology is ever adapting itself and the Gospel to the times such as they are. Hence for a worshipping community to be aware of the cultural water through which it swims seems both an uncomplicatedly thoughtful and devout thing to do. To do so formally underscores the seriousness of the Gospel's drive and adds only the intentionality necessary to ensure the worshipping community is in fact participating rather than hindering wherever possible.

To say that culture moves and heaves is both a truism and rather self-evidently unremarkable. To say that reconciliation involves change is similarly obvious and uneventful. To say that theology has progressions and trends often associated with culture—some of which, like culture itself, can be decidedly significant or utterly flitting—is not controversial. And to say that a worshipping community might grow and adapt and alter over the course of years or decades is equally unexceptional. Yet to say that a worshipping community should seek to allow changes in culture, trends in theology, evolution in its own community makeup, and reconciliation's advance to remodel it, and to do this remodeling in pursuit of its goal—which may themselves then be subject to re-modification—is to beg the quite serious question of where it will all lead. This is what I mean by "present:" a worshipping community which maintains a posture of change where culture, the congregation itself, and the Spirit's movement are given responsive attention. Present here includes both temporal and spatial meaning, because the ongoing nature of reconciliation requires ongoing attention in time while the

completed nature of reconciliation declares proximity to Christ in space.⁴ A worshipping community that sets out to foster reconciliation is a commendable thing, to be sure. A worshipping community that also sets out to be reconciled puts itself at risk of becoming something other than what it is or was or wishes to be. In this sense a community choosing to be present with itself, neighbor, God, and to do so within the times in which it exists, is both a dangerous and a theologically compelling thing to do. Setting assumptions about the future aside and instead relying on a hope for reconciliation's advance and the Spirit's guidance and provision is both exceptionally Christ-like and vividly countercultural in ways both secular and ecclesial.

When taken out of the context of a community and placed instead on an individual this is all very conventional, even orthodox. For the person who allows Christ into their life assuredly cannot predict what the new human might be or be headed toward. That sanctification is an ongoing process, replete with surprises and sacrifices, is a given. This includes of course one's developing grasp and read of Scripture, which one might recall is what Martin Luther gives as his major reason for writing the *Large Catechism*, wherein he begs that biblical readers "not to imagine that they have learned these parts of the Catechism perfectly, or at least sufficiently . . . [for] in such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and fervor."⁵ Without donning any sort of process-theology lens, most would agree

⁴ Father Greg Boyle writes of meeting Jesus in marginalized persons: "The second any of us engage and enter into relationship with those on the margins, the Christ encounter is alive and well. After all, I don't bring gang members to Christ, I always say. They bring me to Christ." Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 119.

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1959), 3.

that becoming Christlike involves change, growth, and repetition, and no small amount of uncertainty in that mix.

For the conservative, change of this kind is unsettling only insofar as the ultimate aim is hazy or protean. So long as the new human is static and well-defined this is all to the good, Christlike attributes being often fairly well agreed upon. Were one to remove some of the parameters of received standards for those attributes, things become more precarious, not least because it is unclear who is to say what standards one might then uphold (that is, does sanctification point toward piety? toward devotion? toward service? toward a generic Western version of values or propriety? toward solidarity with the outcast and the poor?). One individual's "heart of stone to heart of flesh" transformation (Ez 36:26) might tend toward ascetic purity, while another's might resemble the poet James Russell Lowell's adage that "He's true to God who's true to man."⁶

When these matters are placed back into the context of a worshipping community things are even less standardized, precisely because there are far less quintessential characteristics of a worshipping community that one can point to as established and firm. As a quick example, one might choose any number of aspects of the New Testament communities that one can find present in a particular current worshipping community, and then find at least an equal number of New Testament-specific aspects that are absent in said community ("holding all things in common" from Acts 4:32 immediately comes to mind). In this way it is not a little precarious for a worshipping community to subject

⁶ James Russell Lowell, "On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington," in *The Works of James Russell Lowell* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1890), 225.

itself to a fluid existence of progression toward non-specified ends in response to important influencers, which is another way of defining being present.

One last point warrants mention, namely the host of scriptural examples of, and contentions for and against, fluidity in a community. These range from Israel's disdain for the amorphous elements of theocracy in favor of the structure of monarchy in 1 Samuel 8:1-22, which can be read as an argument for structure, to the expansion of the community (as part of the expansion of the Gospel) in Acts 11:1-18, which can be read as an argument against structure. Texts such as Luke's generous characterization of neighbor within the "good Samaritan" story in Luke 10:25-37 can be placed at odds with the necessity of community boundaries in Acts 4:32-37 ("holding all things in common," impractical though it is, would firmly mandate a perimeter between the worshipping community and society at large).

There is no small amount of exegetical work to do when attempting to decide from the biblical perspective what community should and should not be, but even the briefest set of cursory exegetical examples, such as those just mentioned, shows the hermeneutical work required in getting to Luther's "new and greater light and fervor" on this subject. Again, texts like Acts 11:1-18 and Luke 10:25-37 can be read as speaking to a progressive version of community, while others like 1 Samuel 8:1-22 and Acts 4:32-37 are just as easily read in the opposite direction. The prospect of "reading, conversation, and meditation" here seems to point directly toward emergent understandings, whether in a community or as individuals.

I hearken often back to Joel Green's insights on the subject of biblical hermeneutics, and to this end Green is quite apt on the subject of community and, going

further, of community's understanding of itself: "Different reading communities are situated in distinctive cultural settings and work from diverse presuppositions, and therefore 'hear' or construe the same text differently."⁷ Thus Green would recommend that Bible readers "attend better to what we bring with us when we bring ourselves to the task of reading the Bible."⁸ That this should be a continuous procedure seems obvious, even with an awareness that it potentially becomes prescriptive, which is to say that by recognizing the liquid nature of the community any new scriptural reading will engender further liquidity. In my case, a good portion of what I bring on all fronts is the awareness of NVC's malleability, whether under the influence of culture, the Bible, the congregants, or a general sense of the Spirit's reconciliation work. Over the past decade the practice of being present has instilled in me a sense of the virtue of being present in a circular fashion.

The task at hand is twofold. This project will create a rationale for an annual re-appraisal effort to assist NVC in maintaining its evolving being, such that it might be continuously present with itself, with neighbor, with Scripture, with the times in which it exists, and with God's Spirit. Rationale is needed indeed, for to advise that the continuous nature of both reconciliation's advance and culture's change, coupled with NVC's amorphous structure rooted in authenticity and relationship, should entail that the community should seek not a mature set of practices and structures but rather to be perennially transitioning—which I term "ecclesial adolescence"—as its best and only

⁷ Joel B. Green, "The Challenge of Hearing the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

⁸ Joel B. Green, *Seized By Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 2-3.

means of both surviving and thriving, is to place the worshipping community in a conspicuously precarious location. Ecclesial adolescence constitutes the deliberate reformation of the worshipping community as the end rather than the means, a permanence of impermanence as worthwhile being, much like the mythic Penelope's never-ending sewing project wherein she "reweaves the fabric of intimacy without ever managing to complete it."⁹

The wisdom of being present must be demonstrated, but doing so requires demonstrating how NVC came into this *modus vivendi* in the first place. To that end this project will begin with a sketch of the history and current state of NVC's staff, congregation, and location, with some attention to the outside culture's effects. Then the ideas from a range of contemporary theologians, who weigh in on changes in culture and on how worshipping communities should resist and respond to said changes, must be analyzed in order to give direction and some semblance of definition to a worshipping community seeking to be present in the recently enumerated ways. Finally how those two meet, NVC in its current form and the theological considerations of being present, will be considered. Issues of boundaries—for example, "How much reformation is too much reformation?"—will here need attention, for an amorphous entity cannot become completely amorphous without losing itself in the process.

Having formed this rationale, the second thing needed is material how the NVC community might engage in re-appraisal, including details on participants, leadership,

⁹ This is Jean-Luc Nancy's metaphor for a properly composed community. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), 10.

format, and assessment. The major goal will be for a document that is used annually by the congregation as a means of taking its own pulse, remembering its history, and setting its trajectory amidst current culture. It will resemble a “new members” class to the degree that it considers a variety of aspects of NVC and seeks further participation of participants, but it will be thoroughly distinct by drawing from across the congregation and explicitly making clear that change to ecclesial habits, procedures, and goals is possible. If it comes to pass that this manual for re-appraisal is used by NVC and brings about a flourishing in the community’s bearing of witness to Christ—who exemplifies flourishing and “embodies the good life”¹⁰—then it will be a project wholly worthwhile. This doctoral project will develop a manual for annual theological reappraisal to assist Northland Village Church in its ministry of reconciliation as a small PCUSA worshipping community within a framework of relationship and authenticity.

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), xvi.

CHAPTER 1

MINISTRY CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

Notice: I say *we*; there, every one, separately,
Feels compassion for others entangled in the flesh
And knows that if there is no other shore
We will walk that aerial bridge all the same.

– Czesław Miłosz

As noted in the introduction, Northland Village Church (NVC) is a PCUSA worshipping community founded in 2009 in Southern California. This section will describe its current ministry context and challenges, with particular attention to its history in order to demonstrate essentially why things are the way they are. This history will be framed through the lens of the three locations of NVC's worship space, which sufficiently demarcate significant changes in form and functionality. For the sake of this project's length, this biographical sketch will be as cursory as the material allows.

2009-2012 at Glenfeliz Elementary

NVC's origins, stock though they were, are such that its trajectory through its first decade was not foreseeable or calculated. One might, upon encountering a PCUSA church-plant in theory or in practice, make numerous assumptions about what and how it will operate. Presbyterian churches tend to have considerable distinguishing marks within a considerably thin frame, not unlike other mainline denominations, making them

predictable if not also a little quaint.¹ Thus, it is important to note at the outset that the fact that NVC has not ended up inhabiting that run-of-the-mill PCUSA frame is not because of any great strategy for either creativity or avoidance. The early members at the founding of this worshipping community had any number of expectations and desires regarding how it would form and transform, and the fact that the worshipping community has remained quite similar to what it was when it began is not a testament to ingenuity, or failure for that matter, but rather a testament to the Spirit's guidance of the community's convictions.

When Nick Warnes arrived at Fuller Seminary to pursue his MDiv in the fall of 2006, he immediately took a job at Glendale Presbyterian Church (GPC) on the advice of Chap Clark, whom he had met during his years of Young Life in west Michigan. It was Clark who had seeded the seminary idea in Warnes' mind, and Clark again who directed him toward GPC. While in this role, Warnes ingratiated himself both to GPC and to the San Fernando Presbytery (SF Presbytery), and as his idea for church planting began to form in seminary it found resonance with leadership in both entities. Eventually GPC and the Presbytery signed off on a church plant, to begin in 2009 and "officially launch" in Easter of the following year. GPC would allot a handful of members for the launch team, and funding would be made available via the church, the Presbytery, and the denomination's still-in-utero church planting push, entitled "1001 New Worshipping Communities" (which would be formally launched three years later in June 2012). This funding would be spread out over three years, each year decreasing as the congregation,

¹ For example, the color of the hymnals might be different, but undoubtedly *How Great Thou Art* will have a prominent placement.

or so it was supposed, became increasingly financially self-sustaining. This funding model was a product of the Christian Reformed Church's church-planting model, and Warnes and his wife went through the CRC's vetting process (as that of the PCUSA at the time was by all accounts sorely lacking).

The GPC seed members were bolstered by friends, curious onlookers, and a number of Fuller students, myself included. Together this group formed the NVC launch team, which began meeting for planning sessions over dinner in the summer of 2009. Many of the launch team had been deeply wounded by various aspects of their church experience, whether people or practice or theology. Many of the Fuller students were deeply shaped by their current worldview-dispersal brought on by their studies. By contrast, many of the GPC members were not dismayed at all by the state of and their experience of ecclesiology; rather, they were simply big-eyed at the prospect of creating something new yet familiar. Suffice to say, the launch team was fairly theologically and ecclesologically eclectic, and its PCUSA trappings were at least as much a product of circumstance as conviction.

The demographics of age and ethnicity of the NVC launch team are worth noting, as the group was never more than moderately diverse. Given Nick Warnes' age and the Fuller contingent, the mean age was squarely mid-to-late 20s. A few of the GPC members had been sought out specifically for their septuagenarian status, but out of a forty-member launch team these were a mere two couples. Another thing to note about the ages: there were six children, two of whom departed soon after the official launch due to the typical post-graduation job opportunities of their parents. The population of children and older adults at NVC in 2009-2010 was quite small.

The ethnic diversity was similarly one-note. GPC was a largely White congregation; Nick Warnes and his wife were White; the friends and acquaintances he had made at Fuller were largely White, myself included. When I got married to a woman of color in 2010, she added more diversity to the percentages than anyone might care to admit. In researching this project, I reached out to a number of former congregants, one of whom put the ethnic demographics to me in an email exchange with no small amount of acerbity: “[NVC] has always been led by a white person . . . and . . . the launch team was overwhelmingly white, who invited people from their mostly-white networks, creating a mostly-white space that can be tough for a person of color to feel comfortable in and where blind spots around race are only reinforced.”²

As this individual points out, the efforts and expectations surrounding racial diversity were hamstrung from the start. Aware of the lack of racial diversity, the launch team made some attempts at inviting a diverse group to the worship gatherings during the first three years. Attempts were made at singing a smattering of songs with lyrics in Spanish, but the couple of persons in the congregation for whom Spanish was the primary language were never more than infrequent attendees, and so eventually those efforts died due to lack of participation (also, admittedly I was not adept at leading congregational singing in Spanish). NVC posted signs written in Spanish and English, and pursued neighborhood flourishing projects, under the assumption that some in the Latinx community in the neighborhood of Glenfeliz Elementary would crave a small local church and would make their way into our midst. What is clear now is that the lack of

² Private correspondence with the author.

racial diversity within the congregation, and specifically within the relationship networks of its primary members, contributed heavily to the ongoing absence of such diversity, and the feeble and half-baked efforts at remedying this were likely to have not succeeded even had they been astute.

This is not to say that the congregation was homogenous. One document from the time, the “launch team artistic gifts survey,” contains a list of twenty-five original members; three are persons of color. This scant 10 to 15 percent racial diversity did not last; by the time NVC had its first major move (in 2012) there had been an increase to 20 to 25 percent diversity. But even those numbers are still low by any metric, lending credence to the former congregant’s contention that it was “a mostly-white space” from the outset onward.

Part of the difficulty inherent in church-planting is getting everyone on the launch team to agree; all manner of considerations are necessary, from the liturgical components to the facilities/equipment maintenance. The team had all agreed that reconciliation was a compelling force around which to rally, but much of the rest had been ignored. On September 13, 2009, NVC had its first worship gathering for the launch team, held in the library at GPC. NVC continued to gather there Sunday evenings for the next few months, until the April 4, 2010 “official launch” held at Glenfeliz Elementary in Atwater Village.

Because the first twenty-five worship gatherings were in the temporary quarters, many details of the larger worship gathering did not require attention. What did require attention was the content of the worship gatherings, and the intimacy of the GPC library played a role in shaping how it became grooved. By the time of the launch there had been habits that had formed which set tones that persist to this day. One of those was the

practice of authenticity, on both a personal and theological level. Personal struggles and celebrations, theological doubts and discernments, individual temperaments – all were voiced in a forthcoming manner by congregant and leadership alike. Another practice was that of relationship intimacy and immersion. Much of the congregation made efforts to invest themselves in the lives and activities of each other, which the Sunday worship gatherings quickly became a forum for and avenue toward. As one congregant recalls, “Early on a lot of people were trying to figure out their place within the community so it felt like everyone was generous and welcoming with one another. I felt the community wanted to be supportive and welcoming because everyone was deeply committed to the mission and vision of NVC.”³

While things like the details of worship gathering production probably should have been reckoned with more thoroughly, the congregation’s sense of community was bolstered such that by the time the worshipping community arrived at the formal launch the production value was conspicuously low while the camaraderie was peculiarly high. The combination, however, was perhaps more impactful than might be assumed given the messy nature of the production. Said the same congregant: “I remember it being a lot of work to get the Glenfeliz space ready for worship, but always feeling like the space was transformed into a sacred space.”

The low production and high relational quotients of those early years had two simultaneous effects, namely the deep immersion of many of the members and the inaccessibility to many newcomers. Another determining factor was the severe lack of

³ Private correspondence with the author.

infrastructure. NVC lacked everything from a building to a pastor's office to a printer to a set of hymnals to any staffing roles for maintenance, admin, security, technical or audio/visual support. It thus fell to the congregants themselves to attend to these tasks, and regarding the worship gathering this meant that many tasks were left unattended such that certain welcoming characteristics—even obvious ones like properly formatted song slides—sometimes fell through the cracks. This also meant that nearly anyone with an opinion or a desire to contribute something to the worship gathering was able and welcome to do so, which in turn meant that the necessity of agreement between the early members about liturgical content and theological sphere was bypassed, because a good portion of what was being said and done during the worship gathering was simply congregant-derived.

Another early document from the time entitled “Survey Conclusions” shows a number of ideas from the congregation about ways to enhance the worship gathering: “Theatrical Arts;” “writing, poetry;” “graphic arts, animation;” “Dance shown via slide show;” “Character monologues of characters in the sermon.” Regardless of which of these were implemented and how frequently, this document highlights the early congregation's understanding that activities of all sorts were possible and depended almost entirely on the willingness of individuals to carry them out.

As aforementioned, there was a distinct lack of accessibility for visitors for precisely these reasons. Many were the times a visitor would arrive, notice the candid or bumbling (or candidly bumbling) speakers and the amateurish music, and quietly excuse themselves. There were in fact a number of the launch team members who left within the first year, the bulk of which departed after having noticed that the worship gathering

included little to no flash or showiness and an often proletarian version of theology. What was regularly moving on a personal level was both unsophisticated on a theological level and unpolished on a production level, and without the relational buy-in it was not particularly attractive to newcomers. This, coupled with a decision early on by the leadership to refrain from engaging in marketing tactics such as mailers, flyers, or ad-buys—these being out of character for the nascent community’s desire to reconcile Church to neighbor and thus avoid anything smacking of evangelical-style publicity—meant that the congregation grew entirely by relationship rather than by conversion or collection from other churches. In short, NVC was not particularly “seeker-sensitive.”

While the congregation remained small during the first three years of existence, it was fairly active in the local community. The “Community Vision” document from that time outlines the reconciliation-centered “core values,” the first of which reads: “Reconciling the stories of our neighbors with God’s story through commission. We are commissioned with God to share in the gospel with our neighbors.”⁴ The deliberate inclusion of the word “in” highlights NVC’s early strategy of participating in the flourishing of the local community in Atwater Village. For four years, beginning in 2010, the congregation held a beer-brewing competition staged at a local pub. In 2011 NVC created an “art walk” on Glendale Blvd., where two dozen businesses (coffee shops, restaurants, dance studios, and more) displayed artwork from local artists; this became an annual event that the Atwater community saw fit to continue even after NVC departed. A few members of the congregation volunteered weekly at Glenfeliz, doing things like

⁴ The “Community Vision” document was put together by a committee sometime in 2009, but the details of the committee who created it, including persons and process, are unknown.

story-time reading and math tutoring. There were a few clean-up projects at the school, and one community beautification project approved and sponsored by the Atwater Neighborhood Council. Each October, beginning in 2009 and continuing through 2015, the congregation setup a candy-distribution and face-painting booth on Glendale Blvd. during the city's Halloween event. One former congregant describes the outward focus in this way: "We had to test different things to see if they work [sic] and we made changes to things that just didn't work."

Indeed, each project listed above was birthed out of a desire to bless and enrich the local community, and those unlisted above were ones that were tried and found lacking. The successful (and thus repeated) activities were never accompanied by inducement to attend the worship gatherings, and generally did not include any formal advertising of NVC's existence or participation. The goal was always to be the sort of worshipping community that participated in the Gospel with the community, with the Gospel not being limited to an eschatological checklist but instead tending toward life that is "whole and lasting."⁵

2012-2016 at Cutter Street

The lack of infrastructure contributed, for better or worse, to the worship gathering's low production and assorted nature of participant and activity. It also, unfortunately, contributed to the burn-rate of volunteers. Meeting in the auditorium of an elementary school meant that each week a slew of equipment and decorations needed to

⁵ This is a phrase I use often in liturgical activities, which I gleaned from Eugene Peterson's translation of ζῶην αἰώνιον ("eternal life") in his version of John 3:16.

be brought to and from the closet (luckily the school had agreed to onsite storage), and the small number of congregants meant that it was impossible to avoid utilizing their willingness to volunteer far too frequently. By the end of our third year the leadership recognized that there was considerable need for a space with more availability than three hours on Sundays.

Due to the abundance on the original launch team of de-churched persons—those who had significant worshipping community experience marked by severe wounding and brokenness—the launch team’s conversation surrounding residence within another church building was always short-lived. At the time the community was reaching the end of its setup/tear-down energies in early-2012, the question of where to move still did not include other churches given the still-present de-churched sensibilities of many members. While the full-time use (or at least more time than three hours weekly) loomed large in the conversation, money was another factor that weighed heavily. Given NVC’s success at investing in the local Atwater Village neighborhood, it was thought that a full-time space of the right décor and look might generate reciprocal interest in the worshipping community as well as commercial activities. The proper space might allow for rentals for film/TV/commercial shoots, weddings, concerts, art shows, open mic and other creative events, which would bring in some of the income that was being lost from the calving from GPC and SF Presbytery. During the summer of 2012 a team searched for such an establishment, and finally landed on the site of a former furniture warehouse a baseball’s throw from the newly formed Golden Road Brewery. It was located on Cutter St. in Atwater Village and was referred to as such.

There are a few things to note about the Cutter St. space. The first is that it had no effect, positive or negative, on the influx of new attendees to the congregation. A worry had been that because Cutter St. was in an industrial area there would be a paucity of local Atwater Village folks who took an interest. Yet there had already been the same paucity while NVC was in the neighborhood, and it simply continued. Again, it was thought at the time that people would, through relationship networks or community-minded events, discover NVC and be keen to join it, and that it would be out of character to engage in marketing or advertising that might involve polishing or accentuating the actuality of the proceedings. The result was that, as at the beginning, the stream of new attendees was meager, and nearly all arrived via relationship networks.

Because the worship gathering no longer occurred in a neighborhood, it was thought that simply focusing on the Atwater Village community was no longer sufficient. Adding to that was the location of NVC's congregants, none of whom actually lived in the Atwater environs by late-2012. The Cutter St. move marked a transition from a location-based reconciliation focus to one that was individual-based. The language of loving the neighborhood morphed into descriptions of being reconcilers in one's own spaces, whether work or family or general life activities, and thus began a process of pulling back from the initially-deep community investiture.

However, another thing to note about Cutter St. was that it did indeed provide opportunity both for financial gain and neighborhood investment. Because NVC had full-time control over the space, over the course of four years it had hosted dozens of events for outside entities, including those aforementioned as well as weddings, Neighborhood Council meetings, Presbytery meetings, film-screenings, recording sessions, and pop-up

neighborhood markets. This had the dual effect of bringing in much-needed income and giving the congregation a sensation of its own vibrancy. A common refrain at the time was the celebration of the varied flourishing that was happening in the lives of individuals and the local community due to NVC's existence and site.

With the coordination of so many events falling almost entirely to Nick Warnes, his energy for pastoring began to gradually diminish. Ever the entrepreneurial and enterprising individual, the networking aspect of the Cutter St. acquisitions were invigorating, while the day-to-day pastor tasks began to slowly lose their luster. By mid-2014 he and the leadership team were actively working to create a new staff position which might cut his pastoral hours and workload in half. Warnes had also continued his involvement in church planting and fashioned himself into something of a coach and organizer. When the search committee landed on Samantha Curley for the newly minted "Director of Development" role, Warnes took on a half-time position with the Presbytery as "Director of Church Planting," where he continued to expand his church-planting prowess and influence.

Whereas NVC had always been committed to a decentralized leadership structure, this move to a score of hours for Nick Warnes as the pastor, myself as the liturgy director, and Samantha Curley as the development director gave an increased sense of the division and balance of power. Also, Warnes' preaching duties were reduced to twice per month, which afforded the opportunity to bring in a diverse slate of guests, each with varying degrees of expertise and soapbox. These folks, all vetted by Warnes, were corralled by him to a degree (his habit was to request their manuscript in advance and return it with notes), but occasionally one would voice theological or social convictions

that did not jive with the community, at which point he (or Curley or myself) would have to stand up and remind everyone of where the worshipping community collectively stood on this or that issue (typically this was an agreement that there was no formal agreement nor one sought).

The most memorable of these occasions was when a certain pastor visiting from another country and continent made remarks about the Bible's exclusion of the LGBTQ community; Warnes' response was to remind everyone that all were welcome to NVC's worship gathering and, specifically, to the Communion table (which held prominent placement in the room for precisely that reason). Where NVC stood on this or that issue was in some instances decidedly undefined, which made some visiting preachers (and attendees) somewhat uncomfortable.

This incident, which occurred in 2015, was a microcosm of larger changes in the PCUSA. In 2011 the denomination had opted to allow the ordination of LGBTQ clergy at the discretion of local jurisdictions of presbyteries, prompting a number of congregations across the country to jettison their PCUSA ties. Many chose to join the CRC and the ERC, while a number banded together to form ECO. None of the congregations of the SF Presbytery followed suit, but many of the discussions were rancorous. For NVC, the arrival of Samantha Curley as a member of staff had a significant influence. Curley was the director and co-creator of an organization called *Level Ground*, which, at the time, had as its motto "a safe space for discussions of faith, gender, and sexuality." Level Ground was committed to fostering respectful dialogue between clashing factions surrounding such issues, with the tacit goal of inclusivity, and thus Curley's presence on staff at NVC brought the conversation about NVC's inclusivity to the fore.

Publicly available session minutes indicate the leadership team spent a great deal of time in discussion and prayer regarding how NVC would respond to the newly-minted PCUSA stance, with outside guests attending and reviews of literature and materials conducted during session meetings. Samantha Curley's presence on staff had galvanized the conversation, and by late-2015 the leadership team was actively discussing what to do. They landed on a year's worth of meeting, praying, studying, and discerning, which finally occurred beginning in May 2016 and finishing in April 2017. At that March 2017 meeting it was decided that NVC would formally become open and affirming of the LGBTQ community, with the conversation about publicity occurring in April and the rollout shortly thereafter.

While this mid-2017 date might appear from a liberal perspective to be a late-staged action, it is entirely in keeping with the community's ethos of being community-focused. The community had been welcoming of LGBTQ attendees, had hosted LGBTQ weddings, and on the whole had been firmly open and affirming from its outset. However, in seeking to further reconciliation, and knowing that taking a formal stance would necessarily make certain people on either side of the ideological debate feel excluded, the leadership team had not felt it prudent to draw any proverbial lines in the sand. This had begun to change not simply with the arrival of certain more progressive members, but also because of the waning participation of certain more conservative members; on that latter front, for example, one of the congregation's two elderly couples had exited due to declining health. Sadly, a few of the ethnically diverse congregants, whose faith origins were decidedly conservative (as was, apparently, their faith), had also begun to quietly exit given what they perceived as a starkly leftward turn. Yet, while it

was a turn, it was not stark or abrupt. For years many in leadership opted for the pursuit of reconciliation in the manner of allowing the community to house people on either side of the issue. Then, with changes to the congregation and to the larger cultural narrative, the leadership decided to take action. However, the action was not simply to choose a course that would alienate some while welcoming others; it was, rather, to seek to listen to the Spirit's guidance in a lengthy, sustained process. As I write this more than two years hence, the decision for how to approach the issue and the ensuing Spirit-guided and Bible-informed discernment process seem as laudable as they are prescriptive for current and future points of contention.

A final thing to note about the Cutter St. years is the changing demographics. Three quarters of the launch team had been in the twenty to forty age range, but many of those were either newly married or soon-to-be married. As one might expect, soon there were babies. At first it was a few, an early batch of children born between 2011-2015. Then it was veritable storm of children, including one point in 2017 where there were eleven pregnancies in the congregation which still hovered around fifty adults. While the Cutter St. space had been a step forward for the energy of volunteers and staff because they no longer needed to engage in Glenfeliz's immense weekly setup and tear down, and had been a step forward in that it became a space where the congregation and the local community could flourish in a variety of ways, it was a step backward with regard to the children's ministry. Glenfeliz had adequate bathrooms, ample space for dispersing based on age, an always recently-cleaned facility, and a helpful array of playground structures and classroom activities; Cutter St. by contrast had a single room with a difficult bathroom and required parents and staff to handle the cleaning and the provision of

activities and supplies. While the preponderance of children as yet remained under 4 years of age, this was not ideal but certainly acceptable. NVC signed on for another year of leasing the warehouse in October 2015, which was then sold soon after; the new buyer promptly informed us that they would not renew the lease, thus giving a sunset date of September 1, 2016 at which time it would need to be vacated. This was met with a sigh of relief from many due to the clearly foreseeable issues with children.

2016-Present at Harambee

The transition from the Cutter St. space was necessitated by its change in ownership, but it would have eventually occurred due to the influx of children. As the location-scouting team scoured the NE LA area (generally Glendale, Eagle Rock, Highland Park, and Pasadena), adequate children's facilities were a big factor. Having experienced the pros and cons of both Sunday-afternoon-only and full-time spaces in effectively equal measure, any allure based on access was rather moot. The factor that did take precedence alongside children's facilities was the consideration as to what sort of congregation NVC wanted to become. It was felt that a space could assist in becoming a force for social justice, whether in activism or in justice-oriented activity, or it could assist in becoming more institutionally robust. Some of the spaces the team toured had pronounced aesthetic appeal, prompting many conversations about pivoting toward a more seeker-sensitive model and thereby shoring up membership with an emphasis on vibe and production. Other spaces lent themselves to social justice and mercy work, such as a site in Highland Park adjacent to a geriatric center.

In the end, the site that presented the best combination of opportunities was the Harambee Center. There was an elementary school that served primarily Latinx and African-American students, a perfect place to serve and experience mutuality. The school had a number of children's classrooms and play structures. A deliberate effort was made during the time of the first meetings at Harambee (September 2016) to enter the relationship delicately, in order to avoid any complications of colonialism and white-savior complex. Slowly, congregants began volunteering at various Harambee activities, including recess supervision, meal delivery, tutoring, and reading to the students.

The final few months of the location search and the move coincided with the 2016 election, a politically raucous period that was the culmination of what author Ta-Nehisi Coates has called "our fitful, spasmodic years."⁶ A growing sense of dismay over things like the injustices of the 2008 financial crash and its recovery, the increasingly erratic weather phenomenon brought on by climate change, oppression the world over, "fake news," national social instability brought about seemingly innumerable inequities, and any number of other instances of systemic and situational brokenness had begun to stir in many of the NVC congregants a sense of the need to talk about and through difficult subjects. The worship service had been peppered with attention to political and social issues of this sort since its beginning, but a palpable increase culminated with the election in November 2016. At that point, it became clear that the laity was in deep need of reflecting on the goings-on in society, regardless of the leadership's willingness or eagerness.

⁶ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World Publishing, 2017), 333.

The first Sunday following the election of Donald Trump was, by many accounts, a miserable failure. Whereas the messaging could have included mourning the imminent difficulty for persons of color, non-citizens, the LGBTQ community, and those of lower socio-economic status, and made a clear denunciation of the hateful language of Trump toward Mexicans, women, persons with disabilities, and the others, NVC instead tried to walk the finest of lines between recognizing that for some the election boded a crisis while for others it boded an end to a crisis. In keeping with the theme of reconciliation and having lamented the loss of certain individuals due to the adoption of an inclusive stance, it was hoped that space at the table could be maintained for persons on both sides of the electoral divide.

Sadly, this posture had the dual effect of alienating the right-leaning members and dismaying the left-leaning members. The former felt put upon by the very discussion of societal issues, as the sheer numerical value of Trump's statements gave any number of opportunities for disagreement; the latter felt that without severe public castigation of his statements by both clergy and laity alike things like misogyny and racism were simply being given a pass. Ultimately, however, it did not matter what the liturgical and clerical posture was, because over the course of the post-election weeks and months the congregation, so steeped in the practice of authenticity and its requisite vocalization of thoughts and needs, brought up all manner of political issues anyway. While this alienated a few members, ultimately driving them away, it also, in the words of a former member, "clarified who the people of God are meant to be and how we are meant to live

and gather and go out together.”⁷ The same interviewee further elaborated, describing the post-election atmosphere as follows: “In some ways, it felt like it divided our community in its immediate aftermath, but the long term impact was bringing us together in working towards the kind of future and world that we wanted - one rooted in love, reconciliation, and hospitality to those on the margins.”

In this way the NVC community furthered its commitment to the ministry of reconciliation by allowing itself to be present to the realities of the Trump election and presidency. Certainly the congregation ran the risk of alienating those congregants “who d[id] not submit to the ‘liberal absolutism’”⁸ of much of leftward culture, but by and large the reaction to the Trump election and presidency was simply the community bringing their reactions into the proceedings and ruminating on them. That this discursive mode made certain folks feel as though there was no space at the table for them is lamentable, but to have done the opposite, that is, stifling the congregation from mentioning overtly-political things, would have been to stifle the very core of NVC’s reconciliation effort with its requisite mien of authenticity and decentralization.

By the late-Spring of 2017, the worshipping community was established at Harambee, settling into a habit of service there (and elsewhere in Pasadena), and was fairly vocal in being unsettled regarding the political, social, and environmental situation in the US. As noted, Nick Warnes had begun to fashion himself into a church-planting guru, including founding an organization called Cyclical that focuses on assisting

⁷ Private correspondence with the author.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence: God’s Command to Speak Out* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 105.

presbyteries and other denominations' mid-councils in church-planting. In April he announced that he was ready to step down from his role as pastor of NVC, and it was decided that the helm would be passed to Samantha Curley and myself. Neither of us were ordained nor had any intention of pursuing ordination, but the Presbytery consigned one of us to the ordination process else an interim minister would have to be immediately brought in; Curley refused, so I was set on that path. The Presbytery, hewing to age-old tradition, expected the Warnes family to quietly and permanently depart the congregation, but NVC's Leadership Team successfully lobbied the Committee on Ministry (COM) that doing so would undermine the entire ethos of the worshipping community, predicated as it was on community and relationships. After much haggling the Presbytery relented, stating that Warnes would need to exit the proceedings for a few months and stay away from leadership roles and positions for a year.

The difficulties of a founding pastor's transition are predictable, largely involving his or her role in the center of the liturgy, relationships, ethos, and institutional aspects. In the case of NVC, this was doubly so because of the unique trajectory the community had taken. When Nick Warnes stepped down there had yet to be established a permanent location, liturgy, theology, ritual tradition, or demographic (particularly with regard to age). Because of this, the SF Presbytery had considerable difficulty in finding an interim pastor, because each candidate they practicably considered was suited for a more run-of-the-mill worshipping community. From the end of Warnes' tenure (June 30, 2017) until early March of the following year COM wrestled and interviewed and wrestled some more, until finally settling on what they described as "the best option:" me. Having

completed enough of the ordination requirements to satisfy COM, I was ordained as a “commissioned ruling elder” on April 29, 2018.

Briefly, I had been entirely skeptical of pastoral ministry as a calling, and, in fact, of the idea of calling in general. However, it was helpfully explained to me that call could be thought of as peculiar needs coinciding with peculiar attributes of skill and experience, and accordingly I felt “called” to ordained ministry specifically with this congregation at that particular time. The staffing changes from that time to thence are not germane to this project, other than to say a new “Director of Community” was hired and a “Children’s Ministry Consultant” has, as of now, spent more than a year attempting to create a children’s ministry within such distinctly difficult confines as ours.

In sum, the NVC community was founded on a pursuit of reconciliation which continues to this day. The practice of authenticity and being centered in community quickly became the norm. A number of local Atwater Village enrichment efforts dissipated into an edifice-based path, which itself then yielded to a re-immersion into a local community, with emphasis on social justice largely due to the national political and social climate. Throughout, the morphing of the community has continued unabated, a result of prioritizing reconciliation, which, at its core, requires a willingness to hold all things loosely such that they might be subjected to the process of reconciliation. That power and influence have been eschewed might be deemed estimable, but stability is another matter entirely, shakiness being an inherently dubitable virtue. As NVC enters its second decade, questions of how its reconciliation process might continue to occur become ever more important and pressing.

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

A love of reconciliation is not weakness or cowardice. It demands courage, nobility, generosity, sometimes heroism, and overcoming of oneself rather than of one's adversary. At times it may even seem like dishonor, but it never offends against true justice or denies the rights of the poor. In reality, it is the patient, wise art of peace, of loving, of living with one's fellows, after the example of Christ, with a strength of heart and mind modeled on his.

– Pope Paul VI

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Taking Stock of Our Surroundings with Chris Hedges and Miguel De La Torre

While an “emergency” for framed democracies represents the possibility of change, “emergency” for the weak is precisely a “lack of emergency,” that is, a lack of change, alteration, or modification of the current state of affairs.

– Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala

There is one problem: this image of the world is completely wrong. In virtually no element of our national discourse are Americans provided with a more inaccurate depiction of the world than when it comes to matters of war, peace, and freedom. Americans live in a world that is safer and freer than ever before in human history.

– Michael A. Cohen and Micah Zenko

A crucial element for any worshipping community which seeks to pursue reconciliation is an awareness of the cultural and historical epoch in which it finds itself. Certainly this is true for a community seeking to be present to reconciliation, because if God is reconciling the world to Godself through Christ there must be cognizance of said world. Taking seriously the mantle of “the ministry of reconciliation” in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 compels as much.

Therefore the world broadly and the US specifically are the forum for reconciliation. While it goes without saying that the world today is in dire need of

reconciliation, it must also be noted that a common human tendency is to think of one's present time period as the most broken, scattered, and chaotic time in history. It is often each generation's conceit to find in their present circumstance a sense of greater worry about the world's progress coupled with a sense of the propriety and placidity of previous eras and generations. When a person puts a wetted finger to the wind and finds it blowing with increasing entropy and dismaying occurrences, it is understandable that this would create a sense of this being the worst of times over and against any past strife, which lends itself to a revisionist version of how good things were in a fictitious rosy-hued former period. The sobriety of recognizing these tendencies is necessary for any accounting of one's present circumstances, certainly so for looking broadly at the national and international scene with an eye toward reconciliation.

Awareness of that human trait—to believe today to be the worst of times—is especially important when reading the industrious journalist Chris Hedges, whose output of articles and books is matched in their extreme number by their extreme pessimism about society's decline. Ordained as a minister in the PCUSA denomination and describing his ministry as being “ordained to write,”¹ Hedges is particularly glum about the state of the world and considers it his theological duty to speak this truth in his articles, interviews, books, and even preaching engagements. He writes, “Sermons, when they are good, do not please a congregation. They do not make people happy. They are not a form of entertainment. They disturb many.”² His journalism has taken him to

¹ Chris Hedges, “Ordained to Write” *Truthdig*, October 13, 2014, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/ordained-to-write/>.

² Chris Hedges, *The World As It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress* (New York: Nation Books, 2001), 18.

Yugoslavia and Iraq and many sectors of American society, always with a critical view of power and a compassionate view of marginalized and oppressed persons. He writes in a manner reminiscent of James Baldwin, not regarding tone or introspection but in the sense that Baldwin maintained a baseline of gloom about the United States' ability to right itself from its historic transgressions and sought to broadcast that gloom continuously while working toward change. When Baldwin declares "I'm terrified at the moral apathy, the death of the heart which is happening in my country,"³ Hedges' journalism mightily reverberates.

Hedges' most recent book, *America: The Farewell Tour*, covers a swath of America and is indeed quite disturbing. He illumines the state of American politics which has "become subordinate to economics"⁴ and therefore cannot prioritize the wellbeing of citizens. Lobbying efforts, bills and laws written by corporations, and excessive amounts of money from corporate non-persons ensure that the needs and voices of the lower half of America go deeply untended. Hedges decries the "economists [who] call for reducing taxes on corporations and the rich and cutting social service programs for the poor" and the "industrialists [who] poison the water, the soil, and the air, slash jobs and depress wages," as well as the cultural tendency to "define our worth not by our independence or our character but by the material standards set by capitalism – personal wealth, brands, status, and career advancement."⁵

³ James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, comp. and ed. Raoul Peck (New York: Vintage International, 2017), 39.

⁴ Chris Hedges, *America: The Farewell Tour* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

Hedges' is an earnest conviction that this is the worst of times, but thankfully he provides a good deal of historical precedent and precursor to today's woes. In particular he regularly sifts through histories of world powers such as eighteenth century France and the ancient empires of Greece and Rome to find analogue to the present moment, and forcefully notes how a distinct mark of civilization decline is "when populations are averting their eyes from the unpleasant realities before them" and then "become carnivals of hedonism and folly."⁶ Hedges considers it his sacred duty to highlight this disconnect between the present emergency and present awareness of it.

In particular, Hedges notes how privatization in the economy, wrought by large moneyed interests and compliant political and media figures who "do corporate bidding and pay lip service to burning political and economic issues,"⁷ as well as privatization in religion, peddled by "magical thinking" of "infantile fantasies about inevitable human progress" that is "part of the narcissism of the dominant culture,"⁸ have steadily advanced with detrimental effects. Drawing on Paul Tillich's reinterpretation of sin as estrangement, Hedges notes on the one hand how people in America are increasingly stratified while simultaneously weighed down by corporate gain of the trickle-up variety, a system of increasing poverty that fosters interpersonal distancing manifested in xenophobia and nationalism. On the other hand, he points out that estrangement allows the Church to shelve its duty to protect the poor and marginalized and instead retreat

⁶ Chris Hedges, *Wages of Rebellion: The Moral Imperative of Revolt* (New York: Nation Books, 2015), 33.

⁷ Chris Hedges, *Death of the Liberal Class* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 25.

⁸ Chris Hedges, "Confronting the Culture of Death," *Truthdig*, January 21, 2019, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/confronting-the-culture-of-death/>.

“into a vague embrace of humanism and self-absorbed forms of spirituality.”⁹ Hedges convincingly demonstrates the increase of privatization and the need to combat it.

A distinct focus of Hedges in *America* is the dissipation that seems dramatically on the rise throughout American culture, evidenced in things like prescription drugs and their corresponding addictions and gig-economy jobs and their corresponding lack of benefits and livable wages. Some of *America: The Farewell Tour* is nearly unreadable, such as when he reports in vivid detail on pornography, sex trafficking, and gambling, things which are tragic outgrowths of global capitalist society the disconnects humans from their own humanity. Perhaps part of why those spectacles are so shocking is that they are unfamiliar outside of lurid Hollywood productions. Such crises are downplayed in the media for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the corporate ownership and mentality of media itself, but also due to what mathematician Cathy O’Neil terms “weapons of math destruction.” In her book of the same name, she notes how these computer algorithms “place the comfortable classes of society in their own marketing silos,” thus dividing people from one another and allowing “society’s winners” to ignore “how the very same models are destroying lives” of the poor and oppressed by their lifestyles, habits, and political and financial decisions.¹⁰ Hedges, dismayed over the separation of humans which “fosters the alienation, anxiety, meaninglessness, and despair that are preyed upon by mass culture,”¹¹ sheds acute light on a national predicament and

⁹ Hedges, *Death of the Liberal Class*, 87.

¹⁰ Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 200.

¹¹ Hedges, *America*, 310.

calls for revolution that includes “the question of morality, of a way of life”¹² where human dignity, freedom, and connectedness are prioritized.

That the aforementioned crises are downplayed in the media is troubling, but the fact that they regularly do not feature prominently in the Church is detestable. That, at least, is the view of Cuban-American ethicist Miguel De La Torre. Taking a similar perspective as Hedges to a different target in the book *Embracing Hopelessness*, De La Torre writes what could be described as a diatribe against the comfortable Christianity that uses hope as an excuse to avoid sacrifice and change, thus “reinforcing oppressive structures and reining in revolutionary tendencies.”¹³ De La Torre calls out a version of salvation that is self-embracing and purely eschatological because it allows actions of justice and mercy to retain never more than fleeting importance within a salvation framework, thus removing the poor and oppressed from any pressing consideration. This fleeting importance gradually becomes non-essential, and thus the poor and marginalized are bracketed out while those of privilege continue to operate with only minor concern, in a mindset, as described by theologian Soong Chan-Rah, wherein we “abstract injustice, allowing ourselves to believe we no longer have a direct hand in it.”¹⁴ Thus those on the underside of society experience the emergency of being a non-emergency, while those of us on the privileged side see little rationale for treating their plight as urgent. De La Torre is fairly ruthless in his treatment of this soteriology, taking severe aim at present actions

¹² Ibid., 19.

¹³ Miguel De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 6.

¹⁴ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 89.

of Christ-followers that are only blurrily informed by culpability for past actions. He claims that a significant issue with maintaining hope is that it relies on a faulty view of history's myriad instances of failure and injustice, a view where wellbeing and justice have steadily won the day. His essential point in this realm is that the fabled arc of history is not, in fact, bending toward justice, and certainly not due to any Divine activity or social-gospel push. He writes:

The quality of the "not-yet" of Christ's return allows the hopelessness of the now to be exchanged for the hope for which Christians have been waiting for two millennia. But the wait, especially for those grinded under the wheel of history, has lasted so long, the promise is starting to ring hollow. This theology of promise is central to the thought of God providing the answer to every possible conceivable question, regardless of the despair and angst of the present. God's promise to act in the future becomes more important than any act, or lack thereof, that might have occurred in the past.¹⁵

Alongside a sober view of history, De La Torre simultaneously cries out for the purposeful activity on behalf of justice for the poor and marginalized over and against the lackadaisical activity of the privileged who believe God's faithful intervention is just around the bend. That the cross has priority in Christian theology across the board goes without saying; it is the cross which constitutes a singular activity of God in history and points toward a recapitulation of God's activity in the reconciliation of all things. De La Torre does not specifically dispute this, but, rather, claims that the poor and marginalized are perennially waiting for salvation now while the privileged members of Christ's Body are awaiting God's salvation in the future in relative comfort. De La Torre is alleging that God has not fulfilled God's end of the covenant, which, as "the centerpiece for understanding everything Scripture has to say about God and [God's] relationship to the

¹⁵ De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness*, 74.

world,”¹⁶ thus calls into question how God has been portrayed in the Bible and the history of theology. De La Torre points to historical tragedies like the Holocaust as well as contemporary examples like the insidious racism of education materials in Arizona to show that the God who is supposed to show up as the culmination of hope is too often not doing so. He looks in vain “to see the face of a seemingly absent God in the midst of a suffering world . . . where premature death and marginalization are more common than things working for good for those who are called according to God’s purposes.”¹⁷

Within De La Torre’s critique are calls to reinterpret Scripture and reimagine the Divine Being in ways that speak more directly to today with conviction and disruption for the Church. Indeed, his effort is always in the service of galvanizing salvation-secure Christians to take more seriously their mandate to fresh service and sacrifice with justice and mercy. Concomitant in this is a labor shared by many, that of disabusing persons of privilege from the normativity of their experience¹⁸ such that their willingness to care about the less mainstream or less fortunate might increase.

What Hedges, De La Torre, and many others repeatedly point out is that Americans are less and less inclined to meaningful, regular actions on behalf of the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. They are taking issue with the status quo that envelops the

¹⁶ Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross, Volume 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 372.

¹⁷ De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness*, xv.

¹⁸ Much of the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates is centered in this realm. He writes, ‘It is truly horrible to understand yourself as the essential below of your country.’ Such bellwether sentiment is specifically designed to have both an awakening and ignorance-reducing effect. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 106.

“have-nots” with further oppression and despair while clothing the “haves” in comfort and disengagement anointed by a modicum of care, bearing out author Anand Giridharadas’ assertion that “much of what appears to be reform in our time is in fact the defense of stasis.”¹⁹ While De La Torre levels this criticism mostly at the Church, Hedges has a societal view, lamenting the loss of community-mindedness of ordinary citizens due to corporate capitalism which “has made war on the communal and the sacred, on those forces that allow us to connect and transcend our temporal condition to bond with others.”²⁰

Both authors are aware of the power of information and narrative to coerce and cajole people into complacency and self-absorption, with De La Torre pointing out that truth is often “whatever those in power claim truth to be.”²¹ Journalists Micah Zenko and Michael Cohen bear this out in their book *Clear and Present Safety*, in which they marshal a severe critique of the current political and media landscape which claims that national security is in straits so dire that vast amounts of money must be funneled toward defense and intelligence. They point out that things which actually do threaten Americans—things like lack of health care, crumbling infrastructure, and poor education—are glossed over in favor of “a political environment dominated by habitual threat inflation”²² of foreign threats. With admirably bipartisan criticism, they note how

¹⁹ Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York: Knopf, 2018), 12.

²⁰ Hedges, *America*, 84.

²¹ De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness*, 23.

²² Michael A. Cohen and Micah Zenko, *Clear and Present Safety: The World Has Never Been Better and Why That Matters to Americans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 13.

presidential administrations, even those which recognize “pressing domestic challenges,” are still inclined to “expand a military commitment against a largely phantom threat, while at the same time decrying the deleterious impact of pursuing such policies.”²³ Such fear-based rhetoric continuously distances average Americans from any sense connectedness to each other and to the rest of the world, thus lowering the interest many have in comprehending suffering and marginalization, due to the common and growing impression that they and their loved ones are in a permanently precarious position.

Recalling the aforementioned human tendency to consider the crises of one’s current epoch as the most extended and exacting, it is useful to consider the point borne out by Cohen and Zenko in the center, Hedges and De La Torre on the left, and even conservative commentator Tucker Carlson on the right, that while this period of history may or may not warrant the heading of “the worst of times” it is nonetheless a period of distinct deterioration that is not being properly acknowledged. Each author thunders against elements of the 2008 financial crisis, but also against the ensuing decade of response. That crisis, which should have been confounding and galvanizing, was instead met with a reshuffling of the same systems and players, where “the big corporations have influenced lawmakers to make the tax and financial laws favor their interests” as philosopher John Caputo diagnosed.²⁴ Carlson literally pleads with his audience to take seriously global and national catastrophes, not least the declining mental and physical health of average Americans: “If they [the US population] start dying younger or killing

²³ Ibid., 159.

²⁴ John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Pelican Books, 2018), 207.

themselves in large numbers, figure out why. Care about them.”²⁵ On the other end of the political spectrum the sentiments are similar, such as those of artist Ai Weiwei: “The silence of 65 million refugees is a humiliation for those of us with a voice.”²⁶

The unifying theme of these perspectives is that the lack of emergency pervading the worldview of many retains its appeal precisely because it feels distant and vague, and because attending to the emergency—that is, letting justice and mercy flow—would be too disruptive to such a worldview, let alone life itself. Livy’s appraisal of Ancient Rome, shockingly apropos, is that we live in a time “in which we can endure neither our vices nor the remedies needed to cure them.”²⁷ Americans, and particularly American Christians, are indicted by such authors for their inability to address both their plight and their ability to discern their plight, whether in a national or an international context.

The difficult and perhaps even unappealing nature of change that would be required to forge new connectedness and care for the well-being of others is the thrust of both Hedges and De La Torre’s work. Their work yearns for a creative approach to disrupting old forms and prioritizing liberation “from chains of fear or want or greed” as the hymnodist well puts it.²⁸ Convincingly illuminated by Hedges and De La Torre, the lack of connectedness and care in American society generally and the American Church specifically leads to a simple yet incisive issue: namely, to what extent will the Church,

²⁵ Tucker Carlson, *Ship of Fools: How a Selfish Ruling Class is Bringing American to the Brink of Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 2018), 240.

²⁶ Ai Weiwei, *Humanity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 80.

²⁷ Livy, *The Rise of Rome: Books One to Five*, trans. T.J. Luce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

²⁸ Jane Park Huber, *A Singing Faith* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 17.

or a specific worshipping community, allow itself to be re-formed away from eschatological equanimity by the current realities of the world's brokenness and redirected toward the plight of the poor and marginalized in present ways.

**Taking Stock of Scripture
with Walter Brueggemann**

But for my children, I would have them keep their distance
from the thickening center.

– Robinson Jeffers

But look what the Church has done to Jesus during the last two thousand years.
What they have made of Him. How they have turned every word He spoke for
their own vile ends.

– Carson McCullers

Given the ever-advancing brokenness within American society, not to mention the world at large, and the advancing disconnect between perceptions and facts about such brokenness, coupled with much of Christianity's limp response to the same largely due to cossetted confidence in Divine intervention, it begs the question as to what, if anything, Scripture says about our society and our proper response to it as witnesses to Jesus. In keeping with Luther's "ever new and greater light and fervor," a faithful biblical engagement believes that "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," as Jack Rogers puts it, "a change in our attitudes and actions can be a faithful response to God's leading."²⁹ As such, Scripture can speak in such a way as to modify readings of Scripture, for indeed because of this "guidance of the Holy Spirit" it is not untoward to expect followers of Jesus to be led to new understandings of God's commentary on their situations. My point

²⁹ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Revised and Expanded Addition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 59.

here is not so much to suggest that a different interpretation of the Bible can be a Spirit-led enterprise; my point is simply to say that the Bible can, even in a conservative perspective, be read as speaking to the Church now, rather than speaking strictly to the Church in the past and the contemporary Church's appropriation of that strain.

One of the best examples of Biblical scholars who creatively discern the Bible speaking in piercing ways to our time is Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann is enthusiastically inventive and persuasive in his contention that a proper interpretation of Scripture is one that challenges convention and complacency, especially in the Church. He encourages the Church to enter Scripture expecting to find itself disrupted, for, he claims, such disruption is "a venue for the Holy One."³⁰ Brueggemann writes that the Bible often "offers a reality counter to dominant reality that characteristically enjoys institutional, hegemonic authority but is characteristically uncritical of itself."³¹ That Brueggemann's typical contentions are at odds with American culture perhaps speaks more to the insurgent nature of Scripture than to Brueggemann's peculiar hobbyhorse, for, as translator David Bentley Hart reminds us, when one puts on the shoes of Jesus and his earliest followers "one enters a company of 'radicals.'" Hart characterizes the early church accordingly:

[A]n association of men and women guided by faith in a world-altering revelation, and hence in values almost absolutely inverse to the recognized social, political, economic, and religious truths not only of their own age, but of almost every age of human culture. The first Christians certainly bore very little resemblance to the faithful of our day, or to any generation of Christians that has felt quite at home in the world, securely sheltered within the available social

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), xiv.

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xi.

stations of its time, complacently comfortable with material possessions and national loyalties and civic contentions.³²

For Brueggemann this “radical” aspect of Scripture in both the Old and New Testament is incessantly cutting against the grain of modern American society, and good interpretation should continuously and vociferously challenge faithful readers. The Divine Word creatively brings about liberation through disruption, for, as Brueggemann writes, “God works in freedom without respect either to the enduring structures so evident [in a faith community], or to the powerless despair when structures are gone.”³³

Examples of Brueggemann’s hermeneutic rebellion against culture abound, particularly in two works, *Sabbath as Resistance* and *Interrupting Silence*. In the former, he expounds on all manner of things via the Ten Commandments. He points out the contrast in late Genesis and Exodus between YHWH and the Egypt’s “insatiable gods of imperial productivity,”³⁴ therein begging the question as to whether a job market that increasingly offers low-wage jobs without benefits of any kind, such as Uber or Grubhub, can actually be described as strong or solid.³⁵ He dovetails this with a reading of Exodus as moving from “systems of restlessness into the restfulness of neighborliness”³⁶ via the

³² David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), xxiv-xxv.

³³ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 25.

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 5.

³⁵ That these companies avow a humanist set of values while maintaining business models and practices insidiously harmful to their workers is particularly grating to Carlson, who offers this biting anecdote: “Days after a mass shooting in the summer of 2016 . . . peace signs appeared on the Uber app. ‘As we move around our cities this weekend, let’s take a moment to think about what we can do to help,’ the company suggested. One obvious thing Uber might have done to help: treat its own employees more humanely.” Carlson, *Ship of Fools*, 35.

³⁶ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 17.

commandments to Sabbath and just treatment of neighbor, which works against today's individualism and community stratification.

Further attending to the radical nature of the Biblical requirement of Sabbath, Brueggemann loudly clamors against the tendency within American society for those on top to forget those on lower rungs by demonstrating how a deliberate, prioritized day of rest "is an occasion for reimagining all of social life . . . to compassionate solidarity."³⁷ Later he illuminates Amos as fulminating against "an acquisitive economy," one in which the ways and means of labor and capital are disguised "with the euphemisms of well-being that contradict the facts on the ground,"³⁸ and that creates its own reality where justice is allowed to reside only in the abstract and we are removed from culpability in injustice. Readings such as these place Brueggemann squarely in the camp of authors such as Hedges, Giridharadas, and O'Neil; or, to state it another way, Brueggemann illuminates stout Biblical backing for the contentions of those authors.

In *Interrupting Silence*, Brueggemann again sets the Biblical lens against current American culture, highlighting how the oppressed and the poor are too often not given voice. He draws from the Markan version of the Syrophonecian woman's encounter with Jesus (Mark 7:24-29), a woman who theologian Hisako Kinukawa reminds us "has been accustomed since birth to being subjugated and looked down upon . . . [and] taught to remain silent, hidden, and obedient all through her life."³⁹ Brueggemann posits how

³⁷ Ibid., 45.

³⁸ Ibid., 78.

³⁹ Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 58.

hearing from such a source cannot but “abrasively shock our comfort zones,” especially regarding our privileged defense of stasis, because it violates “the consensus that has been silently accepted.”⁴⁰ He looks as well at the Lukan parable about the woman clamoring for justice before the uninterested judge (Luke 18:1-8) and recognizes that justice is something that must be striven for continuously “before every indifferent judge, on earth and in heaven,”⁴¹ pointing us toward the necessity of raising voices on behalf of those who are marginalized and oppressed.

The similarities between this type of Biblical exegesis and the depositions against economic globalism and imperialism of De La Torre, philosophers Vattimo and Zabala, and others are readily apparent. Going a step into textual criticism, Brueggemann analyzes the silencing of women in Corinthian congregation in 1 Corinthians 14:34-40 and allows the distinct possibility that such verses “are a later intrusion into the epistle.”⁴² This he connects to the tendency of churches “to accommodate social resistance to equity”⁴³ in order to maintain things like longevity and order at the expense of difficult or disruptive people or issues. We are left with the prioritization of institutions and principles over people, what author Pankaj Mishra has called the “replacing of social bonds with market relations and sanctif[ied] greed.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence*, 52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁴ Mishra, quoted in Francis Wade, “‘The Liberal Order Is the Incubator for Authoritarianism’: A Conversation with Pankaj Mishra,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 15, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-liberal-order-is-the-incubator-for-authoritarianism-a-conversation-with-pankaj-mishra/#!>.

With each of these ventures into how the Bible speaks to the Church today, Brueggemann is giving space for “these emergent new readings [to] place everything ‘old time’ in jeopardy.”⁴⁵ His hermeneutic seems almost premised on a counter-cultural ethos, which for Biblical exegesis would be highly questionable, until one begins to allow the Bible to illuminate how much Western culture’s reading of it has been subservient to things like power and wealth. This, of course, is itself a dynamic reading, and yet in countless ways and through countless voices the point is made that the “American Dream” and Scripture’s vision of flourishing— “life that is whole and lasting” in Peterson’s rendering of John 3:16—are not the same. Furthermore, Brueggemann is consistently drawing distinctions between a community that represents and resembles Christ and “a culture that is, for the most part, unforgiving and ungrateful.”⁴⁶ Studies such as these provide a springboard for a worshipping community to seek to be actively engaged with the Spirit’s guidance, akin to the early church’s penchant for listening to the Spirit and moving accordingly, evidenced perhaps most strongly throughout the book of Acts. Much like that early gathering of Christ-followers, a worshipping community present to the Spirit’s movement and guidance is predictably a counter-cultural organism.

For a worshipping community to place habits, traditions, orthodoxies, and structures “in jeopardy” is no small thing, yet the Bible is replete with examples of the people of God following the Spirit’s guidance into change (stretching from Abraham’s journey out of Haran to the exodus from Egypt all the way to Acts). Furthermore, for the

⁴⁵ Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence*, 109.

⁴⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), xiv.

people of God to avoid marrying themselves to a mode of thinking and operation that is culture-based, the “thickening center” so dismaying to the poet Robinson Jeffers, it is necessary to maintain a sense of the forward-movement of sanctification for individuals and especially for communities, holding fast to the conviction of “the Kingdom we have only begun to experience” that Stanley Hauerwas affirms.⁴⁷ In particular, this mentality provides space to call into question our assessment of God’s past activity, not in order to question God’s agency but rather to allot what De La Torre calls “epistemological privilege”⁴⁸ within that assessment to the myriad examples of places where silenced voices have remained silenced, thus embracing true responsibility and avoiding what Cornel West calls being “well-adjusted to injustice.”⁴⁹ In this vein a worshipping community might “believe the countercultural, peculiar claim that *through the Spirit God is active in history then and now*”⁵⁰ not simply outside but also within the community itself. A reading of Scripture that is present opens a wide horizon of wrestling with where and how the Spirit is active. Accordingly, the question arises: what sorts of parameters or boundaries might a worshipping community place on itself when reading through Scripture under the assumption that challenge will assuredly be found for the community itself that points to and even necessitates change?

⁴⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame, 1981), 101.

⁴⁸ Miguel De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 50.

⁴⁹ Cornel West, in Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), ix.

⁵⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Holy Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2015), 23, emphasis theirs.

Taking Stock of the Church
with David Fitch, Kwok Pui-lan, Joerg Rieger, and Willie James Jennings

The church is only the church when it exists for others.

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Out of no one, a new someone; out of the distraught and broken, the beloved community.

– Daniel Berrigan

The age-old claim from Cyprian that “there is no salvation outside the church” is being met in the twenty-first century with no small amount of hostility and indifference. Book titles like *unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* and *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* abound, filled with details about followers of Jesus who retain faith but abandon ecclesial identity due to wounds, disagreement, disillusionment, and apathy. If for no other reason than the sheer numbers of absconding congregants, it bears considering what worshipping communities might be and do differently in this current era. As outlined above, however, the Bible and the Spirit’s movement coupled with the voluminous work to be done on behalf of the Kingdom of God give ample rationale for the same consideration.

One theologian offering a decidedly novel approach to this issue is David Fitch. In his book *Faithful Presence* and elsewhere, Fitch proposes a meaningful alteration when a worshipping community has been “dislodged from its call to faithful presence”⁵¹ to God and thus to its participation in God’s activity. He outlines seven spiritual disciplines that can help a worshipping community to re-acquaint itself with being present to God, but his more profound insight is that in order to do so a worshipping

⁵¹ David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 30.

community must be local and small. To the latter point, he contends that “true community diminishes with increased size. There simply is no way to efficiently mass-organize thousands of people for the goals of community.”⁵² Mass organization of people toward goals of public policies or candidates are of course possible and often necessary for efficacy. But community, according to Fitch, cannot occur at a populous level, because the connectedness intrinsic to prayer, edification, support, affirmation, correction, and forgiveness requires people to know and be known by one another. To the former, Fitch appropriates Lesslie Newbigin’s rationale for election, which posits that in order for the good news to be spread throughout the world it must begin with a people to do the initial spreading. Fitch writes, “God’s work is necessarily twofold. God first is present and active in the whole world. But God also chooses to become present in and through a people locally. [God], in essence, completes [God’s] work in the world in the concrete lives and circumstances of a people through the real presence of Christ.”⁵³

The growth of reconciliation is thus outward from a smaller group toward greater and greater reaches. A common cultural avenue toward caring for others is often concern for those distant; for instance, 2019 saw huge monetary donations to causes as varied as the rebuilding of Notre Dame’s roof in Paris and providing health care to unaccompanied minors detained by Homeland Security in the southwestern region of the US. Noble though these may be, they are often performed at the expense of caring for those near, in part because the latter group might demand things other than financial contributions such

⁵² David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 42.

⁵³ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 33.

as humility, or forbearance, or influence, or sacrifice. In contrast to the person who, to use Rousseau's witticism, "loves the Tartars so as to be spared having to love his [sic] neighbors,"⁵⁴ Fitch proposes local attention for a worshipping community precisely in order to achieve the dual effect of edification within a community and justice and mercy outside the community.

It is to be expected that such an approach will dislodge a community from its typical way of doing things, and as such it is considerably less attractive than a thoughts-prayers-donations schema. Finding energy for service is often a difficult task; disruption and conviction within service raises that cost considerably. Yet a community focused on local social justice efforts as well as on itself as a connected community has the ability to bear witness internally and externally, to make Christ's "reign over the whole world visible" rather than solely a distant part of it.⁵⁵

A worshipping community that emphasizes community is, according to Fitch, the primary venue for a follower of Jesus to learn how to be a follower of Jesus, because it is the place where the uniqueness of such learning is embodied. One aspect of a Christ-centered community that is counter-cultural in a quietly severe manner is the connectedness outlined above, wherein individuals know and are known by one another. Activist Sarah McBride points out that a fundamentally important component of wellness in twenty-first century culture is being seen. "Each of us has a deep and profound desire to be seen, to be acknowledged, and to be respected in our totality," McBride writes.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 108.

⁵⁵ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 39.

“There is a unique kind of pain in being unseen . . . that cuts deep by diminishing and disempowering.”⁵⁶ While McBride commendably writes from a societal perspective, the community that Fitch advocates is one in which acknowledgement and respect are not the sole goals. As noted above, things like correction and forgiveness are also important, despite culture’s visions to the contrary, and being seen with regard to these areas is where the smaller size is so crucial.

Another current author who admirably promotes improvement on a societal level is Roxane Gay. “I have never considered compassion a finite resource,” Gay declares. “I would not want to live in a world where such was the case.”⁵⁷ For society to embrace such a posture is of course not so simple, which is why the local component in Fitch’s proposal for a worshipping community—as the primary avenue for God’s work and witness—is subtly yet strikingly distinct. Compassion can indeed remain non-finite in such a community, precisely because it is continuously receiving compassion from Christ. Where a community might find itself running out of such a resource, it can recall, alongside Father Daniel Berrigan, “Bonhoeffer’s insistence that community is primarily a gift of the Spirit, made of no human hands.”⁵⁸ In short, the small local worshipping community proposed by Fitch is not only countercultural but patently and uniquely able to participate in the Kingdom inside and outside itself through the Spirit’s guidance.

⁵⁶ Sarah McBride, *Tomorrow Will Be Different: Love, Loss, and the Fight for Trans Equality* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2018), 35.

⁵⁷ Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 300.

⁵⁸ Daniel Berrigan, *Ten Commandments for the Long Haul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 85.

The connectedness for which Fitch so convincingly advocates is already present within the local church, given the presence in the United States of the “amazingly greedy and cynical oligarchy” and political class which brooks “no interest whatever in either the rights of the citizen or the welfare of the poor,”⁵⁹ as philosopher Richard Rorty long ago warned of. That, at least, is the contention of authors Kwok Pui-lan and Joerg Rieger in their book *Occupy Religion*, where they utilize vogue economic and political terms to illuminate how a conspicuous linkage already exists between the bulk of the American populace, the so-called 99%. Their assessment is that the solidarity of this group regarding its plight can be leveraged to create what they term “deep solidarity,” wherein the 99% begins “understanding that we are all in the same boat” and is then enabled to “take each other more seriously in our differences while working together on alternatives that provide life for everybody.”⁶⁰ Rieger and Pui-lan phrase reconciliation as “transforming the world to make it just for all and sustainable for the environment,”⁶¹ thus taking a wide view of the areas which demand the Church’s attention. And they make the claim that “the multitude is all about relationship,”⁶² placing their sentiments squarely in line with Fitch’s small-worshipping-community model.

Central to the “deep solidarity” within Rieger and Pui-lan’s “theology of the multitude” is the celebration of differences, where the grouping of people is based solely

⁵⁹ Richard Rorty, “Fighting Terrorism with Democracy,” *The Nation*, October 3, 2002, <https://www.thenation.com/article/fighting-terrorism-democracy/>.

⁶⁰ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 63.

on class while every other difference is affirmed and retained. The weight of difference among the 99% precludes any project of trying to synthesize them into a uniform type, while the sheer enormity of the distinction between the 1% who benefit from what economist Thomas Piketty calls the “spectacular increase in inequality”⁶³ and the rest is enough of an umbrella under which to keep that difference intact. Thus is born a theology that pits nearly everyone against “unrestrained capitalism”⁶⁴ forces that marginalize, oppress, and impoverish and are upheld by the few who benefit at the top, for the purpose of bringing flourishing to everyone. Author Rebecca Solnit mourns, “In the time it takes you to read this book, acres of rainforest will vanish, a species will go extinct, people will be raped, killed, dispossessed, die of easily preventable causes,”⁶⁵ adding all the more galvanization to the work of expanding flourishing.

This theology is not against elites qua humans, but it is against the fallacies of meritocratic individualism that pervade the thinking of those who have been the beneficiaries of the modern global capitalist system. The idea of the deep solidarity of the multitude is aimed ever higher up the socio-economic ladder with the intention of reminding elites of the connectedness they too often ignore. To this end Carlson

⁶³ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, UK: The Belknap Press, 2014), 24.

⁶⁴ I borrow this phrase from *The 1619 Project*, lately in *The New York Times*. See Matthew Desmond, “In Order To Understand The Brutality Of American Capitalism, You Have To Start On The Plantation,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>. Note: I am well aware of the criticism, by numerous major scholars, of *The 1619 Project*, culminating specifically in its conflation of the American Independence movement with the preservation of chattel slavery. This criticism, in my view, has merit, but is singular and thus does not undermine the bulk of the project’s goals and successes.

⁶⁵ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 77.

approvingly cites political science professor Patrick Deneen, who posits that elites are typically eager to find ways of “freeing themselves from any real duties to the lower classes that are increasingly out of geographical sight and mind.”⁶⁶ Accordingly, the multitude can be coaxed into working together without strict religious or economic coagulation but, rather, with a type of shared humanity.

Rieger and Pui-lan make the important claim that it is through retention of differences that the individualism and “the commodification of everything”⁶⁷ (which includes relationships and connectedness itself) in our world today can be successfully overcome. Individualism, which author Allan Johnson notes “makes us blind to the very existence of privilege, because privilege, by definition, has nothing to do with individuals,”⁶⁸ is, by this logic, to a degree correctable because the circumstance is so widely shared. By uncovering the connection of class, Pui-lan and Rieger demonstrate the feasibility and the plausibility of the multitude working together to solve issues and bring about flourishing. This is especially true with regard to the lower echelon of the 99%.

Many a critic has noted how service of the poor is too often charitable rather than “liberatory,” to use the categories offered by womanist theologian Jennifer Buck.⁶⁹ The activist Angela Davis makes the case that setting aside humility and mutuality actually undermines one’s efforts at reconciliation and justice, claiming “you will always defeat

⁶⁶ Quoted in Carlson, *Ship of Fools*, 33.

⁶⁷ I borrow this phrase from activist Demita Frazier. Quoted in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed. and intr., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 137.

⁶⁸ Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 77.

⁶⁹ Jennifer M. Buck, *Reframing the House: Constructive Feminist Global Ecclesiology for the Western Evangelical Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 5.

your own purposes if you cannot imagine the people around whom you are struggling as equal partners.”⁷⁰ Rieger and Pui-lan’s idea of the multitude not only creates space for the connectedness of privileged and non-privileged because of the overarching view that these two categories are already connected, but furthermore gives room for the restoration of relationship through mutuality of shared struggle.

Mother Teresa once declared, “Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”⁷¹ Rieger and Pui-lan utilize the overwhelming financial data available to show that we do indeed belong to each other, not least due to the commonality of economic circumstance. Given the emptying-out of churches referenced earlier, such an approach to theology is both welcome and necessary. For an ecclesiology to prioritize the holding of differences rather than the subsuming into a peculiar grouping opens up space for a wide array of involvement where such differences “are understood to be a resource, not a deficiency”⁷² and the variegated nature of Christ’s Body is upheld and encouraged. It is to take a financial categorization, one that implicitly contains heterogeneity, and reinterpret it as a theological categorization⁷³ that falls

⁷⁰ Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, ed. Frank Barat (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 26.

⁷¹ “Mother Teresa Reflects on Working Toward Peace,” The Markulla Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://legacy.scu.edu/ethics/architects-of-peace/Teresa/essay.html>.

⁷² I garnered this perspective from Joan Wallach Scott, who delves deeply into the secular pluralism of 1990s-2000s France as it pertains to the Muslim community, ultimately arguing for the preservation of heterogeneous society over things like security and purity of culture or nationality. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 123.

⁷³ Cornel West points out that the Bible conspicuously does this: “Do not the Old Testament prophets and teachings of Jesus suggest, at the least, a suspicion of such unrivaled and unaccountable wealth and status?” Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 151.

squarely within the purview of the commonality of sinfulness (or, per Tillich and Hedges, estrangement) we see in the declaration of humanity's sinfulness in the middle of Romans 3:23 and elsewhere. Rieger and Pui-lan are thus creating a unity of shared characteristics within an association of difference.

Their highlighting of the unity of the 99% in a manner of retaining differences is especially helpful because respect for differences is required for fending off coercion and hegemony, especially when it comes to the rights and dignity of the poor and marginalized. Volf is quick to remind us that "in a pluralistic context" such as the United States in the twenty-first century it is mandatory that "Christians grant to other religious communities the same religious and political freedoms that they claim for themselves,"⁷⁴ and thus any categorization or association must include space for distinct characteristics. Rieger and Pui-lan cite Gustavo Gutiérrez, who "calls for an 'uncentering' of the church, such that it does not see itself as monopolizing salvation, but rather orients itself toward service to the people,"⁷⁵ entirely in keeping with the reorientation away from anything eschatologically overt championed by De La Torre, Rah, and others.⁷⁶

Given the shared situation, Pui-lan and Rieger set as their goal not an overcoming of difference or a subsuming soteriology but rather a flourishing for all that is manifestly evident and wide-ranging. This flourishing begs for creative approaches to the liberation of all people from suppressive systems. As they point out, "If another world is possible, it

⁷⁴ Volf, *A Public Faith*, xvi.

⁷⁵ Pui-lan and Rieger, *Occupy Religion*, 117.

⁷⁶ Rah, for instance, ruminates on the "American inability to move beyond Christian triumphalism" which he says "arises from the inability to hear voices outside the dominant white male narrative." Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 60.

is not enough for people to criticize the old institutions without creating something new and living in it.”⁷⁷

Part of De La Torre’s lament is that too often the Church feels itself in the precariat and therefore cannot conjure up imagination and energy to attend to those in abject need, and to this Rieger and Pui-lan offer a narrative goal of recreating the mechanisms of society to bring about deep solidarity. Where Hedges laments the balkanization of American society, Fitch offers a narrative goal of utilizing the local church to begin to create community that makes a stand against both despair and dehumanization. The Biblical lens of Brueggemann and others helps display how God’s Word under the Spirit’s guidance is specifically aimed at the work of reconciliation regardless of institutional being or custom.

Each of these thrusts finds an ecclesiological berth in the work of Willie James Jennings, particularly in *The Christian Imagination*. With a far-reaching historical lens, Jennings analyzes how distorted creation theology snowballed into the dehumanization of certain ethnic and racial groups. He scans a number of historical figures who took part in empire and colonialism, noting how the dominant theological thread became increasingly perverted by demarcating types of people, such as indigenous South Americans or Africans brought to the US by the slave trade, out of a full soteriology in order to maintain a “self-protective”⁷⁸ theology that includes anthropological tiers. Jennings excoriates such an “ever-tightening insularity of collective identity and collective

⁷⁷ Pui-lan and Rieger, *Occupy*, 40.

⁷⁸ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 89.

narration,”⁷⁹ which elsewhere he calls “whiteness,” because it separates people from each other in a way that elevates few and lowers many. “To speak of whiteness,” he writes, “is not to speak of particular people but of people caught up in a deformed building project aimed at bringing the world to its full maturity.”⁸⁰ This “building project” cohabitates worldly successes, such as money and power, with attributes of lighter skin tone and Western-leaning values in such a way as to make certain types of people a “standard” over and against others are “noted and particular,” with the result being that persons of privilege retain their privilege and lose their sense of the humanity of persons without privilege, and persons without privilege continue in their suffering and find themselves, as theologian Howard Thurman once mourned, “but a step from being despised to despising oneself.”⁸¹

Jennings sets out to uncover the roots of this ideology and to suggest recourse toward undoing it, and here is where his work dovetails with that of Hedges, De La Torre, Rieger and Pui-lan, Brueggemann, and Fitch. While the historical scrutiny he demonstrates is weighty and significant, it is a particular insight that he offers in *The Christian Imagination* that has sizable bearing on the local church in America amidst the rank worldwide brokenness of the early twenty-first century. This insight is incarnational intimacy—the intimacy of God becoming human as performative proximity, the desire of God to be with humans—that points us toward “a new way of belonging and living

⁷⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁰ Jennings, in *Can “White” People Be Saved? Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, eds. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramirez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 28.

⁸¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 33.

together.”⁸² Jennings’ argument is as simple as it is profound: if Christ is the demonstration of God’s ultimate goal of reconciling the world to Godself, which entails the removing all barriers or variance between God and humans, then this “trajectory of intimacy”⁸³ should be taken up by humans in their relationship to each other. The God who defines Godself by the project of intimacy with God’s beloved creation “presses with great impatience against the insularities of life” that we humans set up and maintain for ourselves such as those which are “national, cultural, ethnic, economic, sexual, and racial” in nature. Divinely tuned love of this sort “constantly gestures toward joining,”⁸⁴ and this has ramifications for the followers of Jesus that cannot be overstated.

As discussed above, the present period of history features a crisis of disconnectedness within and without America’s national borders in which “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” as Thucydides long ago put it.⁸⁵ Exacerbating this crisis are the political and media portrayals and explanations of it, a “fundamental disconnect between what Americans have been encouraged to believe about the world and the reality of global affairs”⁸⁶ which fosters division and hatred and a relentless forgetting of those with deepest needs who very often have their voices silenced. The Church, having often been what Brueggemann calls “chapels for the

⁸² Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸⁵ See Yanis Varoufakis, *And the Weak Suffer What They Must? Europe’s Crisis and America’s Economic Future* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), where he details the crisis of Brexit (among other global crises) through the lens of the fundamentally anti-democratic apparatus of the European Union.

⁸⁶ Cohen and Zenko, *Clear and Present Safety*, 6.

establishment”⁸⁷ where only certain subjects are broached that benefit certain individuals and groups, is therefore put on notice that any passive hopefulness for God’s intervention will not do, for inaction on behalf of the poor and marginalized defines the Church as precisely not the Body of the Christ who brought healing to the blind and paralyzed.

Thus the Church is called to commit itself to compassion and justice “not because we hope we will win in the end” as De La Torre advises, for such a hope in the bare face of “the absence of God in the world”⁸⁸ will engender only despair and desire for an inward-focused self-preservation. The distorting and perverting systems at work in our society are not things that can be overcome, as Hedges’ survey makes abundantly clear, and yet the Bible demands that the Church pursue reconciliation just the same, as Brueggemann capably exhibits. This reconciliation is directed outward toward the world but also necessitates inward attention toward Christ’s Body, and thus the Church is in need of a starting point and launching pad, both of which are provided by the local church for which Fitch advocates and the practices of which he elucidates.

Such a community does not need to strive for the glossing-over of difference, what philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls “interior unity, subsistence, and presence in and for itself,” because, as he observes, “being with, being together and even being ‘united’ are precisely not a matter of being ‘one.’”⁸⁹ Therefore the unity, described by Rieger and Pui-lan, of circumstance amidst the suppressive and stratifying systems of global

⁸⁷ Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence*, 32.

⁸⁸ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperOne, 1977), 71.

⁸⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 154.

capitalism is in fact bolstered by the protection of difference and diversity, breeding opportunities for equity and justice not permitted by a status quo eternally fixed and finalized and therefore directly and indirectly “detrimental to the most marginalized.”⁹⁰ All of this is theologically and ecclesiologicaly underscored by the person of Christ, the change “from the abstract Lord to the concrete Jesus” who in his personage is “the pivot from holy faith to holy flesh” and thus commends to us the same.⁹¹

This is a dynamic move, an act of being present. It is one based in time, and, as Rorty points out, “the price of temporalization is contingency.”⁹² Christ takes on flesh and places himself at risk. The Body of Christ, in the form of a specific worshipping community which gathers in a specific locale in a specific period of history, does the same. It is altogether reasonable to assume that the continued avoidance of personifying what Jennings calls the “intimacy” of the God-with-us by the local church is a firm instigator of the forgetting of the siblinghood of humanity so eloquently grieved by Mother Teresa, for as author Scot McKnight succinctly notes, “whether we admit it or not, a *local church really does shape what we think the Christian life is all about.*”⁹³

The contentions of these authors raise a number of issues which will be considered in the next chapter: To what extent does the intimacy of Christ draw a local worshipping community toward a radical, and perhaps even perilous, revising of itself in

⁹⁰ De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics*, 41.

⁹¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 92.

⁹² Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 23.

⁹³ Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God’s Design for Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 12, emphasis his.

order to be present with the Spirit's movement in addressing the needs of its time, place, and membership? What ways might Scripture drive a wedge between a worshipping community and its culture, gesturing toward joining those rebuffed from both culture's and soteriology's perimeter of flourishing? What sort of purposeful recklessness might be entertained when, as Joel Green writes, "the distinctive property of disciples is the abandonment with which they put aside all competing securities in order that they might refashion their lives and identity according to the norms of the kingdom of God"?⁹⁴ And finally, can a worshipping community thrive in ecclesial adolescence?

⁹⁴ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 567.

CHAPTER 3
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Present With God

To adopt a communal form with the idea of changing or discarding it according to individual judgment is hopeless, the despair and death of meaning. To keep the form is an act of faith in possibility, not of the form, but of the life that is given to it; the form is a question addressed to life and time, which only life and time can answer.

– Wendell Berry

Being present is intrinsically multifaceted, and for the purposes of this project has been cordoned into three sections, the first of which is being present with God. The underlying question afoot is twofold, querying who God is and who God wants God's people to be, because rightly attending and responding to God within a community is the very center of being God's people. Another way of stating the same is to query what God is doing and how God's people might participate. For God's self is manifested in God's activity, and we, as the Body of God's Son, are similarly identified as such by how we operate. As God demonstrates what Caputo calls a "*situated* freedom,"¹ wherein God's personage is limned in God's action, so we, as God's people, do the same. That ours is a faltering and fallible demonstration of commitment is, of course, part of the identity.

¹ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 52, emphasis his.

Setting aside, as noted, any process theology lens, it is simple enough to recognize that while God does not change (Heb 13:8) our assessment of God and ourselves does, as does our recognition of God's activity and our participation or hindrance.² In this way the questions of who God is and who God's people are called to be are not ones that can necessarily be answered with finality.

The threading of being and action in our understanding of God has much bearing on the congregation's understanding of who they are as God's people because the latter cannot be described without attending to how we act. The identity of the worshipping community is communicated in its participation in the Kingdom. Then to be considered is the balance of the two—NVC's understanding of God's activity and its understanding of its own corresponding activity—which translates generally into weighing principles or convictions against persons, as well as the practice by which to carry out or employ attention to said balance, or discipleship. It bears repeating that discipleship in this context pertains to the worshipping community, not to individuals.

What God is doing and what God wants God's people to be and do is a comfortable place from which to begin for NVC because many incidentals of its theological roost are already established by PCUSA norms. A theology of being present does not derive or arise by hypothesis but in a particular entity with its abiding characteristics, which, in the case of NVC, are in some measure in place due to the Presbyterian tradition. For instance, the congregation, generally speaking, believes in the

² Volf points out that the categorically infinite nature of God means our knowledge of God is never more than thoroughly limited: "Even our true statements about God—for instance, that God is good or that God is one—manifest as much ignorance as they do knowledge." Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 58.

Trinity, with never more than a moderate concern regarding the co-equal status or lack thereof, and very often a cavalier attitude toward distinguishing the various Divine Persons in parlance if not belief. It believes—again, generally speaking—in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, but neither are allotted much by way of mystical status or efficacy. Further generally-accepted beliefs are that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, with the congregation having little (if any) truck with errors or original manuscripts and other linguistic hang-ups, and that Scripture calls for an egalitarian approach, with the congregation allotting passages like 1 Timothy 2:9-15 either an antiquated or misused (or simply discarded and forgotten) status. While being present with God calls for a continuous re-forming of understanding who God is and who God’s people should be, there are boundaries provided by PCUSA that helpfully bar any number of issues, such as Docetism and patriarchalism and the like.

There are other PCUSA norms which are typically considered less established and to which NVC, along with many other PCUSA congregations, holds less tightly. The Westminster Confession, for instance, takes a fairly clear stance on predestination, and there are any number of confessional elements with which one might quibble within the Belgic or Heidelberg documents, to name a few. The current iteration of the *PCUSA Book of Order* allows a wide berth with such documents, calling the confessions “subordinate standards in the church”³ and “authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do.”⁴ While there is purposed direction, such sentences

³ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I, Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2014), xiv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xx.

notably lack severity and allow considerable room for differences of opinion and conviction. As I write, NVC's most recent Sunday worship gathering featured an elder whose sermon bordered on espousing open theism. While I do not completely share this elder's theology and would not preach in the same manner, her manner of giving voice to her conviction was quite typical and welcome.

In short, a traditional, Reformed version of Christian theology is represented in the PCUSA statements, but many specifics are open to greater or lesser degrees of interpretation. At NVC, this lack of forceful doctrinal stances has fostered a distinct lack of strictly observed agreement between congregants. As such, the worshipping community has housed persons with a not-inconsiderably wide array of theological perspectives over the years, ranging from thoroughly Evangelical to charismatic to agnostic to recalcitrant atheist. Reconciliation acts as an umbrella in this arena, with the vagaries of being reconciled to a non-determined personage of God accounted for by the vagaries of being reconciled to the rest of the worshipping community.⁵

One might question the validity of taking certain doctrinal components as given while eschewing or even rejecting others. One might also question the validity of beginning with the PCUSA considerations. After all, if a community is seeking to be present with God, should not that allow for all possibilities of theological disabusing or displacing? If a reading of Scripture is predicated on a willingness to be shifted and

⁵ Consider, for instance, this explanatory hypothetical situation: congregant *A* believes that God is calling us toward emotional intimacy with the divine, while congregant *B* believes that God is calling us toward intellectual understanding of the divine, but neither claims the full force of their own propriety because they are being reconciled not simply to God but also to each other.

shaped by the reading, could not this open a horizon of possibilities? Most importantly, how does a community make such decisions in a democratic fashion?

These questions are all by definition secondary and must be treated as such. There are many things with which NVC begins, and these starting points have effects. NVC begins with a denominational footing, and thus has polity, procedure, and profession of faith that reaches back for centuries. NVC begins with general agreement about Reformed theology, and thus has theology and hermeneutic of similar pedigree. NVC begins with itself at present—its form and function—and thus has a set of norms, derived from the past decade of existence, that accumulate in the current set of participants. NVC begins with that set of practices and rituals, and the exclusion of other practices and rituals is an indirect confirmation of the prioritization and adherence to only some denominational components.

Therefore, a primary component of being present with God is modification. To modify itself is to begin with itself, and, as such, any attempt to understand what God is doing and how we can participate in a present manner will include the current components of Scripture, prayer, communal discernment, the interaction of committees, and the NW Pasadena locale as the underlying facets of current practice and identity. It will underscore everything with reconciliation as purpose and propellant. There is no sense in moving outside these confines, because doing so removes the self from the self. NVC prioritizes reconciliation and continues to do so without issue. Were it ever to come into a scenario in which the community decided to change this prioritization—to rally around some other theological notion—it would be giving up its mandate and thus become something else entirely. The entity and the theology are inextricably bound.

These principles remain in place because the community has found that they provide enough structure to house the varieties of members, moments in history, and locales. Certainly there are only a very few who would hail faith in the PCUSA polity or denomination itself; but it has thus far proven to be both defined and malleable enough to carry the community through each new situation. Were there to be a future situation in which the PCUSA's development or strictures became a hindrance to the community's pursuit of reconciliation, serious inquiry would be mandated to determine a proper course of action. This is because reconciliation, as elucidated in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, is God's activity the cosmos through Christ. Contingent things—be they institutions or worshipping communities—are part of this in as much as they are part of the human experience, but things of this sort are not people, and God, as stated both directly and indirectly in vv.16-21,⁶ is reconciling people in the midst of loving the cosmos. Reconciliation in this sense provides the parameter within which to interpret how to be present with God; PCUSA participation does not.⁷

What PCUSA does provide is a form by which the community can make decisions on how to govern itself and how to worship, allowing for a dynamic operation

⁶ For instance, in the first part of v.19 Paul declares God to be reconciling “the world” or “the cosmos,” which allows for a broader understanding of God's project, except that the sentence ends by noting how this will include “not counting their trespasses against them,” which renders the whole sentence mildly if not wholly anthropocentric. That said, Scripture is confident in the entirety of the cosmos being, and needing to be, reconciled, evinced in such passages as “creation groaning” in Romans 8. The point here is merely that an institution such as the PCUSA is never more than contingent.

⁷ There is a long and sordid history of Protestant churches protesting their forebears and regulations, much of it contemporary to the PUCSA denomination regarding its inclusionary practices. While I do not agree with the decision of many of those Presbyterian churches to leave the denomination (disagreeing at the outset with their stance on inclusion, but more particularly because their action so often exhibits the prioritization of things like money and status), I do grant that, were there to be a church which felt inhibited from its mission by regulatory impositions, it would be acceptable, and perhaps even necessary, to leave said impositions.

whereby reconciliation can continuously be pursued without allowing particular principles or convictions to outweigh individuals. This is important, because underneath the architecture of whatever dogmas or principles we adopt or uphold is the conviction that God desires the reconciliation of the world and is therefore bringing it about through Christ, leaving no person outside that purview. Everything else being secondary entails that everything else is subject and thus somewhat malleable. In this way a worshipping community is present with God by continuously clarifying God as the reconciling force of the cosmos where each person is caught up within the scope of that project. The biblical understanding of the rigidity of God's love for the whole world and God's desire to see it reconciled—a principle or conviction—is not in question, and my point here is simply that no person—people against whom are being weighed principles or convictions—is left out. This is who God is as manifested by what God is doing, and therefore being present with God means being present to this.

By keeping the form—of the triune God advancing reconciliation of the world—and allowing the specifics to issue thence, the latitude for discipleship, or the practiced manner by which a community becomes who God wants God's people to be, is particularly wide. As read through the works cited throughout this project, however, discipleship is somewhat more defined. That is, in view of these authors discipleship must be a bracing advance of reconciliation at the expense of political, social, and spiritual stabilities. The emphasis here is on disruption for a community. Borrowing from author Arundhati Roy, the language of discipleship has often tended to accept a status quo that is intrinsically unjust – and then tries to make it more accountable while

accepting its contours.⁸ Being present with God disallows this by insisting that attention be paid toward the whole of God’s work of reconciliation. It includes a scriptural hermeneutic for a worshipping community that is susceptible to the movement of the Spirit in response to this work, with the possibility of a regular re-thinking of texts away from homeostatic individualism. As author James K. A. Smith comments, such re-thinking “should not . . . translate into skepticism about the truth of the Christian confession,” because “our confidence rests not on objectivity [about text readings] but rather on the convictional power of the Holy Spirit.”⁹ This convictional power should be ever-present, disrupting the often self-satisfied culture of the Church in the United States.

Thus discipleship broadens from internal and external postures that “call us to move beyond surface living,” “invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm,” and “urge us to be the answer to a hollow world”¹⁰—all deeply important things, to be sure, but, as De La Torre demonstrated, when mixed with the nationalism and imperialism of American culture, as well as its individualism identified by Jennings, offer scant avenue or even advertisement for escape from such systems—into any number of routes of embracing the Kingdom that joggle the worshipping community out of

⁸ Roy’s insight comes in the context of the social justice movements and overtures of governments: “The language of human rights tends to accept a status quo that is intrinsically unjust - and then tries to make it more accountable.” She makes this remark amidst her lament at the replacement of justice with a vague and anemic notion of human rights. She decries, “Human rights are fundamental rights, they are the minimum, the very least we demand. Too often, they become the goal itself. What should be the *minimum* becomes the *maximum* - all we are supposed to expect - but human rights aren’t enough. The goal is, and must always be, justice.” Quoted in Arundhati Roy and John Cusack, *Things that Can and Cannot Be Said* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 56-57, emphasis hers.

⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 51.

¹⁰ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 1.

individualism and homeostatic existence. Spiritual disciplines that are laudable, at least in the setting of a reconciling worshipping community, are those that further this effort. Reiger and Pui-lan make clear that the solidarity of existing before God as a people being reconciled extends immediately to the solidarity of existing as part of the 99% and thus struggling against oppressive systems and the “capitalist imperatives of competition, profit maximization, and accumulation”¹¹ that marginalize and pervert, and this extension from the theological to the economic draws God’s people into the reconciling work of dismantling systems of privilege and injustice.

Further, Fitch shows how even within this visualization of 99% versus 1% we do not in fact create enemies but rather reveal enemies whom Christ seeks to reconcile through disruption. “But the sword, we remember, is not a violent sword but the sword of [God’s] Word,” Fitch writes. “[God’s] very presence, accompanied by [God’s] persuasive Word, reveals enemies for the purpose of making space for the unwinding of antagonisms, for presence, healing, and restored relationship to God and one another.”¹² Where Fitch’s language is somewhat tepid, the thrust is no less forceful, in that, as noted, ultimately God’s reconciling work extends to the whole of humanity. The follower of Jesus does not create enemies any more than Jesus creates enemies.

Upon initial glance both Fitch and Murphy appear to be offering an infirm testimony against oppression, especially from the perspective of those who suffer, who quite reasonably demonstrate a full-throated demand for action and rebuttal of apathy. As

¹¹ Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 61.

¹² David E. Fitch, *The Church of Us Vs. Them: Freedom from a Faith That Feeds on Making Enemies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 156.

Hedges persuasively argued, it is far too often that the abused and oppressed are subjected to words and deeds of the bourgeois who bypass the current state of societies in yearning for some future improvement, whether eschatological or earth-bound. Those presently on the underside are right to demand attention and action. But the project of reconciliation undercuts vilification. Indeed, it must, for God's reconciling project defies exclusion.¹³ The authors of *Radical Reconciliation* declare that "The God of justice calls for a love that transforms relationships, societies, indeed the world,"¹⁴ making clear their belief that the interconnectedness of humanity is not simply God's aim but is indeed our mandate. The plaintive words of Baldwin, Mother Teresa, and others rebuff damnation.

Discipleship, as read in these authors and for this worshipping community, is couched in liberative and disruptive solidarity: disrupting the participation in systems of greed and imperialism, and liberating from anxiety and need. Being present with God is an avenue toward being disabused of one's less-reconciled self and desires. As 1 Peter 1:14 recommends, "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance," which assumes and necessitates disruption and liberation. This state of being present with God conforms one not to any ends or to former versions of oneself but to Christ-likeness. James Cone declares that "once contact with the

¹³ The actual practice of inclusion, however, requires nuance, as Volf makes clear: "Grace has primacy: even if the *will* to embrace is indiscriminate, the *embrace* itself is conditional." Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 29, emphasis his.

¹⁴ Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 154.

transcendent is found, a new existence in the world becomes possible,”¹⁵ indicating a new existence that reverberates with the incarnational intimacy and solidarity of Christ.

This solidarity, which God’s people are liberated and disrupted to, means holding fast to the theological conviction that God is reconciling the world to Godself through Christ. In turn, this conviction clarifies the classification of all persons as important within that work, and thus being present with God entails a wide-ranging and ongoing set of practices and postures to both “progress in the spiritual walk”¹⁶ and disentangle ourselves from hindering the Kingdom’s advance by acquiescing to “the inherent dominative mode”¹⁷ which allows some or many to fall outside the boundaries of value and dignity. Indeed, the conviction of Foster and each of his meditative forebears would be that disciplines of this kind would actualize discipleship that is a harmonization of Spirit-filled existence and Christ-like behaviors, and it follows that a worshipping community committed to reconciliation will not allow a purely stratified sanctification that accommodates a lack of presence with the community itself by promoting individualized returns.¹⁸

¹⁵ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 155.

¹⁶ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 10.

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 28.

¹⁸ It bears repeating that this project is focused on a theology of being present, which is predicated on a worshipping community. Comments here in no way hijack the import or intendment of disciplines centered on individuals. However, the conviction of a theology of being present is that it requires focus on God, neighbor, and the worshipping community, which does have ramifications for what disciplines and discipleship are or should be. Those ramifications, though, are outside the purview of this project, in the sense that the overall consequences of a theology of being present are not here being trotted out to a systematic realm, nor even to brinkmanship with other theologies more focused on individuals. As noted throughout this project, the focus is on a worshipping community, and a specific one at that. Discussion of disciplines and discipleship caters to that context, outgrowths being thence willfully neglected.

An insipid version of being present with God, wherein the community energetically tends to its eschatological security and its requisite emotional revels—divorced as this is from being present with God’s presence on earth (in the form of either the least or the enemy) as well as from God’s practice of reconciliation—and thus contents itself with a version of God who is—by virtue of having spoken finally and unequivocally about what is considered to be the only thing that matters, namely, soteriological guarantee—essentially aloof, is, as the inimitable critic Harold Bloom put it, “almost purely experiential, and despite its insistences...is scarcely Christian in any traditional way.”¹⁹ Bloom’s key insight here is that following Jesus in the immediacy of his first-century life, and, to an extent, historically in the Church, had ramifications for people in how they furthered Christ’s ministry, and a community’s spending of itself on itself is, simply, not the whole of it. Hart’s reminder, by contrast, is that “the verdict of God is on the side of the slave”²⁰ always and permanently rather than on the spiritually or economically well-off, and, going a step further, all humans, including the most deplorable, “are bound to one another in the sheer contingency of our shared brokenness, and the brokenness of our world, and our responsibility one for another.”²¹

Reconciliation encompasses those made in God’s image, and it follows that the people of God, in their bounded-ness to all people and given the “entreating” of the ministry of reconciliation (as Paul describes it in 2 Cor 5:20), are present with God by

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 37.

²⁰ David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 333.

²¹ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 144.

being continuously dislodged from their complacency and lack of creativity in order to seek the flourishing of all. A weighty declaration from Barth comes to mind: “Again it has to be said that the command of God, to the extent that it can and will be heard, is self-evidently and in all circumstances a call for counter-movements on behalf of humanity and against its denial in any form.”²²

A worshipping community which is present with God seeks to be present with those people with whom God is present, and no people are outside that condition. All manner of discipleship, or at least that which seeks to be present with God, follows suit, including disruptions via a dynamic biblical hermeneutic. All manner of spiritual disciplines, or at least those which seek to be present with God in this same manner, should engender such discipleship, for to do otherwise is to set God in a removed, albeit elevated, position which—by definition—defies God’s presence.

Present With Community

If you are only for yourself, you cease to be a real human being, and you become no longer a who, but a what.

– Louis Kaplan

the world is not a pleasant place / to be without / someone to hold and be held by

– Nikki Giovanni

A worshipping community includes people of differing backgrounds, beliefs, expectations, personalities, opinions, and temperaments, and to be present with such a group means keeping space open for those elements to be brought to bear on the proceedings. As Jennings clarified, the work of intimacy, of being with and for each

²² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4*, trans. A. T. Mackay et al, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York, T&T Clark International, 2004), 544.

other, within a worshipping community of such diversity is founded on the example of Jesus, whose “central trajectory . . . [was] a life of joining, connection, and intimacy.”²³ There are two essential components of being present with the community: collectivism and de-centralization. Both are versions of attentiveness to the differing aspects of the community’s individuals amidst upkeep of the community as a whole, and both are critically important if the community is to be responsive to itself. This is particularly true of a worshipping community premised on reconciliation, which includes reconciliation of a community to itself.

One of the key insights from Fitch’s *Faithful Presence* is that God works not in history or in global movements but in the lives of a local worshipping community. In this sense it is the Sunday worship gathering which forms the worshipping community to be the reconciling presence to itself and then to the local community. From there it is clear that in order for followers of Jesus to have any kind of connection between the Christ-centered formation that happens during Sunday worship and their everyday lives the latter must be brought to bear in the former. Otherwise, our worship becomes a means to its own end, and, as Fitch warns, “we inevitably focus on doing the disciplines correctly, smoothly, professionally, and conveniently,”²⁴ as though spiritual formation can remain aloof from increasing one’s participation in the Kingdom. As Volf succinctly notes, “[w]orship of God is more about living than about thinking and speaking,”²⁵ and the sheer oddity of this even necessitating statement is matched by the typical distance within

²³ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 7.

²⁴ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 41.

²⁵ Volf, *Allah*, 110.

a worship gathering between one's "living" and one's "thinking and speaking" about God and God's people. It is important for the spiritual formation of a community to be deeply connected to the everyday lives and experiences of that community, else a disembodied, unsustainable formation transpires.

Of paramount importance in this realm is the dislodging of triumphalism from soteriology, theology, and ecclesiology, so as to pay attention to Buechner's "absence of God" in the lives of community members. Hope of redemption and resurrection is often not more than hope, and that at times even such devout hope elicits only disillusionment and bewilderment in the absence of any measurable connection to reality. One might "confidently hope that all will yet be well,"²⁶ as Lincoln put it in his "Farewell at Springfield," but hope and guarantee are impenetrably distinct.

A worshipping community does well instead to look for a nuanced version of triumphalism, which is perhaps best understood via the Psalms, where its rich expression is appreciably counterbalanced with real-world situations. The Psalms provide vital contrast to the contemporary Western Evangelicalism version which contains little to no balance, opting instead to claim that all is well even when caught in shortage or distress or the awareness of such in others. Many are the Psalms in which the speaker addresses the actual issues facing herself or her community in the form of complaint, lament, petition, and question, doing so alongside praise and declaration of faith and wonder.

Consider Psalm 60, in which God is depicted not as loving and compassionate but, in stark contrast, is shown to be outraged:

O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;

²⁶ Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 366.

you have been angry; now restore us!
You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open;
repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering.
You have made your people suffer hard things;
you have given us wine to drink that made us reel.

In these first three verses it is clear that the Psalmist's community and even the land itself is suffering considerably, which the Psalmist attributes to God being irate. Whether one agrees with that theological contention, it is clear that things are not going well for the Psalmist and she feels no consternation about saying so. Furthermore, the Psalmist allows the difficulties to have bearing on her understanding of who God is. One could challenge the validity of such malleable faith, that it might lead to capricious or trifling impressions, but this argument falls short by virtue of scriptural context and context alongside communal understanding and support. Regarding the former, potentially trifling or capricious impressions of God are part of the Bible's witness to faith particularly in the Psalms. More importantly, an authentic expression of theological angst, as demonstrated by the Psalmist, is biblically evinced, where it contains awareness of the realities of life regarding the self and the community and makes God the subject from whom we demand response, rather than ourselves or our surroundings which are so often unaccountable. Regarding the latter, a community's discernment is balanced both by its participants, who themselves are balanced by their various cohorts outside the community, and by its anchors in things like denomination and tradition.

Texts such as Psalm 60 depict God not as the impassive observer of a bracketed existence, an existence which could only ever achieve a piecemeal shoring up of oneself and one's community amidst suffering and hardship, but rather as the recipient of petition who can act and often manifestly does. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann abrasively

declares, “God is not yet so present that he is efficacious ‘all in all,’ which is what Paul expects for God’s coming kingdom (1 Cor 15:28). But God is already so present that he dwells among the victims and sufferers, comforting them through his eternal companionship.”²⁷ Assuredly warranted here is the assertion that not only does God dwell with “the victims and sufferers,” but God also in fact identifies Godself in “the victims and sufferers.” Enviroined triumphalism has the insidious effect of blinding the community to the plight of the marginalized and oppressed²⁸ inside and especially outside the community, which actually warps the image of God. Rah bemoans that so often “praise *replaces* lament” in the American Church, reinforcing “a cultural context that upholds triumph and victory but fails to engage with suffering.”²⁹ If a worshipping community cannot stomach giving voice to all manner of difficulty, let alone lament, it is disabled from being present both to itself and to the world, which means not being present with God. As such triumphalism needs to be disempowered and disassembled.

A Sunday worship gathering can include many routes toward this goal, including via any number of liturgical elements and creative activities. In such a setting an individual’s joys and concerns thus become the community’s joys and concerns, and the community is enabled to support and sustain said individual actively as well as spiritually. Additionally, as the joys of one person have the buoying effect on the

²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 185.

²⁸ This blinding is not always simply an inability to see, but is at times “the refusal to know,” which author Robin DiAngelo identifies as part of the “white fragility” which accompanies and sustains systemic racism. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 50.

²⁹ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 66, emphasis his.

concerns of another person, so the opposite is also true, in that the concerns of an individual dilute the joys of others in helpful ways. Rah notes that there is often reconciliation that must occur between those who are experiencing joy and abundant life and those who are experiencing suffering and difficulty, much the same as the reconciliation Hedges demands of the 1% toward the 99%. Ruminating on the book of Lamentations, Rah claims, “Lament calls us to examine the work of reconciliation between those who live under suffering with those who live in celebration. Lamentations challenges our celebratory assumptions with the reality of suffering.”³⁰ For a community to be reconciled to itself, this aspect is crucial.

Furthermore, if a community anchors its prayer with eschatological security, it is difficult to imagine individuals being able to express their concerns with fullness, similar to a person dealing with a difficult situation who declares “everything happens for a reason” and thus mollifies his or her own experience of that situation. A worshipping community, in order to be present with itself, needs more “wrenching the till-then from the ever-since,”³¹ as Rilke put it, gathering its effects—good and bad, weighty and uplifting—to itself and not shunting them off into a distant appeasement. Triumphalist focus on the eschatological has a silencing effect, because there is no lived situation that rises to the same level of importance as the non-lived salvation (eschatological salvation being, by definition, outside the scope of one’s life). As Brueggemann made clear in *Interrupting Silence*, the world contains any number of silencing systems and tendencies,

³⁰ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 69.

³¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Requiem for a Friend,” in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. and ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1989), 73.

and, unfortunately, “in all parts of the church, readiness for silencing and wounding are alive and well.”³² Silencing in the realm of prayer specifically and liturgy generally leads invariably to a separation between people’s lived experience and their spirituality. While eschatological security is assuredly not without its place, forceful and undue focus on it removes attention to the positives and negatives of the community’s lives.

Other liturgical components of a worshipping community being present with itself, by giving responsive attention to its members, include music, sermons, recitation of litanies or other readings, and a range of other activities and rituals. Regarding the former, most contemporary worship music is supremely triumphalist, whether pertaining to eschatological security, divine favor, internal spiritual empowerment, or the measure of God’s God-ness underscoring each. Few contemporary worship songs accept or allow more than a modicum of difficulty, disillusionment, or despair.³³ While the category of infinity, in which God alone abides, is certainly worthy of speculative adulation and colorful description, it is not particularly connected to our indisputably finite existence, and thus popular worship music’s failure to account for the variegations of life is quite a large failure indeed. This is not to say that worship music should not attend to the themes of God’s God-ness and the like; it is to say simply that setting aside the rest of life is a practice that is both unhelpful and uncompanionable. It is also not Christ-like. As noted above, there are only so many times one can say with the voice of the Psalmist that God’s goodness is of an infinite varietal before the Psalmist insists that one begin to comment

³² Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence*, 105.

³³ Lest this seem a luddite’s critique, it bears remarking that a good portion of the hymnary espouses much the same one-note theology. The African-American spirituals at least express a longing for deliverance and redemption, rather than pure satisfaction.

on the predicaments of herself and her community. As the poet Wendell Berry comments, “A creed and a grave never did equal the life / of anything.”³⁴

Going further, there are only so many times a community can say with worshipful voice that God’s goodness is of an infinite varietal³⁵ before it needs to demonstrate the effect of that goodness in concrete acts of loving its neighbor or environment (as God’s “good” creation) or self. To borrow apt words from Sandburg, “Even God gets tired of too much hallelujah”³⁶ if it is not accompanied by confirmation. Along with oft-cited and pointed New Testament texts such as James 2:14-26, Ephesians 2:10, and Romans 2:1-16, Jesus ably demonstrated this in a number of ways, perhaps most directly in his healings. For example, in Matthew 9:5 he heals the lame man in the process of forgiving his sins. Many commentators make the argument that the latter outweighs the former in significance for eschatological and Christological reasons. Among them is Frederick Dale Bruner, who notes, “The easier thing to *say*, of course, is forgiveness, because no visible proof is needed. It is harder to say a healing word because truth or falsehood can be instantly verified. But Jesus keeps the issue focused where he wants: on his seemingly blasphemous claim. Jesus will use the healing to teach his divine investiture.”³⁷ Bruner posits that the spiritual healing, in addition to the physical healing, is beside the point. In

³⁴ Wendell Berry, “Canticle,” in *The Collected Poems of Wendell Berry, 1957-1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 17.

³⁵ Hart points out that while declaring God’s goodness is an “undeniable assertion” in traditional Christian thought it is hardly a “startling” insight, the newest crop of elemental imagery in lyrics (such as oceans or fires) notwithstanding. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 56.

³⁶ Sandburg, “49,” in *The Complete Poems: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1970), 504.

³⁷ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 1: The Christbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 415, emphasis his.

this reading it is less a question of the forgiveness or the physical infirmity and more a question of Jesus' claim to legitimacy and peculiarity. Yet, even in the midst of what is thus Matthew's Christological contention, the bodily healing still happens. Its occurrence rails against any gesture toward a solely internal or spiritual reality. If a healed body was not in keeping with the flourishing of life that God desires for God's children there would be no need for Jesus to accomplish it, let alone Matthew to relate it. Similar instances of Jesus' attention to corporeal and social needs abound in the Gospels, from the wedding at Cana in John 2:1-10 to the brunch on the beach in John 21:1-19.

A severe reclamation of worship music into the realm of earthly existence is thus warranted. For all the songs wherein Gospel truths are espoused there should be a perhaps equal amount of songs wherein the varieties of the lives of those in the worshipping community are given a response, for the hope of the Gospel must be that we are in the midst of "a story which is not yet finished"³⁸ where God is coming alongside us in our brokenness – a story which is simply not a story if it is reduced to a set of connecting principles about God's God-ness and divine favor with no illustration of actual lives. Songs about the environment, about births and deaths and marriages and divorces, about faith and doubt, about faithfulness and avoidance, about war and violence and illness, about successes and thriving – whatever allows the community to be attentive to itself (and, of course, God and neighbor) is potentially useful for formation and edification.

³⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989, 12.

Fitch points out that many American Christians “never actually spend time being present to the lives of people”³⁹ who live in and deal difficult situations, and allowing those situations to be represented in music, let alone other aspects of liturgy, would go a long way toward addressing that absence. This is by no means to suggest that worship songs, or liturgical content generally, that espouse the greatness of God are somehow deplorable or intrinsically lacking. It is to say, rather, that their uniformity—of positivity, contentment, and triumphalism—is exceedingly lacking and thus exceedingly harmful in the divorce from the lived experience of the community.

Suffice to say, the liturgical activities of a worshipping community, be they music or prayer or readings or sermons, must continually maintain focus on who the community is. Keeping with Nancy’s understanding of community as “the community of *others*”⁴⁰ where no overarching entity draws subjectivity away from the members, a worshipping community that is present with itself is one in which the collective set of experiences inform and shape the collective experience but do not define or subjugate it. Moltmann has an apt description of this type of community: “We respect and recognize other people and those who are strange to us when we stop trying to make them like ourselves, but attempt to open ourselves for *their* particular character, and to transform ourselves, together with them, into a new community of people who are different from one another.”⁴¹ This collectivist approach to spiritual formation is a reasonable embodiment of the ministry of reconciliation in the realm of a worshipping community, for it allows

³⁹ Fitch, *The Church of Us Vs. Them*, 133.

⁴⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 15.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 19, emphasis his.

for reconciliation to occur in the individuals and between the individuals. Furthermore, such an approach works against the perception that differences are alarming, in part because it brings differences to the fore, keeping them ever in view and familiar. The authors of *American Philosophy* highlight an insight from activist Audre Lord, who identified problematic things like racism and sexism as partially pertaining to “an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one that is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self.”⁴² They note how “the inability to recognize the value of differences is in part a consequence of a lack of self-understanding.” This lack is countered by a collectivist approach to liturgy, one which allows for differences to be illumined, considered, and, where appropriate, cherished.

Implied above is a decentralized approach to leadership, whether in a liturgical or institutional sense. In order to accommodate the differing experiences of individuals, a community does well to hold an open-handed and adaptable posture for its liturgical contributions, though these contributions must be cultivated and framed for the sake of cohesion and intelligibility. Utilizing Rah’s aforementioned notion of reconciliation between the blessed and the suffering, it is clear that space must be allocated to not just the less fortunate but also the less polished and less pleasurable. Those in leadership positions within the worshipping community and, at least to a degree, those in privileged positions in various aspects of life, have the burden of creating space for those from marginalized groups or categories to be noticed, heard, and tended. As DiAngelo makes clear, “The dominant group always bears the greatest responsibility to change the

⁴² Erin McKenna and Scott L. Pratt, *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 250.

inequitable relationships.”⁴³ To cater only to the refined is to step backward into the triumphalism from which modern worship liturgy specifically and the Church generally need to escape.

Indeed, culture and Scripture are so at odds in this sense that it would be difficult to overstate. In a culture fueled by “likes” and “views,” the examples of Jesus sharing meals with sinners and tax-collectors and washing the feet of the outcast and the disdained—in short, spending time with those who are utterly mundane—stand in stark contrast. Additionally, in a culture riven with polemical and ideological statements and factions, where we are continuously encouraged to see and deride the speck in our neighbor’s eye, Jesus’ ability to speak truthfully and lovingly with those with whom he disagreed, be it Peter in Matthew 16:23 or the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22, is as rarified as it is remarkable. Both cases illustrate Christ as embodying reconciliation even as he brings the Kingdom of God to bear on worldly ways of thinking and being that, to cite Father Boyle, “jostles the status quo in constant need of conversion.”⁴⁴ Boyle, in making the case for what he calls “radical kinship,” notices how the status quo of our society “lulls us into blindly accepting the things that divide us and keeps us from our own holy longing for the mutuality of kinship.”⁴⁵ It is precisely kinship that Jesus pursues with those in his vicinity, from mutual teaching and learning in his youth (Luke 2:41-52, where he teaches as well as grows in insight) all the way to sharing a meal following his

⁴³ Robin J. DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White?* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 94.

⁴⁴ Boyle, *Barking to the Choir*, 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

resurrection (Luke 24:36-43), whereas the estrangement of humanity and the divisiveness of culture foster separation wherever possible.

This type of scripture reading, in keeping with the kind advocated by Brueggemann (and others), is one that unsettles a community in difficult though edifying ways. Furthermore, “by a kind of paradoxical logic,” this unsettling, engendered by our biblical reading, is “the only way to keep a thing safe from stagnation and ossification.”⁴⁶ Indeed, a Spirit-guided reading of Scripture will entail that “our traditions and institutions will be disrupted and disturbed, not to mention our proprietary definitions of who ‘belongs’ and who doesn’t.”⁴⁷ A worshipping community that is present with itself will constantly wrestle with not simply who belongs within the community but, more specifically, whose perspective is given credence and platform, not for the sake of whimsy or ineptitude but because Jesus stringently demonstrates that both the high and the low matter and warrant attention. The model of Christ is to lend attention to the lowest (the children in Matthew 19:13-15, the woman at the well in John 4:7-30) as well as to the highest (the religious rulers in Matthew 23:13-36, the secular rulers in John 18:28-38), with reconciling word and behavior ever in place.

The divisiveness of culture in America mourned by Hedges is currently being heightened by the media, as Cohen and Zenko detailed. Of the same opinion is journalist Matt Taibbi, who rigorously documents how news organizations strive to increase tensions and disputes between various facets of the population in order to increase

⁴⁶ Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 142.

⁴⁷ Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God is Undocumented: Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 35.

viewership and requisite ad revenue.⁴⁸ Taibbi diagnoses the current media culture with cold accuracy: “After generations of doing the opposite, when unity and conformity were more profitable, now the primary product the news media sells is division.”⁴⁹ Unsettling as this is, Taibbi then pushes further, noting how it is not simply division that is being sold for profit, but in fact the prioritization of conflict and division, such that all other issues, important or not, sink in our estimation and consciousness. “The schism *is* the conventional wisdom,” Taibbi writes. “Making the culture war the center of everyone’s universe is job one”⁵⁰ as far as the media is concerned. Conflicts, and the hyping of conflicts, condition followers of Jesus to ignore not just the poor and weak but even those on the opposite side of one’s privilege or perspective. In view of this systemic problem, it is all the more important for a worshipping community to take pains to give voice to those on the margins of fortune or charm within the community.

Such prioritization of the margins entails that a community cannot progress past a certain point of development, attaining a region of success where questions have been answered and difficulties have been surmounted or where individuals have become more sophisticated. Taibbi points out how the media, by being interested in vociferous and acrimonious pomp and circumstance, leaves itself and its subscribers no place from which to be interested in complicated matters. He writes, “The time to start worrying

⁴⁸ Further, Chomsky convincingly demonstrates how “the highly class-conscious business world with the ‘indispensable support’ of the governments they largely control” are united against solidarity and mutuality and have made it a primary goal “to undermine these subversive doctrines.” Noam Chomsky, *Who Rules the World?* (New York: Picador, 2016), 147-148.

⁴⁹ Matt Taibbi, *Hate Inc.: Why Today’s Media Makes Us Despise One Another* (New York: OR Books, 2019), 41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80, emphasis his.

about the consequences of our editorial decisions was before we raised a generation of people who get all their information from television, and who believe that the solution to every problem is simple enough that you can find it before the 21 minutes of the sitcom are over.”⁵¹ Such uniformity and simplicity lends itself to easy consumption and requisite contentment with shallow perspectives, and, in the case of a worshipping community, the same kind of lack of complexity is the most calculable way to create a genial atmosphere in which no difficult responses are demanded and no difficult ideas are posited and which appeals to the broadest of audiences. Conversely, the intimacy of Christ, expounded by Jennings, requires a continuous revision of a worshipping community on behalf of the reconciliation of its members to each other, and, given the inherent peculiarity of humanity, such revision simply does not cease. In these parameters a graduation to a programmatic or smoothly-running system is categorically impossible for a worshipping community which seeks to be present with itself.

Church-from-below will always include the from-below elements, which begs the question as to what constitutes thriving. In a decentralized worshipping community, thriving means active engagement and leadership of myriad individuals. It does not necessarily include efficiency or progress, but, rather, insists on listening and attending to those on the sidelines “in order to accommodate [their] complicated passion.”⁵² Such decentralization furthers reconciliation of the community because it asks for the participation of the community in the reconciling process. Harkening back to Fitch’s

⁵¹ Matt Taibbi, *Insane Clown President: Dispatches from the 2016 Circus* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 106-107.

⁵² Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Vintage International, 2019), 230.

proposal that a true worshipping community is “a group of people” which “gather together and become present to God” and become able to “recognize [God’s] presence in the world” such that they are then able to “participate in [God’s] work in the world and [God’s] presence becomes visible,”⁵³ it becomes clear that within the worshipping community the prioritization of marginalized and sidelined voices and experiences is crucially important. For in this experience the community is then conditioned to be purveyors of the Kingdom which is uncompromising in valuing the least of these.

It must be said that any number of worshipping communities have chosen not to dwell on God in such a way as to dwell on what God is dwelling on, at least not as sketched here where a community seeks to be present with itself. All manner of disparate focal points are available and, more often than not, quite praiseworthy, with all due respect and humility to the great cloud of witnesses present and past. Communities have laudably sought to dwell on that “timeless set of propositions” (borrowing Newbigin again), Biblical originalism, proselytizing, healing, and myriad other single or multi-faceted pursuits. Certainly the choice of many predecessor worshipping communities to keep divine pleasure and atonement regarding individuals in dual focus is evinced in a great deal of the hymnody. However, for a worshipping community to seek to be present with God means, among other things, being present with God’s people, and this tack is thwarted when a community leaves God in an elevated, removed position, particularly if it includes a secluded understanding of who God is and what God is doing. Theologian Robert K. Johnston describes a problem with this kind of understanding:

⁵³ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 26.

The problem with traditional notions of general revelation that have been based in God's past revelatory action, not his present revelatory Presence, is that nothing fresh is seemingly "communicated;" rather, the knowledge that is garnered is simply "derived." But that is to say that such knowledge is not really revelation at all. It is rather the recollection of or human projection from God's past actions—God's past revelation—whether rooted in culture, creation, or conscience.⁵⁴

In Johnston's account the refusal or inability to allow God to reveal Godself in the present — the avoidance of a malleable, permeable theological understanding — is simply a mistaking of a previous generation's willingness to allow such revelation. Being present with God requires the dynamism of being present with the community, and it follows that being present with the community means attending to the community's experience of and understanding of both God and neighbor, which itself requires a decentralized, margin-seeking, conciliatory posture and approach. A worshipping community that is present with itself will therefore attend — in action, word, and worship — to all manner of members, with the consequences of such attention held as secondary to the work of being present in this realm. For, as Hauerwas and Willimon assert, "Christians believe the countercultural, peculiar claim that *through the Spirit God is active in history then and now*,"⁵⁵ and such a claim only works when discernment and appreciation of such activity is afforded to an array of God's people.

⁵⁴ Robert K. Johnston, *God's Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 189-190.

⁵⁵ Hauerwas and Willimon, *The Holy Spirit*, 23, emphasis theirs.

Present With Neighbor

I'd sing more about more of this land / But all God's children ain't free
– Johnny Cash

For Martin King, an affirmation of the oneness of humanity had to precede an acknowledgement of any form of particularism.
– James Cone

The desire for a community to be present with its neighbor is unruly at its core, because of the nature of those needs and the personage of neighbor. Parsing the concentric circles of physical proximity, relational connectedness, and economic and environmental adjacency is impossible, and to define someone as neighbor because they are located in and around NW Pasadena while not affording that label to someone affected by global capitalist systems⁵⁶ is obtuse. James Baldwin spoke about this often, espousing dismay at the inability of Americans (usually he meant white Americans) to acknowledge and accede their relationship with the rest of the world, let alone their relationship with fellow Americans who were ethnically-diverse. He wrote, “The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality.”⁵⁷ Hart makes the same point with gusto, albeit to somewhat different ends, declaring, “We cannot choose to cease to care for any soul without thereby choosing to cease to care for every soul to which that particular soul is attached by bonds of love or loyalty, and for

⁵⁶ As each of the authors surveyed here would attest, global capitalist systems are, by definition, predatory, in that they, as Chomsky succinctly notes, seek for “private gain, power, and domination, with the interest of the community and its members at most a footnote, perhaps revered in rhetoric but dismissed in practice as a matter of principle and even law.” Noam Chomsky, *What Kind of Creatures Are We?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 67.

⁵⁷ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (New York: Saint Martin's / Marek, 1985), 667.

every other soul attached to each of these, and, if need be, for every soul that has ever been.”⁵⁸ Suffice to say a serious contemplation of the mandate of loving one’s neighbor (such as Mark 12:31) is, from a global perspective, a humanity-encompassing task, and, confronted by failure or inability, we find recourse only in lamentation at one’s sinful participation in oppressive systems and De La Torre’s rationale for combatting said participation not because one expects to conquer it but because “commitment to liberative principles is what defines our very humanity.”⁵⁹ Illumined thus, it must be the case that whatever boundary one postulates for where one’s neighbor begins and ends is at best temporary and arbitrary.

Thus a community’s parsing of neighbor should include both a local, physically-proximate category and a national and international, physically-distant category. This distinction is helpful because it reminds the community of its presence in a neighborhood while also not losing track of the broader globe. Ideally this twofold approach would give the community the ability to have impact in social justice projects, presence in activities that bring flourishing to the neighborhood, and mutuality with others of differing class and status, while also maintaining awareness of greater societal and global issues, such as ecological destruction, predatory capitalism, and xenophobia. Being present to neighbor provides opportunity for small motions of justice and mercy in those arenas.

In this realm Fitch would propose that a worshipping community be unwavering in its local focus. He does this for a few reasons, all of them well-intended, insightful, and

⁵⁸ Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 149.

⁵⁹ De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness*, 141.

helpful for a theology of being present with neighbor. First, a community that sets its sights on distant needs provides itself with far too much opportunity to slide into complacency given the distance between oneself and the world's problems (the modish phrase "thoughts and prayers" here comes to mind). Fitch laments that too often for worshipping communities "Justice and mercy is a government program detached from the church of God's mercy."⁶⁰ The local focus helps to disallow and disabuse such detachment. Second, Fitch notes the need for a starting point for God's work "in the concrete lives and circumstances of a people."⁶¹ A worshipping community has specific touch-points and areas of focus where it brings the presence of Jesus as Christ's corporate Body, and where it meets the person of Jesus in the lives of the needy and outcast (as Father Boyle mentions in a quote above). Third, local focus maintains mutuality whereby a community is not above or aloof from its environs, where God is at work "in the course of sharing everyday life with other people."⁶² This is, of course, reminiscent of Jesus' tendency to share meals, journeys, and social gatherings with all manner of persons in his vicinity.

Finally, Fitch has very little patience or interest when followers of Jesus speak fervently about who God is and how God's people should comport themselves but without any changes or costs to them "in terms of the privileges and affluence of their

⁶⁰ Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 100.

⁶¹ Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 33.

⁶² Fitch, *The Church of Us Vs. Them*, 75.

everyday lives.”⁶³ Local focus makes such elevated rhetoric⁶⁴ and bracketing of oneself from issues more difficult, and makes action more possible and likely. When Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes, “Change is made, not theorized, written about, or orchestrated by policy makers or researchers,”⁶⁵ he is insinuating the same ethic as Volf, that living is often more important than thinking and speaking.

The specificity of local activity is very often the best means by which to endeavor toward such change. While issues more broad, complex, and opaque are assuredly worthy of contemplation and discerned action—participation in globalism, neoliberal hegemony, and exacerbation of environmental destruction are three good candidates for focus of this kind—they cannot be attended at the expense of palpable, local expressions of Christ’s hands and feet, because Jesus, as noted, consistently made clear that the needs of persons in his vicinity were exceedingly important. Lofty social justice ideals have their place, but a worshipping community that is present with neighbor is not one which is frugal about practical application of modest or mustard-seed reconciliation efforts. Recalling again the examples of Jesus’ healing, such as Matthew 9:2-7, it bears noting that Jesus regularly met the needs of a single individual or group of individuals. In that instance it was the healing of the “paralyzed man,” yet Jesus did not heal paralysis generally; nor, for that matter, did he heal blindness, solve hunger, exorcise all foul possessions, or quiet

⁶³ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁴ Like Fitch, Roy assiduously condemns those who, “by shouting louder than everyone else” for various campaigns and principles, “very cleverly let themselves off the hook” from anything that might hinder a potential rise in their fortunes. Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 55.

⁶⁵ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 309.

all storms. His were always local, incidental efforts, and, as considered above, one's opinion of soteriology does not diminish their evidence in the Bible, which is undeniable and assertive. Presence with neighbor includes a scriptural hermeneutic which prioritizes plausibly meeting the needs of neighbor. Indeed, as Moltmann stresses, "Reading the Bible with the eyes of the poor is a different thing from reading it with the eyes of the man with a full belly,"⁶⁶ and so, for a worshipping community which is present with neighbor, its scriptural hermeneutic necessarily tacks accordingly.

Because different worshipping communities are made up of different persons, certain emphases and passions for being present with neighbor can and should develop, particularly as a community seeks to be present with itself. A single community in a local setting cannot meet or even be aware of all the needs of its territory, and to strive in certain areas that are in keeping with the community's vision and the neighborhood's circumstances is commendable. In many ways this is correlated to the turmoil of writers such as Hedges, Carlson, Cohen, and Zenko, each of whom decries the outsized focus of the US on the globe rather than on its own travails.

Here a momentary tangent has helpful bearing. As the United States' defense budget—the blessing of which is always a bi-partisan affair—is doled out to various projects the world over that are "promoting human rights" (which is "not just an element of our foreign policy" but, in fact, "is the bedrock of our policy and our foremost concern"⁶⁷) and policing (and, contemporary to early-2020, assassinating foreign

⁶⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 17.

⁶⁷ Quote from US State Department apparatchik Paula Dobriansky, in Noam Chomsky, *Interventions* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007), 121.

leaders), a case can be made for doing too much and thus doing too little well. This point sets aside the quality of such strategic defense actions, though it bears citing the poet Adrienne Rich, whose appraisal is that actions of this nature are ample evidence of “our country moving closer to its own truth and dread, / its own way of making people disappear.”⁶⁸ Other countries, by contrast, tend to limit their foreign military and defense interests, which, without delving into the merits of said interests, has, at the least, a twofold effect: tremendously less percentage of national GDP spent on defense, and the subsequently greater percentage available for internal expenditure. As noted earlier, each of these authors stringently discloses how the US’s international efforts are so widespread and continuous that they sap a great share of the attention and energy for dealing with national issues. Regional focus, for all of its pros and cons, at least offers the possibility of attending to issues lesser in number and distance.

Again, in order for a worshipping community to be present to its neighbor it must choose which areas to focus on and then be active in those areas. Here I am not advocating for an isolationist politic, or, frankly, a politic of any kind. The isolationists of the world yearn for as small a list of projects as possible, with that list being completely focused on their own preferred countries (and communities); this is neither my predilection or plea. I am, rather, reading an aspect of the literature review into the present section of theological reflection regarding a worshipping community which seeks to be present with neighbor. The authors recently mentioned are all aware of the US’s tendency to solve problems abroad while forgetting about problems at home, in keeping

⁶⁸ Adrienne Rich, “What Kinds of Times Are These,” in *Selected Poems: 1950-2012*, ed. and intr. Albert Gelpi et al (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 291.

with Mishra's quote from Rousseau above. An aspect of this is that too varied a focus disallows for the concentration necessary to address certain problems. One might further conclude that this component of US policy should convey to a worshipping community that it should focus on itself rather than on its neighbor, for the same reason—concentration of effort—as well as for a prioritization of the self over the other (fix oneself before attempting to fix others, as it were). However, this is not the conclusion that I draw here. Being present with neighbor does not mean a bifurcated prioritization of either self or other, community or neighbor; the project of reconciliation adamantly includes both. Furthermore, being present with neighbor means responding to neighbor in that neighbor's present circumstances, but it also calls for the community to be present with itself in such a way as to condition the response to the neighbor, so that community attributes like specialties and ardor are allowed to thrive. There is no sense in taking on projects of neighborhood justice or mercy that do not draw upon the makeup and mannerisms of the worshipping community, because properly being present with neighbor includes being present with the worshipping community itself.

Being present with neighbor includes the sobering assessment that a single entity cannot meet all the needs of its neighbors, and therefore focusing on a smaller number of needs allows a community to attend to them well. However, it also includes a reminder that those various needs do exist and cannot be ignored. As such there is a distinction to be made between action and attention. Fitch's emphasis on local connection provides ample avenues for a congregation's work in being present with neighbor in an active manner. However, in order to recognize the neighbor-status of persons across the globe or in local setting to which the worshipping community has no connection, a larger

awareness is, at the least, in order. This is where Fitch's proposal finds its limit and where, in the context of a worshipping community seeking to be present with neighbor, it should be amended. For instance, when a natural disaster occurs, such as the hurricane in The Bahamas in late-summer 2019 or the earthquake in Albania in late-autumn 2019, a congregation that willfully ignores the plight of the sufferers is ruling out their status as neighbors. This is especially true when such disasters are the result of globalized environmental destruction, in which the United States plays a large part. This does not mean mounting a campaign of support for each natural disaster; nor does it mean chastising a congregation for its ignorance of any such occurrence.⁶⁹ Similarly, when a political conflict occurs, such as the political coup in Bolivia in autumn 2019 or the never-ending crisis in Syria, the neighbor-status of persons affected by those situations cannot be in doubt (this is especially true when such conflicts are fomented by the United States⁷⁰). The questions of how a congregation can be present with such persons is open, but the question as to whether it should be present has been decidedly answered. The questions of which crises even receive notice are open, but the question as to whether crises at least warrant attention has been decidedly answered.⁷¹ Helpful guidance here is provided by a recurring point from Chomsky, that one should focus most intently on

⁶⁹ To emphasize this point I am purposefully choosing global incidents that did not get much traction in US media, and certainly did not garner a hearing at NVC in 2019.

⁷⁰ The afore-mentioned crises in Yemen and Libya will likely never be confessed, let alone righted. The situation is reminiscent, as so many situations of global conflict tend to be, of what Christopher Hitchens once said of Kissinger: "The subject awaits its magistrate." Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (New York: Verso, 2001), 126.

⁷¹ Being present with the community itself is an important influence here, because of the ability for community members to bring their considerations about local, national, and international issues to bear on the community's liturgical and non-liturgical activities.

things over which one has influence rather than on the actions of others. This is remarkably consistent with Jesus' words about the log and speck in Matthew 7:1-5 and his dismissing of the disciples' concerns about the behavior of others in Luke 13:1-5.⁷²

A worshipping community's attention to neighbor, given the endless sectors in which neighbor exists, calls for creativity and energy. A worshipping community's action on behalf of neighbor similarly calls for creativity and energy. Though paired in this way, both must remain distinct in order for a community, on the one hand, not devolve into the isolationism of caring only for itself and, on the other hand, not to devolve into failing to recognize the extent to which reconciliation encompasses the world. The separate though connected realms of action and attention allow a worshipping community to be present with neighbor whether near or far, to be present with itself and its members, and to be present with the God who seeks to reconcile both by dragging⁷³ all of humanity to Godself. It is the parsing of attention and action that empower the fundamental sobriety and hope needed to participate in reconciliation, what Howard Thurman (borrowing Tennyson) would call "the faith and the awareness that overcome fear and transform it into the power to strive, to achieve, and not to yield."⁷⁴

⁷² Interestingly, Hannah Arendt affirms the same sentiment but with the caveat that such a recognition should remain internally prompting but should not necessarily explicitly inform one's words or actions. She writes: "Wrong done by my own people naturally grieves me more than wrong done by other peoples... This grief, however, in my opinion is not for display, even if it should be the innermost motive for certain actions and attitudes." Quoted in Anne C. Heller, *Hannah Arendt: A Life in Dark Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 30-31.

⁷³ In various works Hart makes much of this atypical translation of ἐλκύσω, which I find persuasive and provocative, his gendered pronouns notwithstanding. Hart, *The New Testament*, 200.

⁷⁴ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 47.

Ultimately, a worshipping community that is present with neighbor is one that refuses to limit the category of neighbor, but is simultaneously shrewd in its ministrations because of the humility and actuality of its own finitude. It takes into account who the neighbor is currently, not relying on old forms, understandings, and activities but instead acknowledging what poet John Ashberry once called “the timeless energy of a present . . . which would have its own opinions on these matters.”⁷⁵ A consistent, present-minded consciousness that the ministry of reconciliation is God’s work, in which the Church continuously participates and to which it is continuously subject, is irremissible.

To summarize: being present with God entails being present with that with which God is present, which is both the world and God’s people; being present with the local expression of God’s people, the worshipping community, entails allowing said community to bring itself to the proceedings; and being present with neighbor entails thoughtfully and energetically giving attention and assistance to the world’s needs. A theology of being present is continuous in these areas, each of which influence the others.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Harold Bloom, *Possessed By Memory: The Inward Light of Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 434.

PART THREE

MINISTRY PRACTICE

and they were fighting . . .
or they were stabbing the ground for some prize
worth nothing, but fought over, so worth *that*, worth
the fought-over glossiness.

– Briget Pegeen Kelly

CHAPTER 4

DESIGN

Guidelines

Outlined in this section are the guidelines by which NVC can engage in an annual re-appraisal. Being a present church demands attention and action across the interconnected areas of God, community, and neighbor. That is the premise of a worshipping community's project of re-appraisal, and it extends from the present backward into the community's history and forward into the community's future. Everything that the community works through must have this temporal location in mind, the "struggle of memory against forgetting"¹ that paves the way for a future less stricken with corrupted power and idolatry, because a worshipping community that forgets its humble roots, seasons of difficulty, and myriad failures is one that will invariably prioritize its own importance, influence, and existence over and against the Kingdom of God and sanctification into more Christ-likeness. In truthfully and genuinely assessing its current and former faults and successes, as well as recognizing the potential for both in the future, a community is able to continuously engage in God's project of reconciliation in a humble and laudable manner. Furthermore, a community that fails to celebrate its

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Aaron Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 4.

places of flourishing renders it inert in recognizing and then highlighting future causes for celebration, be they ritual, incidental, or ordinary. Chomsky issues a healthy challenge for entities, one that is entirely appropriate for a worshipping community which seeks to be present with God, itself, and neighbor. Entities, he says, should be subjected “to a very reasonable challenge: justify yourself. Demonstrate that you are legitimate, either in some special circumstance at a particular stage of society or in principle.”² Chomsky goes so far as to advocate that should an entity fail at this, it “should be dismantled.” For NVC, if it cannot demonstrate pursuit and participation in reconciliation it should indeed be abandoned. Therefore, the presence or absence of reconciliation is the first guideline by which to re-appraise the community.

The goal of a re-appraisal—being a present church—does not call for momentous changes, or even changes at all; rather, the goal is reconciliation, its pursuit and participation. Change may or may not be in order. The annual re-appraisal is the means by which outdated, stale, or flawed thinking and acting can be addressed and necessary changes implemented, though without abandoning the form, as Berry recommends. Further, the junctural nature of a worshipping community which is present with God, self, and neighbor is such that any change or lack thereof that is decided via the Spirit’s guidance in a given year may in fact turn out to be a misstep, but such a misstep is both correctable (given the repeated re-appraisal) and—again, within the posture of seeking the Spirit’s guidance toward ever greater participation in reconciliation—unavoidable, and is therefore manifestly less intimidating.

² Chomsky, *What Kind of Creatures Are We?*, 63.

Reconciliation is the only non-negotiable, but remaining in the PCUSA fold should be at least relatively non-negotiable. This is because while the worshipping community could continue to exist and pursue reconciliation outside the PCUSA bounds, it would lack polity and the support of hierarchical resources, such as human resources and training. Re-appraising itself yearly might yield a trajectory of moving away from the PCUSA; if such is the case, the decision should be made over the course of a year, so that it can be thoroughly considered and, importantly, so that there can be a mutually-approved exit that cultivates reconciliation rather than dismissive or combative sensibilities. Again, if the goal is reconciliation then extricating a worshipping community from its denominational parent with animosity or prejudice is out of the question. Each other parameter can be malleable.

As detailed above, NVC has never had a season of pronounced diversity, so prioritizing voices outside the majority is important. As Christena Cleveland points out, “Regardless of ethnic demographics, every community is multicultural when one considers the various cultures of age, gender, economic status, education level, political orientation and so on.”³ Therefore each realm wherein a majority exists should be excavated for the lesser-represented voices. For example, at present NVC contains a number of families with children under ten years of age. Despite the considerable needs and desires of those families, which are important and must be heavily considered, it is crucially important to grant voice to members of the community who do not have (and perhaps do not desire to have) children. In this area, the advantage of doing the re-

³ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 21.

appraisal yearly is that the needs of families with children change fairly dramatically as the children grow and mature (a child of four has very different needs from a child of eight, whereas an adult of thirty-four has similar needs at age thirty-eight), and attending to these needs yearly helps them to not go unnoticed.

Discussion

The re-appraisal manual is not a top-down expository document filled with answers and directives. Nor is it simply a way for the congregation discern how to be present with God, neighbor, and the NVC community, for it is also in and of itself a practice of being present. The characteristics that inform that congregation's conduct inside and outside the worship gathering will deeply form the re-appraisal methodology, and the manual will be largely comprised of decentralized, discussion-based curriculum. The manual is not an expository document but rather a means by which to involve and accentuate the variety within the congregation.

The first tasks for this curriculum are to explain and examine the most categorical aspects of NVC, namely its denomination and its seed verse. This is a good place to utilize the language provided by PCUSA in the *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions*. Because some of the language is antiquated and opaque, efforts are necessary to illuminate and explicate the particulars of Presbyterianism and the Reformed tradition. Pondering the mission statement alongside 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 is important to reinvigorate the congregation toward reconciliation and also consider if the mission statement is still broad yet distinct enough to house all of NVC's activities and characteristics.

Given the weight of these two aspects of NVC—the PCUSA denomination and the seed verse and mission statement—inviting change to either should be expressed as possible but not likely or advisable. With regard to any other changes, sizable as they may be (things such as changing the worship time, worship location, pastor or staff, or committee structure), it bears keeping in mind that a change to any one thing will have distinct bearing on each of the others. As author Taylor Cox, Jr. points out, “Systems theory tells us that the elements of a system are highly interdependent so that change in one element requires adjustments in all the others if the system is to function effectively.”⁴ For this reason a severe recognition of which elements are available for change and which are not should be early in the re-appraisal process. For example, the worship space at Harambee is not currently (as of late 2019) available for use on Sunday mornings; thus a change to the worship gathering time would entail a change to location, which in turn would entail a change to the presence in the local neighborhood and any local social justice efforts.

As outlined in the introduction, NVC has gone through a few distinct iterations, generally pertaining to the three locations where the worship gatherings have been held. Part of the curriculum for the re-appraisal is a history lesson regarding where the congregation has been as well as who the congregation has been. Of particular note is the changing demographics of ages, especially given the current preponderance of children, because the history of NVC is marked by certain priorities and practices that may seem implausible or impractical given its current status. For example, the myriad projects

⁴ Taylor Cox, Jr., *Creating the Multicultural Organization: A Strategy for Capturing the Power of Diversity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 13.

aimed at neighborhood flourishing of the early years would be untenable in the current iteration of the congregation, demanding outsized time and energy for parents of young children. Also important is a recollection of the various goals and emphases pertaining to each iteration, and the rationale behind patterning those or pivoting away from them; this will be helpful for judging the current status and considering if and how to adjust.

As to the history, so to the present. Nearing the end of 2019, the NVC congregation has a number of needs and components that are unique within its own history, such as the new influx of college students and the waning connection to Harambee. Similarly, the current theological and ecclesial commitments should be scanned for things that have emerged such as patterns (such as certain language elements in the liturgy), successes, gaps or deficiencies. Taking stock of the membership, the attendees (always distinct from the membership), the liturgical content, the pursuits, the conflicts, and the demographics is very important for the congregation to be present with itself as well as with God and neighbor.

Bringing to bear the current state of local, national, and international political and cultural events is as much a means toward being present with God and the community as with neighbor. The discussion curriculum needs to allow ample time for awareness and reaction. While there are no such things as “neutral” facts, every attempt should be made to keep the ideological elements out of the conversation. By holding fast to reconciliation, it will be the political and cultural events which demonstrate overt need for reconciliation that commend themselves to the discussion. De La Torre notes, “In the same way that biblical interpretation is never totally objective, social analysis is

incapable of being fully neutral.”⁵ Because this lack of neutrality always tends, according to De La Torre, toward maintaining the comforts of the secure class(es), it is incumbent to keep the ministry of reconciliation at the fore during discussions about being present with God and neighbor. De La Torre goes so far as to advocate for “epistemological privilege” to be “given to the marginalized,” such that it will not only be their needs which are prioritized but in fact their perspective. Philosopher Hamid Dabashi proffers the same argument, noting how it is not only the needs of the marginalized that must be prioritized, but further the worldview of the non-privileged classes which demands a hearing.

Because the Church in the United States has for so long proceeded along the triumphalist route toward individualized salvation, such arguments are highly persuasive, and should be heralded in order to better be present to the reconciling work to be pursued with God and neighbor. Dabashi derides the “theoretical illiteracy” of keeping a single point of view in the main, disallowing the influence of other views which then forecloses on certain aspects of reconciliation. He advocates, from the perspective of the marginalized, for “allow[ing] the emerging facts from our public sphere to define the new regime of knowledge that will speak to our will to resist power and help change it to an institutional claim on that sphere.”⁶ While Dabashi’s sentiments are specific to the academy, his point is no less pertinent. The situations in the local neighborhood, and, where possible, statements from and presence of those involved, are especially significant

⁵ De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, 50.

⁶ Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 22.

for the discussion regarding being present with neighbor to proceed effectively. For this reason, work should be done prior to the re-appraisal session to ascertain from local neighborhood residents and leaders their perspectives and opinions on the state of local matters. Though highly limited, comments of this sort will cover considerable distance in being present with neighbor and demonstrating the desire and prioritization of the same.

Checklist

NVC thrives when its members and attendees are active and engaged in both Sunday worship activities as well as community activities focused on the community and the neighborhood. The congregation is simply not large enough to house or fund efforts apart from the congregation, like sustaining persons engaged in mission work overseas. In this way the congregation is bracketed from the ability to further a disembodied presence with God, neighbor, or the community, which, for all of the requisite restrictions (like the aforementioned mission worker), has the advantage of disallowing any movement away from community toward principles or causes. To borrow a phrase from Rorty, NVC cannot “attempt to find a sense in one’s existence by turning away from solidarity to objectivity.”⁷ The worshipping community finds said sense in its existence only through its commonality and shared effort. A community-immersion checklist is a helpful way to assess and impel such participation in the community.

As noted, the decentralized structure presently includes committees, and, assuming the re-appraisal has not opted against continuing to operate in this fashion, it is important to look at the committee expectations and goals. Doing so helps reaffirm the

⁷ Quoted in Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 17-18.

polity and hierarchy (for instance, the Generosity Committee makes well-considered suggestions regarding the worshipping community's budget, but the Leadership Team votes on the actual decisions, in keeping with PCUSA polity), redirect the committees in the event of areas lacking attention, and re-engage congregants into the committees by illuminating both what they do and what they have accomplished (especially recently).

The connectedness of the congregation is important for many reasons, not least of which is for the community to be present with itself. Activities such as dinner groups, leisure outings (such sporting events or movies), and Bible studies can be healthy ways for the community to foster intimacy and comradery, and, of course, many worshipping communities engage in such activities. Maintaining such activities, however, is subject to the re-appraisal, wherein the needs and desires of the congregation can be discerned. For example, if a Bible study garners robust participation for years and then that participation dissipates, it should perhaps be shelved rather than coerced into continued existence for some ulterior reason, such as publicity or forced reverence. Taking Chomsky's question of the justified existence of an entity to various aspects within the worshipping community is a helpful way for the community to be present with itself.

Decentralized leadership is important in liturgy and worship. Recognizing which congregants are involved might include gently suggesting increased involvement, but, given the nature of personalities, might simply be an area in which creative approaches to increased participation are appropriate. Some members who might be ill at ease in speaking or leadership roles can still be queried for their opinion and perspective via written or digital communication, highlighting the richness of the congregation's diversity. The goal is, as ever, to have a worshipping community which is present with

itself, and so to avoid what Moltmann criticizes as “the church from above:” that is, the situation of having a “church which takes care of the people, but in which the people themselves have no say.”⁸

One mistake of the “seeker sensitive” generation was to move children away from the “adult” worship gathering, which had the dual effect of removing the possibility of mutuality between ages as well as hampering the ecclesial maturation of children and the theological understanding of flourishing in adults (which suffers if children, to whom Jesus affords great value in texts like Luke 18:16, are left out). This warrants considering the community’s participation in the children’s program as well as the participation of children in the worship gathering and the non-Sunday activities.

Of the non-Sunday activities, activism is often one in which there is disparity in the percentage of who participates and who does not. A community-immersion checklist should consider who has been active in various social justice and political activities, so the community does not degenerate into a small group of zealots within a larger apathetic collective.

With these elements in place—the history, the accounting of the present, and the checklist for the future—the worshipping community should have the necessary components for taking stock of itself, its surroundings, the ways in which scripture and culture are instructive and influencing, and the guidance of the Spirit. In so doing the community will be better equipped to thrive into its next year of life.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, quoted in Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 125.

CHAPTER 5
IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT

Target Population

It is ever the misstep of worshipping communities in this period of history, where culture highly prioritizes individual choice, to rely on the patterns of attendance to which previous generations held: gone are the days when ecclesial attendance and faithful participation was mandatory or expectable. In the NVC context, this means not only an irregular participation in worship gatherings and other functions, but also a differing set of categories between attendees; some are committed members, some are committed non-members, some are non-committed members, and some display only the most casual commitment and attendance. Given the desire to be present with the community, this means being present with an ever-changing entity. For the annual re-appraisal, every effort must be made to entice all manner of NVC participant to take part, and then at the conclusion of the inviting period the proceedings should be allowed to simply commence with those present. This enticement will include all those within the NVC sphere, and especially those who have currently or historically demonstrated a measurable level of commitment. It will also fall far short of coercion. The elders, deacons, and staff should

be the persons who facilitate and lead the session, but it should also be made clear that they are participants as much as the laity.

Gathering

As the community sets about describing and discussing itself, one goal will be to clearly convey to the participants that their participation is both unique and important in the movement of the community itself. Noted above is the fact that the congregation does not exist outside itself as a disembodied entity or set of programs and principles, such as overseas mission work or weeknight Bible study. It is crucially important that the participants understand their own agency and importance within the community. Because the fostering of discipleship of the community affects the fostering of discipleship of individuals, the participation of individuals in discerning the tone and content of discipleship matters a great deal. Both individuals and the community as a whole should be encouraged to ruminate on what sorts of sanctification effects might be produced by participation in reconciliation. Another way of saying the same is to consider how the community might more greatly resemble the person of Christ in their being present with each other, neighbor, and God.

Pivot or Pattern

Each of the topical discussion sections will close with a chance for discussion of suggested changes and things to maintain, recollecting Cox's insight that each changed aspect of the worshipping community has bearing on other aspects. Some sections will lend themselves to opportunities for change, such as the portions focused on current cultural and political events and on current congregational demographics. Others will not,

such as the portions focused on the historical elements of NVC and on PCUSA polity. However, given that the re-appraisal keeps, as part of its mandate, a desire to be present with God, neighbor, and community in potentially radical ways, each section will include this space for dialogue about changes and retentions. The language for these discussions is the pivot and pattern language mentioned above. Pivot is a helpful substitute for change because it retains a recognition of the thing prior to the change. Pattern is helpful for the same reason; it contains a sense of a deliberate decision to continue with a particular aspect of the worshipping community. Pivoting decisions that are ontological in nature, such as denomination and mission-statement considerations, will be tabled for the Leadership Team's process after a pause of six months. Most pivoting decisions, however, will not rise to that level; though, in keeping with the Presbyterian system of government, wherein the elders are elected from the congregation but are not representatives of the congregation, decisions will ultimately fall to the Leadership Team. Because the dynamism and responsiveness of being present is the goal, the re-appraisal participants will be able, by democratic vote, to advocate for the creation or modification of new ministries, activities, committees, events, and practices, which in turn can be decided swiftly by the elders. Each of these sections will be anchored in prayer for, among other things, the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Participants will be invited and encouraged to respond by signing up on the community-immersion checklist.

Leadership Team Recap

Given that the re-appraisal session will be held annually in the fall, the Leadership Team will hold a special meeting the following spring to discuss the effects of the re-

appraisal session. A number of questions will be considered: Were new members enfolded into the community's relationship network and activities? Were aloof members re-immersed into active participation? Have new ministries and activities been established, and were the desired pivots successfully implemented? Have old ministries and activities continued to flourish, and were the desired patterns successfully maintained and reinvigorated? Is the core value of reconciliation readily apparent in each facet of the worshipping community's existence? Assessing the changes to or reaffirmations of practices will be highly useful in the Leadership Team's work of maintaining the community's engagement in the ministry of reconciliation.

While the previously-listed questions will frame the bulk of the Leadership Team's assessment, the questions regarding ontological changes will be discussed in detail and voted up only by unanimous consent. The assumption for the re-appraisal sessions will be that such changes, though available, are unlikely and unnecessary, but given their gravity it is fitting for a six-month waiting period to occur in order for them to be vetted, studied, discussed, and prayerfully considered. Furthermore, the gap between the changes being proposed and being decided gives the congregation ample opportunity to assess their merit and offer suggestions to the Leadership Team.

All told, the changes made to aspects of the worshipping community will be assessed by the leadership team at the six-month mark, and this assessment will then pave the way for the next re-appraisal session to occur six months later. This bi-annual focus will facilitate the congregation's ability to be present with God, neighbor, and itself, thus furthering its participation in and pursuit of God's ministry of reconciliation in the name of Jesus.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It should be understood that under the current system of representative government, the political parties can never accomplish any of these things, but they can talk about them, they can make them thinkable and conceivable once again, they can plant the seeds and rekindle the possibility of imagining future praxis - and they can reestablish these themes in their legitimate place in the public sphere.

– Frederic Jameson

And there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after.

– Seamus Heaney

It is important at the conclusion of this project to reiterate the distinguishing characteristics of Northland Village Church, particularly its size and mobility, as a means by which to excuse other congregations from the purview. A doctoral project focused on ministry is a very different thing from one focused on research, and in this case the goal was to thoughtfully engage in ministry, by describing the peculiarities of NVC and then prescribing recourse for its difficulties (self-derived though they may be) and rationale behind said recourse. NVC is somewhat unique in its small size, small budget, small history, small ideological affinities, and small moorings, and this slightness lends itself to refitting and adjustment because there simply is not much being refitted or adjusted.

The specificity of the project, in both its subject and its formulation, has a good deal of precedent, not least with Hauerwas' notion of Christian ethics as community-

based and junctural¹ – that is, chronologically specified, peculiar to a certain group, and relatively limited by the same. For Hauerwas, ethics prescribe a course of action for a population subset via a set of beliefs which themselves are subject to ongoing investigation and interpretation and are, in this way, always sequentially situated, in keeping with the Kingdom which, in his aforementioned words, has always “only begun” to be experienced. Likewise, here is a compilation of the contours of a theology of being present for this particular worshipping community, via an inspection of relevant authors, that enables scrutiny of its existence (or *modus vivendi*) and manner of doing things (or *modus operandi*) and a querying as to how it might live out its mandate into the future. Depicted here is a state of being present as a worshipping community’s way of participating in God’s work of reconciliation through Christ, with the ethics being tailored to this work as thoroughly and assiduously as possible. This project is limited in subject, but also in scope.²

A Theology, or Toward a Theology?

Rendered thus, this project outlines a theology that moves toward something; but it is not moving toward a theology of something. It conveys a theology of being present; it does not move toward that (or any other) theology. This warrants notice because a

¹ Hauerwas firmly maintains the chronological (and, therefore, contingent) nature of Christian ethics. He writes: “The narrative nature of Christian convictions helps us see that ‘ethics’ is not what one does after one has gotten straight on the meaning and truth of religious beliefs; rather, Christian ethics offers the means for exploring the meaning, relation, and truthfulness of Christian convictions.” In this sense, “the narrative nature of Christian convictions” means that ethics intrinsically progress forward chronologically (and, one would hope, beneficently). Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 90.

² There is, obviously, a great deal left out of this project, including much that has not even been acknowledged let alone broached, such as ecology, non-US settings, and the advances of digital existence and digital reach with the corresponding implications and boundary-shifts in worshipping communities.

vogue tactic of research-based work in both academia and the public square is to investigate a subject with such conspicuous humility as to only be moving “toward” something, be it theology or psychology and the like. One can imagine versions of this in my context. For example, rather than describing a particular worshipping community that is present in the ways enumerated above, one could declare this to be a project that moves toward an ecclesiology of presence. Or, rather than considering how a particular worshipping community can deal with its own re-fashioning, what Bishop Michael Curry would call “reclaim[ing] its soul and recenter[ing] its life”³ in God’s Kingdom, one could claim to be looking toward a theology of post-structural Kingdom embodiment. One could also add—again, with only the most contemporary sensibility and sensitivity—an ideological qualifier, such as globalist or womanist.

These moves, nobly intentioned such as they are, are, in my view, often a way of backing oneself away from one’s claims, in deferential recognition of their finitude and historical and cultural context, and, given the self-evident nature of such a recognition, are usually rather unnecessary. I wonder if such maneuvers, at least to a degree, serve to temper things like engagement and embodiment, things that Jennings insists are crucial to a community which seeks to follow Christ. Similarly, I wonder if distance—in a spatial, temporal, intrapersonal, and relational sense, which is to say the opposite of being present—is thus enabled and encouraged, by virtue of the fact that the aspect of moving toward something inherently accepts its own distance from the goal.

³ Michael Curry, *The Power of Love* (New York: Avery, 2018), 36.

A commonality in current culture is the taking of positions or stances that do not require much involvement, as Fitch, Coates, Mishra, and others bemoan. Social media posts are a primary culprit here, allowing people the ability to lay claim to a host of different breeds of tenet and ideology without any measurable undertakings or effects. Frederic Jameson points out this tendency, that very often the dilemmas and debris replete in “everyday life and politics” are divorced from “liberal ideals” (like multiculturalism), such that these ideals “sap the energies of any serious movement intent on radical reconstruction.”⁴ Leaving the tower to dwell in the difficulty, grappling both in theory and in practice with what author Cormac McCarthy forcefully called “the unanimous dark of the world,”⁵ is—again, as Jennings noted—exactly what Christ did, and I wonder if any opportunity to avoid doing likewise, or even making that possibility available, should be scrupulously shunned.

To a degree this is unfair, if for no other reason than modification, extension, or embellishment are very often the preferred goal of such moving-toward types of projects, rather than creation, recreation, or identification. A case could be made that moving toward something intrinsically contains the thing’s prior iteration which is now being revised. If one is moving toward, say, a multigenerational ecclesiology of place, it might appear self-evident that it is an ecclesiology of place which is being advanced and revised, in which case it is perhaps fitting to characterize the proceedings as moving

⁴ Frederic Jameson, “First Impressions,” *London Review of Books*, September 2006: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n17/fredric-jameson/first-impressions>.

⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 192.

toward a new iteration (in that hypothetical instance one might be moving from a non-multigenerational ecclesiology to a multicultural ecclesiology). Furthermore, humility about a subject is always meritorious. Yet the formula of “toward an *x* of *y*” ostensibly has an air of reticence about it, and thus anytime the *y* has pressing significance about it this formula itself immediately renders it less than urgent. I recall here De La Torre’s explanation of his three-book project (which he recounts in the preface to *Embracing Hopelessness*) which sought to begin not with considered activity but with being, and to then move to a consideration and rumination section followed by a final section of considered activity; this is, as he pointed out, an approach quite distinct from the expected praxis-theory-praxis model, because it starts simply with being. De La Torre’s work implicitly contained the urgency of being in and among the oppressed and marginalized, those who suffer from what César Chávez poignantly called “the twin plagues of humanity: exploitation and discrimination.”⁶ Setting aside any consideration of the content of De La Torre’s work, the very formatting itself spoke to imperativeness.

Suffice to say, my project is specific to NVC in and around the years 2019-2020—specific to a particular entity in a particular locale at a particular period in history—and thus I have no intention of moving toward anything, be it theology or ecclesiology or otherwise. I am—currently—engaged in leadership and life in and with this small worshipping community, and we already do things and are things. I have very little time or bandwidth to look toward a theology of being present; I have time only for wrestling with the implications of our mode of being and operation, inquiring whether we

⁶ César Chávez, “What is Democracy?” in *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, ed. Ilan Stavans (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 776.

are what we wish to be, whether it is possible to continue in this manner, and what considerations might facilitate sustained flourishing. Therefore, the findings of this project and the manual culled from those findings are germane to NVC and perhaps nowhere else. Which, as a ministry project, is all to the good. Should there be implications for other worshipping communities, they are only emergent, and certainly not binding, defining, comparative, or critical. My goal is not to follow Fitch's footsteps by offering generalized (and, of course, highly helpful) tips out of the subject matter; my goal is to help NVC figure itself out in order to thrive through a second decade.

NVC as a Present Church

I have contended that being present happens in three ways, each necessary and overlapping: being present with God, the community, and neighbor. These foci and their imbrication warrant review. First, in order to understand who God is, it goes without saying that a worshipping community must focus on God. To do this in a present manner, however, entails being focused on what God is doing. This focus on what God is doing necessitates focusing on that upon which God is focused, which is the reconciliation of the world to Godself through Christ. The world, of course, includes both the worshipping community and neighbor. Second, in order to understand who the people of God are in a local worshipping community qua the people of God, it stands to reason that the worshipping community must focus on itself. To do this in a present manner, however, entails being focused on who the community was, will be, and, most importantly, is. This focus on the worshipping community necessitates focusing on the actual lived experience of the people involved, which includes all manner of members and attendees and,

especially, the manifold arenas where God's reconciliation has yet to occur or even visibly engage. This means, of course, a focus (again) on God and the world. Third, in order to understand the world, it goes without saying that a worshipping community must focus on its neighbor. To do this in a present manner, however, entails being focused on the current situation of the neighbor—to any degree of circumference—and balancing that focus based on proximity and availability, as well as focusing on the historical forces which have brought the neighbor to the current moment. This focus on neighbor necessitates continuous attention to needs and an ongoing endeavor at meeting those needs, which (again) requires focus on the worshipping community, and also (again) requires focus on the God who is bringing about the reconciliation of the neighbor. By seeking a continual attentiveness to these interwoven, circularly-connecting subjects a worshipping community is required to maintain a posture of change in light of culture, scripture, the congregation itself, and the Spirit's movement. Thus a theology of being a present church intrinsically includes change.

As has been done throughout these pages, it is important to ground this project again in the actuality of a worshipping community, rather than, say, an individual or a network. It is also important to ground it again in subjectivity—that of discussing a specific worshipping community—else we find ourselves moving “toward” a theology rather than outlining it. Therein lies a sticking point of sorts, in that a theology of being present is, in fact, moving toward something, namely reconciliation, at best incomplete for all intents and purposes save in a singularly eschatological manner and at worst abandoned or hampered. For this reason it is important (again) to characterize NVC as a

present church, not for the sake of modeling but, rather, in order to show how a worshipping community that is present is embodying this theology even as it changes.

As noted above, NVC did not set out to be a small worshipping community replete with authenticity and relationship; these characteristics emerged and became increasingly internalized as the years progressed. Its core value of reconciliation, however, was deliberate at the outset, and ended up being as prescriptive as it was descriptive. This ministry of reconciliation to which NVC attached itself not only gave a project upon which to work but also entailed an ongoing formulating process of the community itself. Questions about modestly, and even recklessly, reforming itself are built into its existence, and the earnest desire for the Spirit to speak through the discernment of the Bible, culture, and location—to “heave” that speech “at the injustice and unrighteousness of [our] own time and of [ourselves],” to paraphrase Buechner⁷—in disruptive ways is a treasured value. This project, though, starts from somewhere, and has natural limitations, and therefore the boundaries of such reformation needed to be identified more than built.

Reconciliation’s Non-Defining Defining

Reconciliation as a root premise is the first component in setting boundaries. There are any number of other premises that are worthy centerpieces for a worshipping community. A speculative list could include: “making disciples;” “loving our neighbors;”

⁷ Buechner’s claim, derived from his attention to the Old Testament prophets, is scintillating: “These particular truths that the prophets speak were crucial to their own times and are crucial for ours, and any preacher who does not speak them in his own right, naming names including his own name, any religious person who does not heave them at the injustice and unrighteousness of his own time and of himself, runs the risk of being irrelevant, sentimental, a bag of wind.” Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 18.

or “modeling Jesus.” A cursory look at the websites of various churches yields innumerable variations on themes of this kind, many with fetching flashy graphics and branding and many more with deep, sincere, estimable theological leanings. However, most if not all of these worshipping communities contain, in addition to their mission statement, a list of beliefs or doctrinal positions to which the church ostensibly holds. Here is where one might find things like whether the LGBTQ community is allotted full inclusion, or women allowed at the highest levels of ministry and polity; here is where one might find views on Scripture or culture or Eucharist; here is where one often finds strict definitions of eschatology and soteriology (usually of the substitutionary atonement varietal).

NVC has heartily avoided a belief statement of this kind. While the website (and church documents) does touch on some of those items typically found in a belief statement, it is with a variation not of degree but of kind. The website contains views on LGBTQ inclusion (full) and women in ministry & power (full) but stops far short of taking positions on the Bible or theology, or even fleshing out those views in any systematized or supported manner. Rather, there is a good deal of language on outgrowths of reconciliation, which is where the distinction lies. In setting reconciliation as the central conviction, NVC has, for better or worse, allowed all issues of doctrine and dogma to remain in flux. For if God is reconciling the world to Godself, in a present and continuous manner, then all things are subject.

Being present, I contend, is the sine qua non of a worshipping community’s participation in reconciliation. Reconciliation, in a worshipping community setting, in itself contains defining features of being present with God, with the community, and with

the community's neighbor. As noted, these each interweave the others: to be present with God means responding to what God is doing, which entails being present with the worshipping community and its neighbor in the ministry of reconciliation; to be present with neighbor means responding to the neighbor's need for reconciliation, which entails being present to the community's proximity and availability for such response as well as being present to the theological conviction of this prioritization; and to be present with the community means addressing the diverse experiences of God and neighbor within the community via decentralization and collectivism.

This interwoven superstructure of reconciliation underscores its varied and connected projects, such as decolonization (of society), deconstruction (of theology), and decentering (of self). All of these contain change and movement—the same progressing force claimed and cultivated by Hauerwas—in keeping with the fact that reconciliation insists that God is moving the world from variance toward Godself through Christ. As such, a theology of being a present church is simply an exhibition of a reconciling community, of which NVC is a single iteration. Again, the project at hand is not moving toward anything, but, rather, is identifying and describing a community that itself is moving toward reconciliation.

Lingering Questions

However, it must be allowed that the theology cumulated from these authors in the context of this worshipping community could be mistaken, and that the community's insistence on reconciliation as the overarching project of God could be misidentified. Indeed, it must be allowed that a worshipping community which strives to be present

with God, neighbor, and itself is misplacing either emphasis or energy or both. Lest this project be remiss, the potential for inaccuracy (and, therefore, for a distinct degree of inanity) must be allowed. Hedges' fatalistic assessment of American culture, and especially American culture's capitulation to late-stage capitalism and its discontents (particularly the societal flight from community),⁸ could be overblown, such that care for neighbor and accommodation of divergent perspectives in a worshipping community are sensationalistic and unnecessary. De La Torre's appraisal, fleshed out over his multiple works, of the inefficacy and indisposition of Christ-followers to act like Christ could be misguided, such that eschatological certainty is the only thing of any measurable value (the person of Christ thereby utterly subsumed by the significance of Christ, likely a savored concept in some sectors of American Christianity). Brueggemann's advocacy for a peculiar scriptural hermeneutic which tolerates and even yearns for an upending of the status quo could be far afield of what the abundant life (John 10:10) God wills for God's people is supposed to be, such that a staid, contented existence matched by a corresponding staid, contented scriptural hermeneutic is to be preferred and prioritized. Fitch's fears of ideological divide and interior, airy discipleship could be tragically unimaginative and resistant to the modern age with its technological and communication advances, such that an embrace of modern cultural norms—especially modern classifications of inclusion and exclusion, modern individualized wellness, and modern consumerist mentality—is precisely where the Spirit is leading. Pui-lan and Rieger's

⁸ This should also include American culture's capitulation to the logic of the indispensability of capitalism, that it follows necessarily, and is in fact a kind of pre-determined distillation of, or procession beyond, other forms of economies. Economist Ellen Meiksins Wood uses the phrase "commercialization model" to describe this mode of thinking. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (New York, NY: Verso, 2017), 49.

calculations regarding class and heterogeneity could be naïve and excitably fearful, such that the brokenness inherent in all humans has actually only marginal variation, rendering divisions at best effervescent and at worst unctuously unreasonable. And Jennings' attraction to an inexorably incarnational Christology could be hopelessly mired in the hubris of believing that becoming like Christ actually means becoming Christ-like.

In short, the authors considered in this project could be wrong. Going further, a case assuredly can be made that God's project of reconciling the world to Godself through Christ is not, in fact, the main thing God is doing or has done, and, being thus rendered secondary, is by definition only nominally important and informative.

Yet the threads between the authors pull toward a ministry of reconciliation of God, the world, and God's people, and the threads of Scripture seem to indicate both the grandiosity of God's reconciling work and the specificity of God's people being invited to participate amidst the undeniable absence of the fullness of the Kingdom of God in the world. A worshipping community which strides in that direction and, in doing so, runs the risk of misstep and misunderstanding, is entirely within the Acts 11 tradition of discerning the Spirit's guidance and acting accordingly. Here the example of Dr. King is instructive, because although King was boisterously urgent in his work he was also punctuated by a recognition of the work's (and his own) finitude. Encapsulating the former, he once declared, "I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion."⁹ Epitomizing the latter, King elsewhere stated,

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," in Clayborne Carson and Peter Holloran, eds. *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 218.

“We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.”¹⁰ Like the church in Acts 11, a reconciling worshipping community must live out its convictions in the conviction of the Spirit’s guidance while recognizing the fallibility, frailty, and finitude of such a posture.

Alongside the company of authors and the overarching conviction, it must be admitted that the project’s subject itself could be mistaken. I have poured over the necessities and consequences of a worshipping community that is committed to reconciliation, but I have not questioned this community-setting, in and of itself. All the examination above is, in my view, coherent and cohesive regarding a community; but it perhaps does not hold the same logic if filtered to an individual. Yet that is precisely in keeping with the theology espoused in this project, which disallows the individual from existing in isolation. The preponderant views of the authors in conjunction with the Bible’s peremptory valuation of God’s love for the world and the call of Christ-followers to bear it out—having been blessed in order to be a blessing, as Genesis 12:3 names it—speaks to the paramount importance of the worshipping community. The individual is not at stake, because the individual does not factor in qua an individual in this depiction. The authors attended here convincingly illustrate that an isolated individual’s understanding of God is at best circumstantial and at worst self-serving and negating of the presence of neighbor, and they arrive at this through a disruptive, liberative Bible reading and the existential settings of global late-stage capitalism. The individual is, in a sense,

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Time to Break Silence,” in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 231.

meaningless as an individual in this understanding of God and God's Word, for God is not supremely interested in the individual but, rather, the whole of humanity, as the Bible unarguably bears out (though, as Harold Bloom humorously points out, "There is no point ever in disputing the Bible with a Fundamentalist"¹¹). This does not, of course, indicate a requirement for extroversion or social interaction; it is simply a declaration that following Jesus happens with a community, because Jesus is in the community and is also awaiting the community's attention in the person of neighbor with "frail forms fainting at the door" as the old Foster folk song has it. If one focuses on God, the understanding here is that one must focus on that upon which God is focused, which, among other things (like neighbor), includes not just one's fellows among the Body of Christ but also their focus on God. In sum, the theology here is ecclesial at its core, coherent as such yet also not seeking to be otherwise.

Ecclesial Youth, Adulthood, and Adolescence

NVC has always been in motion, but has yet to cross a threshold into a status of established existence, where place, personality, and personage are structured. The members and attendees are fluid. The location is never more than temporary. The manner in which liturgical and congregational activities are conducted and the theological content included and evinced therein are malleable and multitudinous. Illumined thus, this particular worshipping community resembles an adolescent. NVC's history is replete with fanciful whims, illogical impulses, short-lived habits, unexpected growth spurts, and emerging character traits, such that it is decidedly not in an ecclesial adulthood. While its

¹¹ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 74.

current iteration is still prone to such impulses, it also has a well-established set of rhythms and rituals that are reliable for the community, such that it is decidedly not in an infant or youthful ecclesial phase. Being present with God, neighbor, and the community itself requires that the community remain in this adolescent phase of maturation. The theological conviction of God's project of reconciling the world to Godself through Christ both implies and demands such presence, and therefore prescribes this adolescent existence for a worshipping community.

Re-Appraisal as Means to Continue Being Present

The manual for annual re-appraisal will assist the community in keeping itself attentive to what God is doing and what God desires God's people to be doing by allowing and encouraging any necessary changes to occur while maintaining its core conviction that reconciliation properly defines the means and the end of such responsive attention. It may engender severe changes, or it may bring about a minutiae of alterations. The re-appraisal manual will innately understand the limits of the worshipping community and, perhaps more importantly, the limits of participating in God's project of reconciliation, given the impossibility, so thoroughly demonstrated by De La Torre, of successfully combatting the estrangement and brokenness in the human condition. It will also furnish a yearly re-planting of the seeds of justice and mercy, of decentering from privilege and position, and of commitment to a liberative scriptural hermeneutic, not for achievement in those but for striving and definition, as Thurman and De La Torre phrased. Just as "no state or society can claim to have established human rights once and

for all,”¹² so no worshipping community can claim to have fostered reconciliation with finality, both because reconciliation itself defies such finality and because no worshipping community can fully participate.¹³ Conditioning itself to remain in ecclesial adolescence, a worshipping community is thus enabled to be present with God, neighbor, and itself in the reconciling work of God through Christ.

In closing, my hope is that the Spirit might guide NVC in its re-appraisal efforts, and that the community might have the confidence in the Spirit to move into whatever new iterations arise, because, as the poet Alice Walker keenly observes, “When we let Spirit / Lead us / It is impossible / To know / Where / We are being led.”¹⁴

A brief aside is relevant here. I vividly remember a class I took as part of my MDiv studies in the mid-2000s, in which the professor, Mark Lau Branson, spoke at length of an experience with church-planting in Oakland. He harvested and cherished much from that experience, utilizing it as a large part of our studies and consideration. Toward the end of the academic quarter, as a particular class session was nearing completion, a student queried what had happened to the worshipping community, not least since Branson clearly no longer resided in Oakland. He casually replied that the

¹² Weiwei, *Humanity*, 60.

¹³ De La Torre goes to great lengths to make it clear that “sin’s fierce war” (as the old hymn put it), which must be waged by Christ-followers “with deeds of love and mercy,” is abjectly not being won. I recall that Derrida harshly notes the bleakness of this current period of history, defying any contentions that history’s arc is progressing demonstrably well: “For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity.” That he made this comment in the early 1990s is all the more striking given the diagnosis of Hedges and others. Quoted in Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 48.

¹⁴ Alice Walker, “When We Let Spirit Lead Us,” in *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems* (New York: Random House, 2003), 169.

church had ended. It seemed clear that while he did not relish the demise of this community, neither did he passionately mourn its passing. Instead, it appeared he accepted it as a singular manifestation of the convictions of that erstwhile cohort at that time, the memory of which was to be treasured and learned from.

NVC is not dissimilar to Branson's Oakland project in this sense: it may continue to thrive for years or it might cease not long into the future. If the pursuit of reconciliation leads to a disbanding of the community, so be it. Valuing the leading of the Spirit in a continual position of ecclesial adolescence ensures that, as Walker sets forth, it will not be possible for this worshipping community to know where it is tending. In the introduction to this project, the point was made that the effects of sanctification on individuals are unpredictable. A worshipping community that truly values reconciliation should be no different. Being a present church—present with God, neighbor, and the community itself—is the only way in which to consistently and continuously take part in and be subject to God's work of reconciliation. The existence of Northland Village Church is an experiment in a worshipping community that is committed to reconciliation, to being led by the Spirit who changes, sustains, dissolves, creates, and rears; thus the future remains open, even to the possibility of the experiment ending. Being present demands the exclusivity of this faith, and the re-appraisal sessions will hopefully enrich, enact, and enable it. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Appendix A - Re-Appraisal Manual	
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Notes for moderator and elders:

- 1) This manual assumes 6 elders and a moderator, but can be easily modified should there be more/less in attendance.
- 2) This manual assumes the presence of a screen and projector or some way of displaying visual media. If none is available, all sections noted “*on-screen*” should be printed and made available to each attendee.
- 3) This manual in its entirety should be printed for each leader, including collated “*on-screen*” sections.
- 4) There is a handout (of the original mission statement and core values) that should be printed for each participant included below.
- 5) The timing of each section can vary from that proposed, but keep in mind the tendency to spend too much time/energy at the outset and not enough for the more substantial elements which come later.
- 6) After each group discussion, the moderator should give further time to field comments from the general participants.
- 7) Coffee and snacks should be provided, and lunch ordered/prepared and scheduled for approximately 3hrs after the start time.
- 8) Preparation is critically important! Each elder should read through the entire manual to familiarize themselves with its contents. Further work should be done by the Leadership Team as a whole or in part:
 - a. to reach out to local community members for comments regarding areas of need and thriving in the local Pasadena community, as well as input as to how NVC can practice mutuality and assistance.
 - b. to collect data on demographics of the current congregation, including students, youth, pregnancies, diversity (race, gender, orientation, age, disabilities), family size/type

PART I - Welcome (5min)

-Moderator-

Welcome to the annual NVC re-appraisal. Our goal for our time is to take stock of ourselves, our surroundings, and our understanding of God, that we might better participate and pursue reconciliation. We'll try to admit and mourn our mistakes, celebrate our successes, and sketch plans for our future. To do this we'll spend some time recollecting where we've been, including some PCUSA history, and especially what the past year has looked like. As always, the goal is for us to create spaces for reconciling relationships between God, neighbor, and ourselves as the Church. We'll plan to work through four main sections, take regular breaks, have many discussions, share lunch together, and look for ways of further involving ourselves in this community and its participation in God's reconciling work.

-Elder #1-

For us, as part of the Body of Christ, participation in God's work of reconciling the world to Godself through Christ requires reconciling our understanding of who God is, who our neighbor is, and who we are called to be as God's people. This cannot be merely a history lesson, relying on old versions of God or certain versions of neighbor. In a world of ongoing racism, misogyny, nationalism, militarism, and marginalization, our understanding of God's reconciling work will be multifaceted and will include the places where we take part in systems of oppression and of ignoring our neighbor and each other.

-Elder #2-

As we continue to seek to be a worshipping community grounded in God's reconciling work, let us listen to the Spirit's prompting and directing, and let us be ready and willing to change. With each discussion we'll leave room for potential votes for things like new ministries and new emphases. We'll also remember that the Leadership Team is tasked with leading our worshipping community, so we'll defer to their wisdom if they'd prefer to take decisions and votes back to their meetings for further consideration.

Throughout our time we'll read together verses from the Psalms and prayers from a diverse group of faithful Christ-followers from history and the present. Let's begin our time together by reading from Psalm 7:7 and then praying together using these words from a contemporary Benedictine monastic:

“Welcome” section continues.

PART II - History (60min)

-Moderator-

Most of our time together will be spent in discussion about who NVC is currently and who we hope to be in the coming year. First, though, some history is important, because many of the things we do are guided and designated by our history, our denomination, and our NVC-specific traditions. Part of the goal of this re-appraisal is to discern areas where the Spirit is leading us to changes and modifications along with patterning of current practices. In order to better make those decisions, it is important to recall who we've been and where we've come from so as to honor the successes of the past and avoid its mistakes (as best we can). It is also important to reflect on the structures that are in place due to our Presbyterian affiliation and our past decade of existence. We'll begin by going over some history, to remind ourselves of where we've come from so that we might know that things are the way that they are because of choices, which means we have the ability to make choices to shape who we'll be in the future. While this will be helpful in refreshing the memories of those who have been involved with NVC for some time, we hope it will be particularly helpful to those of us who have more recently become involved in this community.

Before we tackle this section, let's briefly ask for the Spirit to lead us in our conversation:

On-screen

Spirit of God, we ask you to guide our hearts, minds, and voices toward God's reconciliation of the world through Jesus. Amen.

-Moderator-

As we prepare to talk through our history, let's read together a declaration of God's provision in the past from Psalm 52:9.

On-screen

"I will thank you forever, because of what You have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim Your name, for it is good."

-Elder #3-

There are two fundamental aspects of Northland Village Church. The first is that we are committed to reconciliation, with our seed verse being 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. Before we get to the second part - the PCUSA denomination - let's read together our seed verse.

On-screen

"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of

reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

-Moderator-

Are there any aspects of this passage that are confusing, where some brief explanation would be helpful?

-Elder #4-

When the original launch team of NVC began meeting in the summer of 2009, they coalesced around the idea of reconciliation as a worthy centerpiece for the new worshipping community. Over the years this has remained durable and compelling enough for us to continue this worshipping community through times of difficulty and contentment. Reconciliation is an encapsulating idea - it seems to contain enough desirable theology and church aspects to satisfy everyone. For instance, some NVC folks feel strongly that we should be thoroughly focused on and premised in Jesus; for them, reconciliation keeps Christ in focus as the person through which God is reconciling the world. In contrast, other folks feel strongly that social justice is the most important thing; for them, here too reconciliation is sufficient because God’s reconciling of the world to Godself through Christ means a furthering of justice and mercy and our participation in such efforts.

-Elder #5-

The core values demonstrate how the early launch team members thought about what reconciliation might look like in practice in this worshipping community. Looking at them today, we might wonder if these should be modified, subtracted, or added to. This is particularly true of some of the language choices!

-Elder #6-

One thing to keep in mind is that, as we will see, reconciliation affects and informs every aspect of NVC’s life. Changing this central theme would, therefore, entail changing much of who NVC is and how it works. It would, in effect, turn NVC into not-NVC. Because of this, were the question of potentially changing our seed verse or our unifying theme of reconciliation to be raised, it would be handed over to the elders to discuss and discern over the course of 6 months. This is true of the core values as well, although these are clearly dated!

-Moderator-

Let’s take a few moments to consider reconciliation as our centerpiece, including thinking about what some other centerpieces might be. One question worth pondering is whether reconciliation fits within or overarches those centerpieces. For instance, if we’re talking about a healthy way of deconstructing and then reconstructing our faith, that goal

fits within our larger desire to reconcile ourselves to God. Let's also look at the core values to think through whether or not they still fit. As we dialogue about reconciliation, let's be sure to consider the language of "pivot or pattern" in our discussion:

On-screen

Questions for discussion:

- What are some different church mottos, mission statements, or seed verses that you've seen?
 - Of those, are any particularly exciting or compelling, or off-putting?
- Of the ideas that are exciting or compelling, do they fit within a central idea of reconciliation?
- If not, should there be discussion about changing or modifying the mission statement and/or seed verse?
- Looking at the core values, are there any that seem particularly relevant today?
- Are there any that seem particularly non-relevant?
 - Of these, do any need changing?
- What are places in Scripture that do/don't fit within the theme of reconciliation?

-Elder #1-

Now we'll turn to our PCUSA participation, including some of the history of the denomination. Many of us are only loosely familiar with the PCUSA, so let's take a moment for a bit of history about the denomination. In the 16th Century the Protestant Church broke away from the Catholic Church over many issues, including money, salvation, authority, and language. We should also remember that there were many places where the Catholic and Protestant (and Orthodox) Churches agreed (and still agree!).

-Volunteer-

"...in varying degrees Protestants broke with the Church of Rome. All rejected the authority of the Pope...Many preserved the hierarchy without the Pope. Even more held to the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. All esteemed the Scripture authoritative, but none would concede to the Pope the right to give interpretations to the Scriptures which would be binding on all Christians. Almost all observed baptism and the Lord's Supper, but few or none kept all the seven sacraments. Although in the nineteenth century it was to be revived in the Anglican Communion, at the outset all rejected monasticism."¹

"History" section continues.

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume II, Reformation to the Present* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 699.

PART III - Characteristics of NVC's worship gatherings (60min)

-Elder #5-

NVC has always valued decentralized leadership and diversity of voices and perspectives in both the liturgy and the non-Sunday activities. An overarching question is whether and how NVC is being present with our worshipping community itself. Largely this is achieved within the worship gathering. In preparation for this section, let's read together a simple reminder of God's faithfulness to us from Psalm 36:10.

On-screen

“O continue Your steadfast love to those who know You, and Your salvation to the upright of heart.”

-Moderator-

And let's repeat again our prayer for the Spirit's guidance and help:

On-screen

Spirit of God, we ask you to guide our hearts, minds, and voices toward God's reconciliation of the world through Jesus. Amen.

-Moderator-

As we consider our style of decentralization and diversity, let's reflect on a helpful quote from a 20th Century author on the benefit of diversity:

-Volunteer-

On-screen

“By ceasing to make our individual differences a basis of competition and by recognizing these differences as potential contributions to a life together, we begin to hear the call to community. In and through Christ, people of different ages and lifestyles, from different races and classes, with different languages and education, can join together and witness to God's compassionate presence in our world. There are many common-interest groups, and most of them seem to exist in order to defend and protect something. Although these groups often fulfill important tasks in our society, the Christian community is a different nature. When we form a Christian community, we come together not because of similar experiences, knowledge, problems, color, or gender, but because we have been called together by the same Lord. Only God enables us to cross the many bridges that separate us; only God allows us to recognize each other as members of the same human family; and only God frees us to pay careful attention to each other. That is why those who are gathered together in community are witnesses to the compassionate Lord. By the way they are able to carry each other's burdens and share each other's joys, they testify to God's presence in our world.”²

² Henri Nouwen, in Henri Nouwen et al, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image Books, 1982), 81.

-Elder #6-

Our worship gatherings have included a variety of genres, materials, and activities over the years. Some of these, such as the use of commentary quotes in sermons or communion by intinction (“rip & dip”) have been pretty consistent since NVC began. Others, such as community art projects or choral music, have been seasonal or simply infrequent. Here is a non-exhaustive list of our liturgical activities:

On-screen

Liturgical activities:

- meditative breathing exercises
- call/response prayers
- poetry
- creed recitation
- silent confession
- corporate confession
- Eucharist
- visual imagery
- film clips
- candle lighting
- artwork creation
- community song composition

-Elder #1-

One important thing to remember is the limitations of both the community and each individual who is part of it. Everyone’s time and resources are precious, so whenever ideas are put forward or plans are made it is important to remind ourselves that we only have so much energy and means. Furthermore, there might potentially be some decisions that have significance enough to warrant being brought to the LT for further sustained consideration.

-Moderator-

Here are some questions for discussion. One point that bears repeating is that we are seeking in part to incorporate the difficulties and doubts of each other into our worship along with the celebrations and places of gratitude. Just as the mourning, lamenting, and petitioning of individuals becomes the community’s mourning, lamenting, and petitioning, so we need also to encourage the celebrating, thanksgiving, and joy of individuals to become the community’s celebrating, thanksgiving, and joy. And again, let’s continue to utilize the “pivot or pattern” language as we think and discern together.

On-screen

Questions for discussion regarding the past year:

- Were the needs of the congregation given attention in and through the liturgical activities?

- Were the perspectives of the congregation allowed to influence the liturgical activities?
- In the past year (2019), there have been 17 preachers and 26 worship leaders and assistants in our worship gathering. What are the benefits and disadvantages to this method of diversity and decentralization?
- Should we consider changing in this realm?
 - For instance, should we seek for more/less diversified voices?
 - Should we seek for more/less decentralized power and decision-making?
- If persons of diversity of any kind (class, race, ability, etc.) were to attend an NVC worship gathering, would the diversity of person and theme in the liturgy provide a sense of welcome?
 - If not, what changes might be made?
- Did we highlight difficult themes and subjects?
- Did we celebrate and express gratitude well together?
- What are places in Scripture that encourage us to consider and utilize diverse voices and perspectives?

-Moderator-

Music has been an incomparably important part of our worship gatherings since our inception. As we seek to embody decentralization and diversity in our worship gatherings, it's important to consider our songs. Within the parameter of the past year, consider these questions:

On-screen

Questions for discussion:

- Was there variety of theme?
- Was there variety of style?
- Is the diverse experience of our community authentically represented in this music?

“Characteristics of NVC’s worship gatherings” section continues.

PART IV - Characteristics of NVC's non-Sunday-worship activities (60min)

-Elder #2-

In order for NVC to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, it is important to be present with our neighbors. An important aspect of this is paying attention to neighbor in the current time; understanding of the past and care for the future are important, but heeding the status of neighbor at present is important. A global perspective demonstrates that there is no limit to who constitutes neighbor. Therefore NVC seeks to be present to the local Pasadena community, the United States generally, and the world most broadly. It is important, in this discussion of being present with our neighbor, to recognize that our resources are limited in every sense, and that our efforts will often only amount to attention, which itself is highly limited. There is nothing gained by fretting about how small are the efforts of the NVC community; rather, this is an opportunity to consider how we have been present with our neighbor, how we might increase that presence, and, subsequently, how our theology is shaped by this presence.

-Moderator-

Before we tackle this section, let us pray together that God would guide our conversations by the Spirit:

On-screen

Spirit of God, we ask you to guide our hearts, minds, and voices toward God's reconciliation of the world through Jesus. Amen.

-Moderator-

As we think about how our worshipping community cares for the marginalized and the needy, let us remind ourselves of God's infinitely greater care for them with these words from Psalm 9:9, 18.

On-screen

"The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever."

-Moderator-

We are committed to being biblically informed, in our discussion and our action. Next to the verse from the Psalms we just read, here is another particularly relevant section from Deuteronomy 15:7-8, to be read by a volunteer.

-Volunteer-

On-screen

"If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your need neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it might be."

-Elder #3-

Here is a list of some notable local issues in Pasadena in 2019. This list is not exhaustive, so be sure to mention important things that weren't included:

- Protest of Rose Queen by Westboro Baptist "church" (2.25.19)
- School closures and debates
- 500+ persons experiencing homelessness in Pasadena
- Tenants' rights infringed
- Struggle for \$15 minimum wage

-Moderator-

We reached out to residents in the local NW Pasadena community with questions as to the issues that are most concerning for them and potential ways in which we as a worshipping community can participate and support, because mutuality and attending to needs has always been a value of NVC as it seeks to pursue reconciliation in the context of its city. Here are some of their statements:

On-screen

Include comments from local Pasadena residents.

As we consider those issues, those comments, and the many other issues not included in that list, here are some questions for discussion. When considering changes or new ministries or activities, be sure to use "pivot or pattern" language.

On-screen

Questions for discussion:

- What are places or people groups in Pasadena that are notably flourishing or suffering?
 - Of these, which seem most pressing?
- What are areas in the local community where we, as members/attendees of NVC, are complicit in systemic oppression or violence?
- In the past year, how has NVC succeeded or failed to address local issues?
- What are places in Scripture that encourage us to care about local issues?

-Elder #4-

We seek the flourishing of our local Pasadena community. An important component of flourishing is humility and mutuality; we do well to avoid "white-savior" actions and those which maintain distance between ourselves and those we would seek to serve and assist. Here are some of our outreach and social justice activities in 2019:

"Characteristics of NVC's non-Sunday-worship activities" section continues.

PART V - Community-immersion checklist (60min)

-Moderator-

Because NVC is not a programmatic worshipping community, it thrives or flounders largely based on the participation of the congregation. There are many ways of getting involved, some requiring great commitment and others where commitment is limited. As we go over these different aspects of NVC's life, please consider how you might want to get involved.

For our final Psalm reading, let's speak together from Psalm 90:17 a humble request for God to help us participate in God's work of reconciling the world to Godself through Christ.

On-screen

“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands - O prosper the work of our hands.”

-Moderator-

Each elder will share in a moment, but first let's pray a final time that the Spirit would be present in our conversation and our consideration, giving us assistance and guidance.

On-screen

Spirit of God, we ask you to guide our hearts, minds, and voices toward God's reconciliation of the world through Jesus. Amen.

-Moderator-

Each elder will now spend a few minutes outlining each committee, including what its goals are, what its meetings are like, when its meetings occur, and what it hopes to accomplish this year. Feel free to ask questions as they share. One thing to keep in mind during this time is that the Committees each have a typical set of tasks and responsibilities, but with new ministries and new events there are ways in which the Committees themselves are fluctuating. Help and participation are clearly needed!

On-screen

- Committees
 - Justice
 - Advocacy
 - *Door of Hope* meal delivery
 - Politics discussions
 - Community exchanges, simplicity sales
 - Participation in local social-justice events
 - Generosity
 - Annual budget creation
 - Internal community grants
 - Explanation of finances at regular intervals

- Oversight of spending
- Communication
 - Social media (Instagram, Facebook)
 - Website
 - Weekly email
- Children's
 - Volunteers
 - Children's curriculum
 - Art projects
 - Facilities management
 - Non-Sunday activities
 - Childcare assistants
- Personnel
 - Annual staff review
 - Compliance with state/local laws
- Liturgy
 - Music
 - Readings
 - Prayers
 - Leadership
 - Preaching
 - Art creation
 - Setup/teardown
 - Food/beverage

-Moderator-

Each staff member will now spend a few minutes outlining some areas they oversee in which participation would be welcome. Feel free to ask questions as they share.

“Community-immersion checklist” section continues.

NorthLand Village Church

Community Vision

This is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:18 & 19

Creating spaces for reconciling relationships.

Mission Statement

Reconciling the stories of the church, God and neighbor.

Purpose Statement

Participating in the fullness of life through God's ministry of reconciliation.

Vision Statement

Reconciling the stories of our neighbors with God's story through **COMMISSION**. We are commissioned with God to share in the gospel with our neighbors.

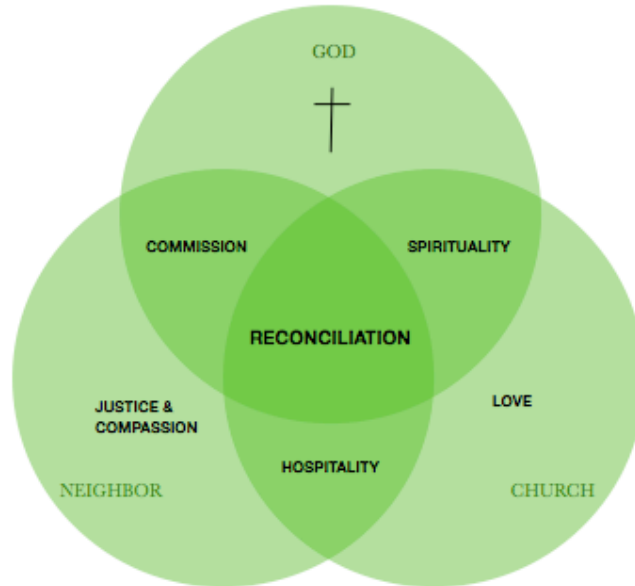
Reconciling the stories of our neighbors through **JUSTICE** and **COMPASSION**. We join our neighbors in meeting each other's needs through justice and compassion.

Reconciling the stories of our neighbors with the story of the church through **HOSPITALITY**. We welcome our neighbors into our lives.

Reconciling the story of the church through **LOVE**. We love each other by being generous in our relationships, time and resources.

Reconciling the story of the church with God's story through **SPIRITUALITY**. We are spiritually formed by God through worship and discipleship.

Core Values



Appendix B – Post-session immersion checklist and assessment

This document is to be used by the leadership team 6 months after the re-appraisal section. The goal is to assess its success, make changes, and be prepared for the next round of re-appraisal. The ordering of this discussion should follow a standard Leadership Team meeting, including prayer at the beginning and end and wherever else is deemed necessary.

I - Target population

- What is the status of people in these categories in the months since the re-appraisal session?
 - Members
 - Attendees
 - Aloof members
 - New attendees
- Did these folks successfully integrate into various Committees?
- Did these folks successfully integrate into various liturgical activities?
- Did these folks successfully integrate into various non-Sunday activities?

II - Pivot or pattern

- What changes were implemented, and what were the successes or failures of those?
- What things were patterned, and what were the successes or failures of those?

III - Assessment plan

Because the re-appraisal session is held in the late-summer or early-fall of each year, a proper accounting of its effects should be scheduled for the Leadership Team during the following spring. The form and function of the recap can be tailored to the Leadership Team's availability and schedule, since there are any number of issues which might be vying for time and attention.

The questions to be considered are basically in two categories, those pertaining to the community's flourishing and those pertaining to momentous decisions. Here are the questions to be considered in the former category:

- Were new members enfolded into the community's relationship network and activities?
- Were aloof or somehow distant members re-immersed into active participation, and, if not, are those members still being supported to the degree that such support is welcomed or allowed?
- What new ministries, activities, or focal points were established, and have those been successful?

- Is the core value of reconciliation, as described in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, manifestly present in the various facets of NVC's being and activity?
- Is there a sense that the Spirit continues to guide and accompany NVC in this season?

The questions to be considered that are more foundational in nature are as follows:

- What are the institutional, communal, and legal ramifications of changes?
- Does NVC's commitment to reconciliation require or lead toward these changes?

In keeping with the decentralization of power and decision-making, the Leadership Team's recap session is not meant to establish or create new things but, rather, simply to assess the changes which the congregation brought into effect during the previous year's re-appraisal session. It will also modify or prepare this manual to enhance the upcoming re-appraisal session that it might better fit and serve the needs of the worshipping community. Attention to the preparatory aspects of the re-appraisal session warrant particular attention, such as collecting comments from the local Pasadena community and investigating demographic and worship information.

The final question to be considered by the Leadership Team during this assessment is the very nature of the re-appraisal itself. Given that it is intended to be an annual event, does it make sense to plan for it this year? Is there enough energy and resources available for the elders to put on such an event? A worshipping community that is committed to reconciliation needs ongoing change and adjustment in order to be present with God, its neighbor, and the worshipping community itself. However, part of being present with the community itself is recognizing where and when there are limitations of ability and availability. If the sense of the Leadership Team is that a re-appraisal is not in order for this year, serious consideration should be given to other ways in which being present will be actively carried out.

A final thought on the subject of reconciliation is here appropriate. May the elders encourage each other to remember the significance of the ministry of reconciliation, given by God, which allows this community to take part in God's reconciling of the world to Godself through Jesus.

"A love of reconciliation is not weakness or cowardice. It demands courage, nobility, generosity, sometimes heroism, and overcoming of oneself rather than of one's adversary. At times it may even seem like dishonor, but it never offends against true justice or denies the rights of the poor. In reality, it is the patient, wise art of peace, of loving, of living with one's fellows, after the example of Christ, with a strength of heart and mind modeled on his."³

³ Pope Paul VI, in *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*, comp. Martin H. Manser (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 311.

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