

**BOOK REVIEW*****SUSTAINING GRACE: INNOVATIVE ECOSYSTEMS FOR NEW FAITH COMMUNITIES***

BY: SCOTT J. HAGLEY, KAREN ROHRER, AND MICHAEL GEHLING,  
EDITORS.

Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020

136 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-1-5326-8759-4

In 2012, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) created the 1001 New Worshiping Communities initiative, the goal of which was to develop . . . well, I guess its name makes that clear. Since that time, over 600 new worshiping communities have been launched. In the forward to *Sustaining Grace*, Nikki Collins, Coordinator of 1001, mentions the longitudinal studies into these communities that are taking place, as well as specific research into their sustainability. Some common themes have been identified in successful communities, but “a perfect formula for success” (xii) has not been identified.

*Sustaining Grace* includes contributions from “theologians, church planters, seminary faculty, presbytery leaders, and innovative pastors” (xii), all of which pertain to the topic of sustainability in faith communities. As a candidate for ordination in PCUSA with a call to form a new worshiping community, I ordered a copy shortly after learning of the book’s existence. The timing of its publication was fortunate, as the urgency of sustainability has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The book includes eleven essays across three sections, which include “Sustainable Ecologies for New Church Development,” “Cultivating Care,” and “Leadership Development in a Sustainable Church Ecology.” Scott J. Hagley’s essay, “Sustaining Grace,” introduces the topic of worship community leaders who are willing to shed “comfortable religious structures and forms” while meeting in “living rooms, pubs, and elementary school gymnasiums” (2-3).

He shares this thesis: “American Mainline denominational systems need pioneering, adaptive leaders to experiment with new forms of Christian community, to dream a new shape for Christianity identity in our present context. So also, pioneering adaptive leaders need mainline denominational systems to provide the support that might make their work sustainable over the long haul” (3). The other contributors share this belief in interdependence between existing congregations and new worshiping communities; both types of entities are needed for the long-term viability of the denomination. Existing structures provide a foundation and support mechanism. New communities offer a way forward that is not fueled by nostalgia or dependent on a “return to some era of hegemony” (5).

In “A Small Shift toward Sharing All Things in Common,” Karen Rohrer wonders if the story of Ananias and Sapphira is sometimes mirrored by the idolatry of the local congregation, in which “we are living as if the broader church ecosystem exists to serve each plant, rather than each plant serving the health of the larger church ecosystem” (24). At the same time, she states that “no communities should be instrumentalized or viewed as disposable [since] health must be understood ecosystem wide” (29).

In “Sustainability in God’s Good Order,” Barry Ensign-George considers New Worshiping Communities (NWCs) from a lifecycle perspective, understanding that some “may in fact discern that [they were] of a particular moment” (39). Nonetheless, he points out the advantage that they have from a structural standpoint, “deeply rooted in the Presbyterian ways of living out faith” (44).

Michael Gehrling stresses the importance of “truth-telling” (61) and spiritual practices in “Sustainable Churches Have Discipled Leaders.” This helps lead to “a whole community of siblings able and willing to provide a sacramental experience of Christ’s authority” (64). Aisha Brooks-Lytle wants readers to “be open to the imaginative ways we can communicate with God as we connect with one another” (78) in “The Stewardship of Prayer and Play.” In “Learning to Listen,” Kristine Stache discusses the unique calling of each worshiping community, how its mission extends beyond its walls, and ultimately how “it is about what God is doing in and

through us communally” (90). David Loleng tackles the topic of generosity, and how focusing on the disciplines of simplicity and margin help us “make space for the other, for God and for God’s kingdom purposes.” (96).

In “Democratizing Church Planting,” Michael Moynagh speaks of how “the Spirit is unleashing a twenty-first century way of following Jesus” (105), and how that can involve seeing “new worshipping communities as little planets around a ‘sun’ congregation” (110). Beth Scibienski articulates a sentiment that often presents itself when discussion of an NWC is introduced to a presbytery: “Innovation in any form calls into question the way we have done it in the past, and if we are calling the past into question, we cannot humanly help but take the question personally” (117). Jeya So writes about the contributions third-culture leaders bring to NWCs, which includes understanding “what it means to be a part of different cultures simultaneously and [how] to navigate fluidly from one to another” (122).

Anyone interested in the topic of worshiping community sustainability should find value in *Sustaining Grace*, especially considering the range of voices and perspectives offered by its contributors. It is a worthwhile complement to other 1001 New Worshiping Communities resources, which can be found at <https://www.newchurchnewway.org>. Whether you are familiar with 1001 or simply interested in learning about a sustainable future for faith communities, this book is worthy of consideration.

Kevin Long  
Lancaster Theological Seminary  
Lancaster, PA