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PUBLIC RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP FOR A NIHILISTIC AGE

SCOTT J. HAGLEY

Abstract

Public and prophetic leadership must navigate between the political need to cultivate shared values and the religious desire for worship. Drawing on Max Weber's lectures on politics and knowledge, along with William Cavanaugh's work on idolatry, this essay seeks a path for religious leadership rooted in love of God and neighbor, practiced through pragmatic politics and theological discernment.

Introduction

On the final weekend before the 2024 presidential election, the actor John Mulaney hosted *Saturday Night Live*. He brought back a popular sketch from previous hosting gigs called "What's that name?" in which Mulaney plays a clueless game show contestant who is able to identify famous people with ease but forgets the names of his wife and children. This time, the sketch starts out as before, with Mulaney easily naming several celebrities. When the picture of Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff flashes across the screen, he identifies the husband of then-Vice President Kamala Harris before gushing about her candidacy. "This is the most important election of my lifetime! Democracy is on the line!" Mulaney blurts out, unsolicited.

The game show host is unimpressed. He offers Mulaney \$300,000 if he can name Hillary Clinton's running mate in 2016. Mulaney stammers. He stares at the camera and shifts his weight. The host offers him a first name. Senator Tim Kaine steps onto the stage and offers more clues. Mulaney has nothing. "But you said *last time* that this was the most important election of your lifetime,"

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the host says. And just like that, *SNL* captured some element of public exhaustion on the eve of what would be a consequential election. It is not just that our collective alarm system is always engaged—there are so many things to care about so much of the time—but that such engagement leads to an overwhelming sense that nothing really matters. When every election is an existential crisis, they start to blend together. When everything matters all the time, nothing seems to matter at all. Important elections have a way of blending in together.

Religious leadership and religious leaders face a particular kind of challenge in North America and across Western democracies. We have this very real sense that things are unraveling, and an old order is passing away. And by old order, I do not only mean the very real challenges posed to democratic institutions by an illiberalism supercharged by social media algorithms, internet trolls, and artificial intelligence. I also mean the dramatic decline in religious participation, a weakened civil society, lower levels of voluntarism, thin social capital, and growing distrust of institutions.

As religious leaders, these challenges carry a particular weight because these unravelings have generated a great deal of religious energy. Like a nuclear reaction, the pulling apart of social bonds generates a great deal of heat, a burst of energy both difficult to contain and destructive. Political rallies become worship services, with their own liturgies, sacraments, saints, and devils. Global pandemics become a Rorschach test for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Political commitments become confessions of orthodoxy. America has become a new kind of burned-over district.

Here is the problem as best I can state it: at a moment when religious institutions are in decline and social trust is at an all-time low, we are left to contend with an age of religious enthusiasm and excess, and this enthusiasm actually feeds on the dissolution of our institutions. A vicious circle. A chain reaction.

In what follows, I will attempt to describe this current challenge by drawing from Max Weber's account of nihilism and William Cavanaugh's account of disenchantment. For Weber, nihilism lurks in the background of modern life. We live in a nihilistic age characterized by the loss of meaning and our frantic search to

recover it. For Cavanaugh, the modern search for meaning, cut loose from institutional religion and directed instead by state and capital interests, cultivates conditions for disenchantment, the migration of the holy from the religious sphere to politics, national identity, consumerism, the Green Bay Packers.

Given this particular framing, I argue that religious leadership can exercise its public and prophetic vocation by leaning into the contemporary search for meaning and directing it toward a praxis of neighbor-love informed and constrained by love of God. Such leadership attends to the where and what of religious leadership by orienting communities toward life with and among others (the where) as a practice that helps discern the communion-creating work of the Holy Spirit in their midst (the what). That is to say: by threading the needle between nihilistic drift and disenchanting enthusiasm, religious leadership for a nihilistic age cultivates the possibility of a shared and meaningful world at a critical moment of societal unraveling.

Nihilistic Times

When John Mulaney's character failed to identify Senator Kaine, the audience laughed in recognition. The existential stakes of the election—the most important in my lifetime—were placed alongside the vagaries of history, leading to an uncomfortable contradiction. For Max Weber, such dis-ease is endemic to the modern condition.¹ In Weber's account, scientific objectivity during the Enlightenment severed questions of knowledge from purpose, fact from value, means from ends, subjecting the world to the twin forces of disenchantment and rationalization.

Modernity is characterized by a series of breaks between knowledge and purpose, fact and value. Scientific knowledge can tell us how things work, but not what they (or we) are for. Religion can tell us what we are for, but it no longer generates plausible

¹ I rely here on Wendy Brown's engagement with Weber on nihilism as presented in the Tanner Lectures at Yale University. See Wendy Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023). I want to thank Tanner Capps, as well, for helping me to see this dimension of Brown's and Weber's work.

knowledge. And politics, detached from religious authority and placed in a scientific age, becomes a this-worldly struggle between what counts as facts and what we claim as values. Such divisions create the conditions for nihilism, characterized not by the loss of meaning, but rather the inability of our current arrangement to constrain and order it. As Wendy Brown says, the problem of nihilism for Weber:

*rests in the consequential intervals opened up between knowledge, politics, and religion in modernity, and especially the partitions—sometimes even oppositions—developed between science and religion, politics and religion, and knowledge and politics.*²

Such “consequential intervals” mean that religion can no longer lay claim to public truth, and the scientific knowledge that passes for truth cannot disclose the purpose or meaning of such truths. And politics, cut off from religious legitimacy, becomes a values-based realm of pure competition. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to live in a shared meaningful world. Nihilism describes, then, not a particular intellectual or moral position, but rather the very conditions of modernity. We live in a nihilistic age, what James Davison Hunter calls “passive nihilism.”³

In two different lectures—“Science as a Vocation” and “Politics as a Vocation,” given in 1917 and 1919 respectively—Weber addresses the challenge of nihilism head-on by appropriating a theological term—*Beruf* or *vocation*—for a disenchanted age.⁴ In both lectures, Weber seeks a way to cultivate a meaningful and orderly world by reinforcing the divisions created by modernity to restrain the worst human impulses. The nihilistic forces unleashed by the Enlightenment can be kept at bay only by doubling down on our disenchantment. Thus, the production of knowledge

² Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*, 15.

³ James Davison Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 326–42.

⁴ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. D. Owen and T. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004); Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965).

must be depersonalized, dispassionate, free from one's own values or interests. Disciplined by the scientific method, the scholar describes the world, holds up and analyzes value systems and ways of life, but does not pass judgment on them. Science requires a pure commitment to means—a quest to understand how things work. To do otherwise is to open a back door to the fanaticism and sectarian violence the Enlightenment sought to end. Science is for objectivity, for means, for description. Contra Marx, the point is not to change the world, but to describe it.

But Weber knows that human communities cannot live together in the dispassionate pursuit of knowledge. We order and organize ourselves by way of shared values, a sense of the common, an orientation toward a particular end. The Enlightenment's displacement of religion might free us from religious authorities, but it also opens a yawning chasm in the human soul. What is this all for?

Weber understood that in a world unmoored from its religious or theological grounding, politics becomes the realm in which “ultimate values” can be cultivated and expressed.⁵ That is to say: the crisis of meaning opened by the displacement of religion in public life must now be pursued through politics. But this is a fraught and fragile enterprise. Weber saw the warning signs in the Bolshevik Revolution—how technocratic expertise and secular eschatology can work together—and sought to constrain the political vocation with what he calls an “ethic of responsibility.”⁶

A disenchanted world no longer offers us high-minded ideals or utopian projects, just the daily working out of our values, which could always be otherwise. Wendy Brown summarizes: “In a sphere that is partisan all the way down, this paradoxical affirmation of the contingency of ultimate values for which one is fighting builds the sense of proportion that in turn builds responsibility at the site of conviction.”⁷ The political vocation is constrained by an ethic

⁵ Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*, 40–43.

⁶ Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 47–55.

⁷ Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*, 47.

of responsibility which disciplines our desire to claim more for politics than what it can reasonably offer.

We have, then, a tension. On the one hand, the politician must resist the temptation to ground the political agenda in religion and metaphysics. Political life and shared social values are, in the modern age, only and ever contingent. On the other hand, the politician must be suspicious of any utopian or eschatological vision that can justify illiberal or coercive means to achieve a political objective.⁸ Our nihilistic condition means that there are no obvious grounds from which to build shared and ultimate values. And any attempt to do so risks illiberal and coercive projects. James Davison Hunter describes this tension by differentiating active and passive nihilism. Passive nihilism describes the conditions under which knowledge, religion, and politics are cut off from one another. Active nihilism describes the toxic brew of moral certainty and the will to power, where people become means to some other idealized end.⁹ The temptation toward active nihilism runs throughout the politics of the Left and the Right, such that the political realm proves itself incapable of generating the ultimate purpose and meaning demanded of it. Left to no other choice, we can only work out our ultimate values in a constrained and contingent way. The Weberian “ethic of responsibility” in politics requires a sober sort of heroism that requires steadfastness, maturity, and determination.¹⁰

Taken together, Weber rightly diagnoses the nihilistic conditions of the modern age. We live in a world in which human values have

⁸ The purpose of such constraint, for Weber, is that the political realm is characterized by violence, and so political actions which fail to consider the link between means and ends are likely to fall into what he calls the “tragedy of action,” where presumably good ends are pursued by violent or coercive means. See Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*, 43-53; Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 46-53.

⁹ Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis*, 342. He develops these ideas further: “the nihilism that emanates from the death of God is passive, institutionalized within the broad fabric of society. The hyper-moralism of various social and political factions reflects the active nihilism of those in the thick of the competing will to power” (358).

¹⁰ Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, 55. Weber says: “Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards.”

been cut loose from the traditions, communities, and authorities that once held them. Our politics must bear the burden of ultimate values, of identity, of meaning. But politics is a contingent, fragmented, messy, and dangerous affair. So we must discipline ourselves to think soberly about our political commitments, to keep them buffered from the realm of objective truth and religious enthusiasm. To do otherwise is to allow human passions and prejudices to run rampant through our public life, to clear a path for demagogues and dictators, junk science, and epistemological crises. I think it is clear we are not on Weber's timeline. He might have been right about the conditions of nihilism, and even the impulse to reinforce the divisions created by disenchantment. But he misunderstood the nature of human religiosity.

Modern Misenchancements

In the fall of 2021, the journalist Jeff Sharlet attended a rally in Sacramento, California held in honor of Ashli Babbitt, the thirty-five-year-old woman killed on January 6 in the Washington, DC, riot at the Capitol.¹¹ Babbitt had been “red-pilled,” as they say, during the COVID lockdowns by the QAnon conspiracy theory, finding not only an online community but also a hermeneutical frame for understanding a fragmented and fragmenting world. She arrived in DC believing in the righteousness of her cause and stormed the Capitol to reverse election results she believed were rigged. She was shot by a Capitol Police officer when trying to squeeze through a broken window. By the time of the rally in Sacramento, Babbitt's identity and story had been elevated to a higher purpose. Her age, habits, and life story had all become malleable for a mash-up of Christian nationalist and White supremacist groups gathering on that day.

Sharlet's narration moves between the stage—where preachers are praising the martyrdom of Babbitt, praying for the soul of America, and calling for a new American revolution—and the

¹¹ The story here traces Sharlet's journey in the book *The Undertow*. See Jeff Sharlet, *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023).

police line at the back of the rally—where a White supremacist militia in leather jackets confronts antifascists dressed in black. Onstage, Jesus empowers insurrectionary violence. Off to the side, epithets are hurled across police barricades, punches are thrown, and symbols of the American republic employed in wildly different ways. Sharlet leaves the rally and decides to drive across the country back to his home in New Hampshire, stopping at church gatherings that look like political rallies, and political rallies that become church services.

In conversation after conversation, Sharlet hears a familiar refrain: don't trust your eyes or ears; listen, instead, with the ears of spiritual discernment so that you might understand that the lines have been drawn between good and evil, God and the devil, and a battle is now taking place for America's soul.

To read Sharlet's reporting is to recognize that we are awash in religious ritual and enthusiasm. In my neighborhood, left-leaning lawn signs read like confessional documents modeled after Joshua 24:15: "In this house, we believe..." Decades of neoliberal policies have trained us to submit to the market's divine will in any and all things. From labor organizing to child care, education to democratic representation, we cannot have nice things unless the market wills it to be so. Weber, it seems, got things half right. The modern age has certainly severed means from ends, fact from value, and left us unmoored from religious authority and theological foundations. But we are unable to live into the disciplined disenchantment he proposes. Our age of disenchantment has turned out, instead, to be characterized by *mis*enchantment.¹²

The surplus of meaning that Weber feared for the political, and the lack of objectivity he cautioned against in the production of knowledge, has become a ubiquitous part of modern life. The active nihilism he hoped to sequester through discipline and systemic

¹² William Cavanaugh uses the term "mis-enchantment" as a direct challenge to the story of "disenchantment" as traced in the work of Max Weber and, later, Charles Taylor. See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

constraint now saturates modern life. Cut loose from institutional and epistemological constraints, the holy has migrated toward other realms, turning the political rally into a worship gathering, a strip mall into a temple, a yard sign into a confession. In *The Uses of Idolatry*, William T. Cavanaugh argues that Enlightenment dualisms or Weberian discipline cannot eliminate the human propensity toward worship. Human beings are not only meaning-making creatures, but worshipers. That is to say, the loss of organized religion or theological tradition does not necessitate the decline of religiosity, but rather its move toward other realms and practices. Put another way, and channeling John Calvin, the human heart is an idol making factory.

For Cavanaugh, idolatry transcends the “secular/religious” and “politics/theology” dichotomies by pointing toward a general tendency in the human creature. He notes that many biblical texts fail to distinguish between believer or unbeliever in their accounts of idol worship.¹³ Take, for example, Paul’s speech to the Areopagus in Acts 17, or his appeal to natural theology in Romans 1. The invisible God has made Godself apparent in what God has created, such that the human creature is left with the revelation of God and an understandable desire to worship what God has created. Idolatry, then, emerges from the universal human quest to find meaning and ultimate purpose in whatever natural and cultural materials we have available. Cavanaugh says:

The twin ideas that the true Creator God is available in all of God’s beautiful creation and that the human person is a spontaneously worshiping creature allows for the possibility of a sympathetic approach to idolatry. It is precisely because there is one true God who created all things and continues to be present in them that idolatry is so difficult to uproot ... it is important to note that even in the Bible itself, idolatry critique has the potential to blur the lines between idolators and

¹³ Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry*, 7.

nonidolators, those who worship and those who do not. The Bible does not seem to recognize a distinction between worshipers and nonworshipers, and thus the distinction between religious and secular would appear to be a misrecognition of the human condition. ...We all worship, and we all worship badly.¹⁴

Cavanaugh's analysis cuts through attempts to explain modern secular societies by way of beliefs and institutional allegiance. National surveys that suggest declining religiosity are betrayed by our allegiance to and enthusiasm for political partisanship, national identity, consumerism, perhaps even the National Football League. Misenchancement thus redescribes our nihilistic condition theologically.

For Cavanaugh, idolatry should be understood on a continuum. It is something universal to the human experience and therefore something with which we can sympathize. It can also become incredibly destructive. As a destructive force, unchecked idolatry perpetuates violence and injustice. It is a habit of the heart that seeks mastery over the things we cannot control, turning humans into objects and making the world mute.

Idolators, the prophet Isaiah warns, have ears but cannot hear. In the language of Jean-Luc Marion, the idol is a mirror that reflects our desires back to us and traps us like Narcissus in a closed circle.¹⁵ That is to say: idolatry, or *misenchancement*, attempts to extract divine purpose and mastery from the contingent and messy and uncertain dimensions of worldly life. And so, it places us on the anxious bench of conspiracist fantasy, it binds us to the vacillations of the stock market, it blinds us to the humanity of our neighbor who speaks another language or wears a red hat.

Idolatry creates the exact conditions Weber worried about. It floods contingent social relationships with the need for absolute certainty and ideological purity and drowns them—and us—in the

¹⁴ Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry*, 154.

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

process. It is here, in the movement of idolatry, that the passive nihilism of our modern condition becomes the active nihilism of a society gripped by the will to power.

As a universal element of human experience, however, idolatry offers a more realistic anthropology than Weber and provides a way to think through a post-nihilist common life. We are creatures constituted and shaped by love.¹⁶ We are not the dispassionate rational agents imagined by the Enlightenment but rather desiring creatures, who *are moved* by the world and who *move toward* the world. As Hartmut Rosa says, we desire a resonant world, and a resonant relationship with the world.¹⁷ We want to be able to speak to the world and receive a reply. We are creatures of desire, of love. Our idolatrous habits betray this element of human creatureliness and thus offer a glimpse of the way forward.

We are left, then, with an intractable problem. The nihilistic conditions of modernity require a restrained liberal politics free from dogmatism and funded by sober and objective means for generating knowledge. But the human creature is oriented by love and not reason; we cannot help but imprint ourselves on the world, such that our politics become an attempt to manage, control, and make the world reflect our malformed desires. Put another way: the nihilistic conditions of modernity, coupled with the human tendency toward idolatry, have turned our politics and common life into a realm which must carry existential stakes, paving the way for an increasingly illiberal politics.¹⁸

Public Leadership for a Nihilistic Age

The account I've given here places religious leaders, and those

¹⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

¹⁷ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World* (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019).

¹⁸ This is true, especially when considering the intellectual momentum behind illiberalism itself. See Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Politics and Culture, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Ryszard Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016).

of us who teach and/or work with religious leaders, in a difficult spot. On the one hand, shifts in American religious practice, along with high-profile institutional and moral failures, have decreased the prestige and plausibility of religious organizations and leaders. On the other hand, religious language, symbols, and passions seem to fuel much of the polarization and violence of American life. We collectively cry out for a meaningful common life, for values and ideals that can tell us who we are and why we matter. We seek to make the world respond to the quest for meaning, no matter the cost. Those religious organizations who play along become a religious parody—the canonization of Ashli Babbitt, the Christological language given to President Donald Trump. And those who do not often lack a moral or theological vision compelling enough to meet the moment.

Yet, the theological dimensions of our nihilistic age invite further reflection on the nature and vocation of religious leadership. The truth is, religious leaders—and the organizations and congregations they serve—are already entangled in, swept along by, complicit with, the conditions described above. It is not enough to focus religious leadership on questions of adaptive change, missional renewal, or postcoloniality without also considering how such leadership can redirect religious energies toward a shared, meaningful world and cultivate social trust. What might the *religious* dimensions of “religious leadership” offer to such a moment? In particular, what theological and practical resources can religious leaders draw upon that connect the Weberian “ethic of responsibility” with Cavanaugh’s realism regarding the idolatrous nature of the human heart?

Drawing from Christian theology, I will explore how love of God and neighbor directs our religious passions toward self-restraint and communion, making room for trustworthy and pluralist social spaces. What follows is a theological argument, with an eye toward leadership practice organized around where and what. Where does such leadership take place? In the precise places where our neighbors struggle for their humanity. What does such leadership do? It seeks to discern, participate in, and witness to the polyphonic communion of those gathered and joined by the Spirit of God.

The Where of Public Leadership

During the height of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, a form of liberation theology emerged from the grassroots of the Filipino resistance that came to be called “Theology of Struggle.” It emerged at the intersection of religious leaders and the plight of the poor. It was often described as a conversion “to a new way of being” precipitated by living and working among the poor.¹⁹ United with labor organizers, landless farm laborers, and subsistence fisherfolk in the struggle against an autocratic and oligarchic regime, church leaders and theologians discovered new resources for resistance, hope, and a more vibrant spirituality. A new form of Christian community was formed at the site of the struggle for the full humanity of those most vulnerable to the regime. Many of those in well-established churches and in comfortable academic posts experienced this turn toward their neighbor as a conversion to the neighbor and the renewal of their faith. As Eleazar Fernandez says, Theology of Struggle is “primarily a reflection of those who suffer and therefore struggle, together with those who struggle, and therefore suffer.”²⁰

Father Louie Hechanova—a Catholic theologian who worked among the poor—is believed to have first used “Theology of Struggle” to describe the movement taking place in the Philippines.²¹ By using “struggle” rather than “liberation,” he wanted to differentiate the Philippines from the Latin American context and also identify its unique contribution to liberation theologies. The Philippine people had suffered for five hundred years under subsequent “liberations” by “benevolent” empires: Spain, the United States, Japan, and the United States again. Each act of liberation left the Philippine people subservient to the whims and desires of the empire. Father Hechanova, along with other Filipino thinkers, acknowledged that Philippine identity is formed

¹⁹ Anne Harris, *Dare to Struggle, Be Not Afraid: The Theology of Struggle in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2003).

²⁰ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 28.

²¹ L. G. Hechanova, “The Christ of Liberation Theology,” in *With Raging Hope* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1983), 13.

in the struggle against imperial oppression. But he also pointed to an eschatological tension prevalent in the Theology of Struggle that critiques teleological and Marxist readings of history.

Liberation—or salvation—is not in the hands of the church or the labor organizer; it is a promise and eschatological gift. But the church and theologian can anticipate where such a gift will arrive, and what the manifestation of God's righteousness and justice looks like, by joining the struggle to live and breathe, to be recognized and flourish, that characterizes those crushed by an authoritarian state. They join the struggle so that they might learn to hope for and receive the Reign of God. As Fernandez says: Theology of Struggle privileges the poor “not because they [the poor] *have* the truth, but because they *are* the truth vis-à-vis the system's lie.”²² Theology of Struggle never produced much in the way of texts or confessions.²³ It did, however, convert a whole generation of church leaders and theologians to a way of life and cultivate new forms of Christian community. When the EDSA or People Power Revolution began after the assassination of opposition leader Ninoy Aquino on the tarmac of the Manila airport, religious leaders were already working in collaboration with a wide array of organizers to help shepherd a largely peaceful overthrow of the Marcos regime.

Of course, I'm telling a highly condensed story here, and the Theology of Struggle offers historical and highly contextual examples of religious leadership in difficult times. But I want to highlight its basic insight—the conversion to the neighbor—as something that can offer direction for our own nihilistic and disenchanting age. That is to say: *where* one does theology or the social location *from which* one exercises religious leadership matters. Solidarity with one's actual neighbors, especially those made vulnerable by the political and economic status quo, raises different kinds of questions for the theologian or religious leader.

²² Eleazar S. Fernandez, “Theology of Struggle: Challenges and Prospects in a Globalized World,” *Silliman Journal* 50, no. 2 (2009): 159.

²³ It tended to generate songs, poems, folk art, liturgies, and—most importantly—new solidarities. See Erme R. Camba, “The Making of a Theology of Struggle: A Testimony of Theological Praxis in the Philippines,” *Silliman Journal* 50, no. 2 (2009).

I hesitate to write too much about this, because it is so obvious once it is written on the page. It is the basic premise of contextual theologies and community organizing and just about any program for neighborliness and community solidarity.

Who we read the Bible with and where we envision ourselves within our society shapes how we see the world, what we think counts, who we think counts, and what sorts of things we pursue. Put another way, *where* we are located socially, politically, and economically shapes our vision of the good, the beautiful, the ultimate purpose of life. Ludwig Feuerbach is not entirely wrong. Our vision of God emerges from a particular theological imagination that reflects our social location, concerns, hopes, and dreams. The Bible recognizes this, tying love for God and neighbor together. And the conversion to neighbor shows a concrete way, a movement and practice, by which we might direct our love and attention in such a way that our vision of God is constrained, corrected, and redirected by the well-being of our neighbor. Conversion to neighbor provides one way to hold our ultimate values accountable to our real-world responsibilities to and for one another, to hold spiritual vitality and the common good together.

Theology of Struggle shares in a wide range of theological on-ramps toward the conversion to neighbor. Liberation theologian Mortimer Arias, in his book *Announcing the Reign of God*, summarizes Jesus' evangelism as a simultaneous conversion to Christ and also to the neighbor.²⁴ To participate in the Reign of God announced by Christ is to participate in the love and generosity of Christ for and with the neighbor. Sam Wells offers a relational frame for God's economy of salvation, arguing that the gospel is the story of God *with us*.²⁵ God, in Christ, does not address us in our mortality, but rather our alienation from God and one another. Ministry that participates in the gospel of Jesus Christ is characterized by *withness*—because God is with us, we are with one another. Each of these approaches grounds the theological in

²⁴ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

²⁵ Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

the political, rather than the reverse. That is to say, our vision of God is held accountable to the neighbor with whom we share life. Or, as Jesus says, “you will know a tree by its fruit” (Matt. 7:16, paraphrase).

The problem with a nihilistic age, as outlined by Weber, is that questions of ultimate purpose, set free from religious constraints, become subject to political struggle and manipulation. And politics, set free from theological foundations, becomes an existential struggle. This is why Weber wants our public life to be constrained by a strict separation of realms—fact divided from value, knowledge divided from politics. But such an “ethic of responsibility” has proved to be a fool’s errand. We are not so much disenchanted as we are misenchanted. The conversion to neighbor offers both ethical constraint (testing our commitments against the flourishing and well-being of our neighbors) and a vision of the good (an orientation toward the liberative and liberating God). As an ethical constraint, conversion to the neighbor tests our commitments against the flourishing and well-being of our actual neighbors.

Whatever good we hope to do in the world, whatever “good news” we hope to proclaim, is tested immediately by the hopes and struggles of those with whom we share social and public goods. This approach can harmonize with many pragmatic approaches to politics and democratic organizing. Jeffrey Stout, for example, demonstrates how democratic discourse cultivates particular virtues for life in a pluralist society, helping communities to recognize the legitimate desires and interests of others and to become responsible for their own commitments.²⁶ Similarly, civil society theory recognizes the moral and human goods produced through associational belonging and public argumentation.²⁷ That

²⁶ See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, New Forum Books, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁷ See Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). See also Gary M. Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

is to say: rather than constrain the political with a disciplined disenchantment, conversion to neighbor offers a pragmatic form of neighbor-love that leans into the human desire for purpose and meaning.

As an orientation toward God, conversion to neighbor clarifies the theological stakes of pragmatic, pluralist politics. Such pragmatism is not the disciplined disenchantment of Weber, but rather oriented by a shared ultimate concern for the present and coming Reign of God. Theology of Struggle, along with various liberation theologies, is instructive here. The neighbor—and especially the neighbor struggling to be heard, seen, etc.—is one through whom we hear, encounter, come to know, the God of the Exodus and Resurrection.²⁸ Love of neighbor thus redirects religious energy into practices that necessarily constrain these enthusiasms by the nature of our concrete relationships with others.

On this last point, a couple of cautionary notes must be offered. First, the ethical and socio-political dimensions of conversion to neighbor are necessary to avoid romanticizing the neighbor or covering over the real differences that emerge in any political community. As will be developed in the next section, love for neighbor assumes difference, tension, and otherness. And by prioritizing the well-being of those struggling for their humanity in this unraveling age, conversion to neighbor requires one to listen, struggle with one's own complicity, and (perhaps) change in the process. It requires real concrete relationships and all the awkwardness, discomfort, misunderstanding, and joy such relationships bring. Second, the conversion to neighbor does not collapse the theological into the ethical, but rather assumes and makes central the entanglement of theology with ethics and ethics with theology.

²⁸ As Gutiérrez says, the Scriptures reveal “God’s preferential option for the poor.” This is a hermeneutic assumption of liberation theologies and the Theology of Struggle, and critical for the argument made here as well. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988).

When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus responds by drawing love of God and neighbor together. A misenchanted world invites us to draw these together again, and I suspect we can do so by prioritizing the *where* of our theological reflection. The neighbor—and the neighbor at risk by the political and economic status quo in particular—answers the *where* of religious leadership for a nihilistic age. But *what* is it that such attentiveness generates?

The What of Public Leadership

Across several books, Willie James Jennings develops a vision of Christian sociality over and against what he calls the “diseased social imagination” of Western Christianity.²⁹ He argues that the colonial era has given us a sterilized gospel that seeks to mute and neutralize difference. When European powers encountered the peoples of West Africa and the so-called New World, they tried to absorb these peoples and these worlds into their own, inscribing race within the Christian social imagination. Under such conditions, the gospel becomes a tool of conquest and social erasure, a way to order, organize, and evaluate the world in Western categories. Western theology thus works through powers of abstraction, separating human identity from land, community, and culture to judge and manage the world.

In Jennings’s telling, Enlightenment disenchantment and modern misenchancements are not only a crisis of meaning, but a devastating rupture in the social fabric of Western societies. Our failures to address racial inequities or cultivate a pluralist democracy reflect our diseased theological imagination. The question of *where* thus needs a consideration of *what*. What is it that we envision God is doing in drawing us to the neighbor? What is it we think we are doing? What are the conditions of possibility for a shared and meaningful world?

²⁹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 5–6. Jennings develops this agenda across his Acts commentary and a book on theological education as well. See Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017); Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

Among other things, Jennings points toward the ek-static, we might say *erotic*, ministry of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ He points to the first chapter in Acts where Jesus “presents himself alive” to the disciples (Acts 1:3), noting that Jesus offers to his disciples “a way through the fear of death by simply touching him. It will be the way of his disciples. Disciples must touch and be touched.”³¹ In Jennings’s telling, the church in Acts is swept up by the desire of God to create communion and connection, to touch and be touched. They find themselves in places they did not intend to go and gathered with people they did not choose: a betrayer of their own people and the ground of a new humanity. For Jennings, the joining of people, one to another, is the most fundamental thing about the Christian gospel. God joins Godself to the human creature by way of the Incarnation, and through the power of the Spirit we are joined to one another in and at the body of Christ. We are joined across gender, ethnicity, nationality, race, not in a way that dissolves difference, but rather in a way that affirms and honors it. Cornelius receives the gifts of the Spirit as a Gentile. Each hears the Word in their mother tongue at Pentecost.³²

Through the joining and communion-creating power of the Spirit, difference is not overcome or homogenized, but rather embraced, enfolding a polyphonic chorus of voices, perspectives, cultures, and places into life together with God, what he calls “the common.”³³ Joined to others in an increasingly pluralist space, Christian community encounters God by way of others, comes to know the good news of God by hearing it on the lips of others,

³⁰ See also Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘on the Trinity’* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³¹ Jennings, *Acts*, 15.

³² Several other theologians develop these themes in a similar way and toward a similar pluralist ethic. See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, English-language ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

³³ Jennings, *Acts*. The common, he says, is “the goal of life together with God.” I’m borrowing the metaphor of “polyphony” from Bonhoeffer’s notion of the Christian as able to attend to “the polyphony of life.” See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, English-language ed., vol. 8, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

seeing it in the lives of others. It is in joining and encountering, listening to and making room for others, that the church comes to know and love God. Swept up in the love of God for God's creation, the church is drawn into a great work we cannot control, manage, or even fully comprehend.

As Jennings says in *After Whiteness*, God's power to join us with others "aims to recreate us" and reform us "as those who enact gathering and who gesture at communion with our very existence."³⁴ Therefore, the love and power of God, which draws us into relationship with others and cultivates a polyphonic communion that witnesses to God's redemptive purposes for creation, cannot help but open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to God and neighbor. Converted to the neighbor, we seek to participate in the ministry of the Spirit that joins us to others as a witness to the good news of God.

The pluralist vision of communion, offered by the testimony of and to the Holy Spirit, orients religious leadership in this nihilistic age toward cultivating trust as participation in God's promised future. The neighbor, and the differences and tensions that emerge in relationship to the neighbor, are not incidental to religious leadership, but rather critical to the work of any religious community that seeks to discern the presence and action of God in their midst. The response to disenchantment, I want to suggest, is not to reclaim some sort of central ecclesiastical authority, but rather the messy embrace of life with others as a witness to the differentiated communion of God's future in the Spirit. This is not an easy task and requires religious leaders and organizations to practice discernment as a critical theological and practical component of religious life.

In *Scripture and Discernment*, Luke Timothy Johnson calls theology a "catch up game."³⁵ By this, he refers to the process of faith by which the church seeks to make theological sense of its experience with and in the world. Theology is the process by which

³⁴ Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, 152.

³⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

our language catches up to what God is already doing. Focusing on the chapters in Acts that lead up to the Jerusalem council, Johnson notes how story, testimony, experience, embodiment, and love contribute to the debates over Gentile participation in the life of the church. Their discernment is rooted in a relationship with their Gentile neighbor. These relationships with Gentiles constrain their reading of the Scriptures and traditions, such that they must reread and rethink previous understandings of religious community and belonging. Johnson argues that such discernment is normative for the life of the church and critical to the life of faith, because open-ended discernment is not done once and for all in specialized circumstances, but is a formative and constitutive practice for the community of faith. Life with God is a catch-up game we play (if I can use that word to continue the metaphor) with others.

But discernment is not only a practice by which we attend to the calling and action of God. It is a formative ethical and political practice, wherein we learn how to live in a shared meaningful world with others. That is to say, the polyphonic chorus of voices and perspectives drawn together by the Spirit is not only a means by which we encounter and witness to the good news of God. It also cultivates a particular kind of ethic, a way of seeing, hearing, and speaking in which our own values and concerns become constrained, shaped, even challenged by the real neighbors God has drawn together. It is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "day together" and "day apart" in one practice, a form of shared life which draws us into the ministry of God and teaches us the nature of neighbor-love.³⁶ In concrete terms, it is in relationship with the neighbor, in which the other can surprise, contradict, even constrain us, that we cultivate the conditions of possibility for knowing God more truly and for cultivating a shared and meaningful world.

³⁶ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together, Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtress, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

Conclusion

This much is clear: neither the exhaustion of John Mulaney's character nor the religious enthusiasm of the rally for Ashli Babbitt will amount to a more just and trustworthy politics under the conditions of late modernity. Public religious leadership in a pluralist society requires us to cultivate shared values while also navigating possible conflicts in ultimate concern. The *where* of public and prophetic leadership orients our attention toward the well-being of our neighbors, building shared values through a politics of solidarity. Such leadership will draw from community organizing, civil society theories, and democratic traditions to orient our misenchanted religious energies toward the good of others and the facilitation of a more just society. The *what* of public and prophetic leadership orients these practices toward a theological vision, seeking to discern participation in God's future as reflected in the Spirit's work of joining us to a pluralist and differentiated community. Public leadership in a nihilistic age, I suggest, is going to connect neighborliness and discipleship, love of God and love of neighbor. We can understand the work of the Spirit of God and the mission of the church in these terms—we are called to participate in the ek-static, community-forming movement of the Holy Spirit.

DURABLE COMMUNION: WORSHIP AND THE FORMATION OF TRUTH-BEARING PUBLIC LIFE

DAVID FORNEY

Abstract

This article examines how worship participates in shaping truth-bearing public life during the Virginia commonwealth election cycle. A qualitative case study of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation in Charlottesville analyzes twenty sermon manuscripts (July–November 2025), eight one-on-one interviews, and a worship-context ledger tracking bulletin art and post-sermon hymns from Glory to God. Interpreted through Brueggemann, Moltmann, Root, and Williams and Lampert, and situated amid high conflict and civic fragmentation, the study traces how worship enacts and sustains “durable communion” through practiced belonging, love-shaped authority, repair-oriented conflict posture, and hope as defiant endurance. It offers grounded, case-based insight into how congregations may cultivate resilient shared life amid polarization.

Introduction

In many US communities, public life is defined less by disagreement than by intensifying polarization, suspicion, and reactive escalation. Conflict once bounded to specific issues now spills outward, reshaping identity, attention, and relationships. Amanda Ripley describes this dynamic as “high conflict,”¹ a pattern in which people are pulled into escalating cycles of suspicion, reactivity, and caricature until conflict begins to change

¹ Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

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the participants themselves. In this charged climate, disagreement becomes increasingly difficult to hold without turning opponents into enemies, and it becomes harder to imagine shared futures that include those with whom one differs.

At the same time, Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett argue that the social infrastructure that once supported shared civic life, such as associations, networks of trust, and cross-cutting relationships, has thinned over time.² When those support structures erode, people have fewer places to practice patient disagreement, fewer habits for sustaining solidarity, and fewer thick relationships that can absorb tension. The result is not only polarized politics, but a broader sense of civic fragmentation in which empathy and trust feel scarce, and public problems are experienced as either overwhelming or someone else's responsibility.

Congregations do not stand outside these dynamics; they share in the same fractured public imagination. Worshipers arrive carrying the anxieties and suspicions of the wider culture. Ministers preach within an attention economy that rewards outrage and punishes complexity. Churches therefore face a persistent pressure: to become partisan instruments or withdrawalist enclaves. Neither option accounts for what worship is nor what it forms. If worship becomes political activism by other means, it trains people to win rather than witness. If it becomes avoidance, it trains disengagement rather than love of neighbor.

This article argues for a third possibility: worship as a formative practice for public leadership, one that does not rely on coercion yet sustains truthful speech in contested public life. Worship does not eliminate conflict or guarantee social harmony. It can, however, sustain what this study calls *durable communion: a practiced belonging that can bear truth without domination and sustain shared life without denial*. In a culture that intensifies division, worship rehearses a different moral and social posture: a people learning to pray, sing, and serve together across deep difference, and to speak

² Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

truthfully without surrendering compassion or communion.

In this study, formation does not imply linear causation or measurable behavioral change. Rather, formation names the participatory work of worship over time. Worship participates in shaping communal imagination, disciplines speech and desire through repeated practices, sustains and at times intensifies patterns of shared life, and provides a recurring public enactment of belonging that gathers the congregation into a common posture. Formation here is not engineered change. It is the slow patterning of attention, language, and practice through which a community learns how to inhabit its shared life amid strain. In this sense, “public leadership” does not refer to formal office or institutional authority. It names the way a community’s shared posture and practices shape how its members inhabit common life beyond the sanctuary.

This argument is grounded in a qualitative case study of a mainline Protestant congregation during the Virginia state election cycle. The study examines a July–November 2025 sermon corpus, eight congregant interviews, and a worship-context ledger documenting bulletin art and post-sermon hymnody. Together, these sources attend to both proclamation and reception: what worship formed over time and how participants interpreted that formation in a contested season. The analysis is guided by three sets of questions:

1. *Formational*: What formative logic does the preaching series enact over time? What people does it seek to form and toward what practices or dispositions?
2. *Public leadership*: What posture toward public life is cultivated through worship and proclamation, particularly in relation to power, truth, and communal identity?
3. *Conflict*: How is conflict framed and addressed, explicitly or implicitly? What patterns of speech and relation are being trained for life amid polarization?

To speak of public life here is not to reduce the congregation to partisan politics or to treat sermons as civic lectures. It is to

acknowledge that worship shapes the habits of attention, speech, and relation by which people inhabit shared life. Leadership, in this sense, does not mean institutional authority or political influence; rather, it names the communal posture that emerges as a congregation learns how to see, speak, and remain together amid difference. Worship shapes that posture through repeated practices that extend beyond the sanctuary into families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and civic commitments. The question, then, is not whether worship produces political agreement, but whether it sustains a people able to endure disagreement without othering and to bear truth without domination.

The concept of durable communion names this formational outcome. Durable communion does not eliminate conflict; it strengthens a community's capacity to hold difference without dissolving shared life. It is grounded in the congregation's confession of God's reconciling action and enacted through repeated practices such as prayer, song, proclamation, confession, intercession, and sending, which shape what a community can hold together.

The argument is framed by four primary interlocutors. Walter Brueggemann clarifies prophetic speech as critique joined to hope.³ Jürgen Moltmann situates that hope within the horizon of God's arriving future.⁴ Andrew Root interprets worship as the congregation's practice of keeping sacred time under secular pressure.⁵ Khalia Williams and Mark Lamport specify how ordinary liturgical practices form communal identity and relational capacity.⁶ Read together, these voices frame worship not as commentary on public life but as a sustained ecology of formation that makes noncoercive public leadership plausible.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁵ Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

⁶ Khalia J. Williams and Mark A. Lamport, eds. *Theological Foundations of Worship: Biblical, Systematic, and Practical Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

The article then develops this theological framework. From this, we move to the case-study design and analytic approach and then discuss findings. The next section explores implications for worship leadership and public life.

Theoretical and Theological Framework

This section articulates the theological architecture that frames worship as a formative ecology rather than a platform for persuasion. The argument unfolds in four movements: prophetic imagination, eschatological hope, worship as formation in a secular age, and the public pressures that render such formation urgent.

Brueggemann: Prophetic imagination and truthful speech

Brueggemann's account of prophetic imagination provides a crucial theological grammar for "truth-bearing" public life. Rooted in Israel's scriptural witness and ongoing reception of that testimony, his account is not a free-standing social theory but an interpretation of prophetic speech as it emerges from and remains accountable to biblical tradition. In this reading, prophecy is not primarily prediction, nor is it a program for seizing power. Prophetic speech is a practice of truth-telling that destabilizes distorted social realities and energizes communities toward alternative possibilities. Its distinctive work is to "nurture, nourish, and evoke"⁷ a people who can see differently and, therefore, speak differently than the dominant narratives of fear, scarcity, and control.

Two movements are especially important here, since prophetic ministry must "hold together criticism and energizing."⁸ First, *prophetic imagination offers critique*, not as cynical negativity, but as the clear naming of what the dominant order conceals, excuses, or treats as normal. Truthful speech disrupts "numb denial."⁹ It invites a community to recognize the costs of "business as usual,"¹⁰ the casualties of public life, and the way power often disguises itself as common sense. This critical work is theological rather than

⁷ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

⁸ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 4.

⁹ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 62.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 88, 91.

merely rhetorical; it breaks the spell of inevitability by recalling the community to God's freedom and promise. Where public discourse trains people to accept polarization as permanent and coercion as necessary, prophetic speech insists that such inevitability is itself a theological claim, one that deserves interrogation.

Second, *prophetic imagination energizes*. The prophet does not merely expose; the prophet summons a people into alternative practices and a renewed social imagination. In this register, "Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality."¹¹ Worship, in this sense, is not an escape from public life but a workshop of alternative consciousness. The congregation does not gather simply to receive information about God; it gathers to become the kind of people who can inhabit public life without being absorbed by its reactivity. The liturgy provides a community with a repertoire of speech—confession, lament, intercession, thanksgiving, praise—that keeps reality open to God's future. These forms of speech cultivate moral and spiritual capacities that are difficult to sustain in the accelerated cycles of outrage and fear.

Here Brueggemann's account of prophetic imagination bears directly on noncoercive public life. Prophetic truth-telling is neither harsh critique nor a strategy for winning arguments. It is a disciplined form of witness that frees a community from captivity to anxiety and domination. Prophetic preaching re-narrates contested realities without scapegoating and resists simplistic binaries. It names distortion without inventing enemies and holds moral clarity together with the possibility of reconciliation. When worship teaches people to lament, confess, intercede, and bless—even those they struggle to understand—it cultivates habits of truth and charity sturdy enough to bear public disagreement.

Moltmann: Hope as horizon, endurance, and communal resilience

If Brueggemann provides a grammar for prophetic truth-telling, Moltmann provides a grammar for durability. *Theology of Hope* insists that "Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 65.

and forward moving”¹² toward God’s promised future. Hope is not an optional mood, nor is it the religious version of optimism. It is an eschatological stance: a future-shaped confidence that “the hidden future already announces itself and exerts its influence on the present.”¹³ In this sense, hope is not escapist; it “can have nothing to do with fleeing the world, with resignation and with escapism,”¹⁴ and it is the engine of faithful persistence.

Moltmann frames worship as an anticipatory practice of the coming reign of God. In worship, the congregation does not merely remember the past; it participates in a future that is not yet fully visible. On this point, Moltmann quotes Paul Schütz: it is the “presence of what is coming towards us—an arriving future.”¹⁵ The community prays “thy kingdom come” not as a pious platitude but as an act that reorients time. The horizon of God’s future relativizes the absolutism of present conflict. Hope’s statements of promise “do not seek to illuminate the reality which exists, but the reality which is coming.”¹⁶ It loosens the grip of immediacy, the demand that every public disagreement must be resolved instantly, decisively, and by force. In place of immediacy, “we with patience wait for it.”¹⁷

Moltmann’s theology also helps distinguish the kind of “durable communion” at stake in this study. Communion is durable not because a congregation avoids conflict, but because it trusts that God’s future is already at work within the present, even amid disagreement. Such durability requires more than conflict-management skills; it requires a theological horizon spacious enough to discern the Spirit’s movement within unresolved realities. As Moltmann writes, this hope keeps us in the posture of wayfarers, “in that unresolved openness to world questions which has its origin in the promise of God in the resurrection of Christ.”¹⁸

¹² Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.

¹³ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 18.

¹⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 21.

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 227.

¹⁶ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 18.

¹⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 18.

¹⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 22.

This is not resignation but expectant realism, because “hope alone is to be called ‘realistic’ because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught.”¹⁹ In this way, hope does not merely endure conflict; it moves through it, trusting that even strain may become the site of deeper communion in God’s promise.

Worship becomes a training ground for this hope. The rhythms of prayer and praise habituate the community to live toward a future it does not control. Confession and assurance form the community to face truth without collapse. Intercession trains a posture of responsibility and compassion rather than outrage. The Table teaches communion that is received rather than achieved, “not in possession of the sacral presence of the Absolute, but is a waiting, expectant congregation.”²⁰ In these practices, worship relativizes every claim to final perspective; it humbles participants before God’s freedom and assumes that the Spirit may be at work even in those with whom they disagree. Even the embodied practices of gathering, singing, listening, and blessing carry eschatological weight, enacting a togetherness that is fragile in polarized public life yet sustained here as gift.

In public leadership terms, Moltmann’s account of hope reframes leadership away from urgency-driven control toward future-shaped faithfulness. Communities formed by hope can resist coercion because they do not need to force outcomes to secure meaning. They can speak truth without domination because the truth does not depend on their immediate success. They can pursue reconciliation without idealizing it because they trust God’s future more than their strategies. This matters directly for a congregation navigating contested public contexts: hope enables sustained attention, reduces reactivity, and supports practices of listening and prayer that keep relationships from being consumed by the logic of faction.

Root with Williams and Lamport: Worship as formation in a secular age

¹⁹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 25.

²⁰ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 326.

Brueggemann and Moltmann provide the horizons of prophetic truth and eschatological hope. Root, together with Williams and Lampport's account of worship's theological foundations, provides the interpretive lens for how these horizons become concrete formation in ordinary congregational life.

Root's central insight is that congregations in a secular age face pressures that are not merely external. Secularity is not simply the absence of belief; it is a set of conditions that shape attention, time, and identity. Under these conditions, most want relevance, and the church is tempted toward strategies of relevance, technique, and persuasion and, thereby, is trying to compete in the marketplace of meaning. The gravitational pull is toward reach. "How can we reach more and more people?"²¹

Root reframes worship as a school of presence and attention, a slow and patient practice that shapes people through participation rather than argument. This is especially important for preaching. In Root's frame, preaching is not primarily an instrument for producing immediate change or measurable outcomes. It is part of worship's long, patient work of forming a people who can endure the pressures of secularity—distraction, anxiety, fragmentation—without becoming captive to them. Preaching participates in the formation of communal identity by modeling a grammar of speech—naming reality before God, addressing neighbor without caricature, and holding conviction and humility together, even within the largely scripted practices of worship. In this project's terms, preaching is not primarily organized for persuasion; it is the slow cultivation of truthful speech and durable communion.

Williams and Lampport strengthen this claim by specifying worship's formative grammar. "By its worship, the Church becomes itself."²² Worship is not merely a container for religious content but a set of practices through which a community comes to inhabit its identity. As Robert Martin observes, the liturgical life of the church does not simply express communal identity but participates

²¹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 144.

²² Williams and Lampport, *Theological Foundations of Worship*, xiii.

in shaping it.²³ Why? Because “worship practices stem from what we think, and what we think also stems from our practices.”²⁴ The assembly’s identity emerges through the enactment of a shared story—gathering, confession, proclamation, prayer, thanksgiving, and sending. In this way worship enacts relationality, modeling how people speak, listen, and respond to one another and to God. The liturgical life of the congregation therefore participates in shaping the relational fabric of the community itself.²⁵ Inclusion is cultivated not primarily through slogans but through the practices by which people are welcomed, named, and given a place within the community’s shared life.

This formative account of worship is not merely sociological. It presumes the sovereign lordship of Christ, before whom every perspective is relativized and every claim to final authority is humbled. The call to holiness reorients desire toward reconciliation and compassion rather than victory. And the confessed omnipresence of God generates a receptive posture toward others, trusting that the Spirit may be at work beyond one’s own certainty. These doctrinal convictions do not stand apart from worship’s practices; they are enacted through them.

This pairing, Root’s account of formation under secular pressure and Williams and Lampport’s account of worship as identity-making, clarifies why noncoercive truth-bearing is plausible. People are not formed into durable communion by being forced to agree. They are formed by learning to inhabit shared practices that discipline speech, reorient desire, and cultivate patient attention. The congregation becomes capable of holding difference because it has been schooled in a deeper identity than political alignment: a shared belonging enacted through prayer, song, and the hearing of scripture.

This account should not be mistaken for a claim that any congregation’s worship perfectly embodies these commitments.

²³ Robert K. Martin, “Education and the Liturgical Life of the Church,” *Religious Education* 98/1 (2003), 43-64.

²⁴ Williams and Lampport, *Theological Foundations of Worship*, 72.

²⁵ Martin, “Education and the Liturgical Life of the Church,” 47.

Worship is always partial and often uneven. The claim here is aspirational rather than idealized: worship may participate more or less faithfully in enacting truthful shared life. The practices described in this case do not escape secularity's pressures; they strive, imperfectly, to respond to them.

This also illuminates why worship context matters for this study. If worship forms through an ecology of practices, then formation is not reducible to sermon text alone. The communal voice of singing, the embodied discipline of listening, the symbolism offered through visual and musical elements, and the post-sermon movements into a shared life of service all participate in the formation of a posture of neighborliness. These elements do not function as "evidence" in the same way as coded sermon paragraphs or interview blocks; rather, they provide contextual warrant for understanding worship as an integrated formative environment. In a secular age marked by fragmentation, worship's capacity to gather and direct shared attention—what the community sees, says, and enacts together—becomes a concrete means by which durable communion is rehearsed.

Root's emphasis on sacred time helps clarify why weekly worship rhythm matters for public leadership.²⁶ In contested contexts, leadership often defaults to coercion, such as winning, dominating, or shaming. But worship sustains a different posture by cultivating attentiveness to presence. As Root observes, "Sacred time is not unchanging, even if its concern for presence and practice demands a longer (less compressed) present than modernity desires."²⁷ In that longer present, congregants are habituated into a grammar of address that shapes how they speak beyond the sanctuary: conviction without aggression, clarity without contempt, disagreement without abandonment. This posture is not a technique for managing conflict. It is the slow fruit of formation, growing week after week as people pray and sing alongside those whose convictions differ, remaining bound without denying real difference.

²⁶ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 54.

²⁷ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 259.

Public pressures: High conflict and civic fragmentation

The framework must also account for the public pressures within which this formational work unfolds. Ripley's account of high conflict helps describe a social atmosphere in which disagreement becomes identity, outrage becomes incentive, and polarization becomes self-perpetuating. High conflict is not merely lots of disagreement. Ripley defines high conflict as one "that becomes self-perpetuating and all-consuming, in which almost everyone ends up worse off. Typically an us-versus-them conflict."²⁸ It is this type of conflict that changes the participants, making them more reactive, more suspicious, and less capable of imagining alternatives. In such conditions, communities are tempted to mirror the conflict around them: to sort, caricature, and escalate.

Putnam & Garrett's account of social trust and civic cohesion provides a complementary lens. When civic life is characterized by declining trust and thinning associations, people have fewer spaces to practice shared life across difference. The social infrastructure that once helped sustain pluralistic democracy becomes brittle. In such a setting, congregations can either intensify fragmentation (by becoming partisan enclaves) or offer practices of durable association that resist isolation.²⁹

These public pressures clarify the stakes of the project without turning worship into a political tool. Worship does not resolve polarization, but it can form a people capable of inhabiting polarized conditions without being captured by them. Under high-conflict incentives and low-trust conditions, the capacity to speak the truth in love without coercion, to sustain relationships amid disagreement, and to practice hope rather than despair becomes a distinctive personal and public gift. This is one way worship becomes witness in contested public life. It is not a strategy of domination but the formation of durable communion that can

²⁸ Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (Simon & Schuster, 2021), xiv.

²⁹ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

endure difference while remaining committed to truthful speech and shared life.

Methodology of a qualitative case study

This study emerged from a pastoral tension rather than a theoretical curiosity. During the Virginia commonwealth election cycle, worship became a site where contested public realities pressed upon a gathered community. As one of the congregation's pastors, I felt the pressure to speak clearly about matters shaping our common life, yet I also sensed how easily speech framed by urgency or ideological certainty could fracture the very communion worship sought to sustain. The study grew from this question: how might worship hold truthful speech and shared belonging together during a season of intensification? Rather than assuming that worship must either withdraw from public life or mirror its partisan dynamics, this project examined how worship was actually functioning within one congregation.

To attend carefully to that question, this study employed a qualitative case-study design grounded in practical theology.³⁰ Rather than treating polarization primarily as a contest of political positions, the project approached it as a formational challenge: communities are shaped by narratives and practices that form imagination, belonging, and relational capacity. Following Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology³¹—descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic—the analysis moved from what occurred in worship and how participants narrated it to theological evaluation and implications for public leadership.

Case selection and boundaries

The case was First Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, a long-established downtown PC(U.S.A.) congregation situated in a politically mixed region during the Virginia 2025 election season. In a community where national political tensions

³⁰ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

³¹ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

were locally visible, weekly worship gathered approximately 350 in blended and traditional services led by two full-time pastors and one part-time pastor. The congregation includes professionals, academics, retirees, and families, with both progressive and conservative instincts held within a shared ecclesial identity. Within this already complex and relationally interwoven body, the congregation felt and navigated the pressures of polarization.

The researcher serves as one of the congregation's regular pastors and preachers. The sermons examined here therefore arise within ongoing pastoral relationships rather than from a critical distance. This study does not attempt to bracket that relational context; instead, it interprets worship as it is enacted within those shared relationships. Sermon manuscripts are treated as case documents, and interview narratives are read as congregational reception, allowing both proclamation and response to be heard on their own terms.

The case was bounded to the congregation's regular worship leadership practices and congregants' narrated experience of worship's formative effects.³² The sermon corpus spanned July 6 through November 23, 2025; October 5 was excluded because a guest preacher filled the pulpit and the study focuses on the congregation's ongoing leadership patterns.

Data sources

Two primary datasets were analyzed, with a worship-context ledger used as a contextual indicator.³³ First, the sermon corpus consisted of twenty sermon manuscripts delivered within the bounded period. Sermons were treated as textual artifacts and proxies for performed worship leadership. Second, eight semi-structured congregant interviews (45-60 minutes) were conducted via Zoom, audio-recorded, and anonymized in transcription and reporting. The twelve-question guide elicited narratives of worship

³² Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018).

³³ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018).

formation rather than political opinions or leadership evaluations. Questions were shared in the Zoom chat during interviews to reduce cognitive load and support clarity. A worship-context ledger documented bulletin-cover art (including interpretive blurbs when present) and postsermon hymns from *Glory to God*.³⁴ These elements functioned as contextual indicators of worship's formative ecology rather than as a separate coded dataset.

Coding framework

A constrained codebook governed the analysis, anchoring interpretation in observable evidence and the study's theological commitments.³⁵ Five primary code families structured all analysis across sermons and interviews: Counter-Formation, Hopeful Orientation, Relational Repair amid Conflict, Communal Identity and Belonging, and Liturgical–Theological Grounding. Interpretive claims were made only where textual or narrative indicators were present, including explicit theological language, recurring metaphors shaping moral imagination, articulated communal practices, or reflective accounts of worship's formative effects. Political positions were not coded unless invoked formatively; the focus remained on leadership posture and communal formation rather than persuasion.

Analytic procedure

Sermon analysis proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, manuscripts were segmented by rhetorical unit and coded within a structured spreadsheet ledger that recorded primary and secondary codes, brief evidence excerpts, and analytic memos. In the second phase, attention shifted to sermon-level and corpus-level synthesis, tracing recurring metaphors, dominant formative logics, and patterns over time. Interview analysis followed sermon coding to reduce the risk of back-fitting congregant accounts to sermonic themes. Transcripts were segmented into coherent response blocks and coded using the same five families and evidentiary

³⁴ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

³⁵ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2021).

rules. Integration occurred through comparison of resonance and dissonance between what sermons enacted and what congregants narrated as lived formation. Worship-context artifacts were incorporated interpretively as ecological support for claims about coordinated attention and shared speech rather than as a third dataset.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was supported through the constrained codebook, consistent segmentation rules, and a documented audit trail linking interpretive claims to evidence excerpts and analytic memos.³⁶ Interview confidentiality was protected through anonymization and de-identification in reporting. As a qualitative case study, findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable. The study does not attempt to measure political attitude change; its contribution lies in describing how worship forms communal posture and sustains it within contested public life.

Findings

Read together, the sermon corpus, interview narratives, and worship-context indicators suggest a coherent trajectory. In this case, worship does not function to reinforce political alignment. Rather, it gathers the congregation into a larger story shaped by God's arriving future, relativizing partisan loyalties without erasing real difference. The analysis that follows traces how this shared life is enacted and sustained through the practices of worship.

Across the corpus, sermons most consistently return to practices that gather and direct shared attention: how listeners speak, see neighbors, negotiate status, share material goods, and endure conflict without dissolving shared life. Interview narratives largely align with this trajectory, describing worship as a space where difference is real but held, where faith is not reduced to a checklist, and where the connection between worship and public

³⁶ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*. (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications, 1985).

life emerges through repeated practice rather than momentary persuasion.³⁷ The four findings that follow name the dominant movements within this pattern.

Finding 1: Belonging as Practiced Communion

The most sustained emphasis across this preaching period is communal: the congregation is addressed as a people whose identity is enacted in shared practice. The July 6 sermon states this with particular clarity: “We walk together. We believe together. We pray together. ...Faith is something that we do together.”³⁸ The sermon logic assumes that discipleship is not carried into contested contexts as isolated moral striving. Instead, “nobody is sent out alone,”³⁹ and communal life emerges as the basic structure through which faithful witness is sustained over time.

The July 13 sermon “Good Question!” develops belonging through the interpretive reversal at the center of Luke 10. It names that “there was ongoing debate about who...qualified as one’s neighbor,” then presses Jesus’ pivot: “Who was the neighbor?”⁴⁰ In this framing, neighbor is not a stable category the congregation can define in advance; neighborliness is an enacted posture shaped by mercy, proximity to vulnerability, and a willingness to be interrupted. The sermon links belonging to public leadership: credibility arises not from winning arguments but from practicing attention and compassion across boundaries.

That grammar then reappears across the series in household-and-table scenes. “The Better Part?”⁴¹ locates discipleship inside a home where listening and serving are held together without

³⁷ Interviews INT-001–INT-008 (January 2026), aligning with worship as a setting where difference is held and faith is narrated as communal formation.

³⁸ Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, “We All Are One in Mission,” July 6, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

³⁹ Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, “We All Are One in Mission,” July 6, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁴⁰ David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Good Question!,” July 13, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁴¹ Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, “The Better Part?,” July 20, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

contempt. “The Place of Honor”⁴² exposes status-seeking as a deformation of belonging and calls worshipers toward downward reorientation. “Lift up Your Eyes”⁴³ returns to attention—what people look at and what they fail to see—as an arena of moral formation. The arc concentrates most concretely in the November 2 sermon “Saints, Sinners, and the Savior’s Table,” where the table becomes the series’ most tangible image of repaired communal life: “The once-empty table becomes a place of abundance. What was hoarded becomes shared. What was damaged begins to heal.”⁴⁴ In this period of preaching, the table functions as a claim about durable communion: shared life is not sustained by sameness, but by practices capable of holding difference and repairing damage.

Interview narratives strongly match this belonging-as-practice formation. Participants repeatedly described the congregation as a community that can hold difference without collapsing into moral sorting. One interviewee (INT-001) emphasized “great diversity...[in] social [and] political...opinions,” yet described the congregation as one that “stays together despite those differences.” Another (INT-003) described the community as a place where people “search for answers,” not a church with “a checklist of right or wrong.” A participant with long-standing Presbyterian ties (INT-002) narrated belonging in terms of covenantal continuity: the church as the place where family life, grief, and pastoral presence were held inside communal memory rather than handled privately.⁴⁵

Belonging also appears as embodied recognition. One participant (INT-001) described being “most at home” among people they had served alongside and spoke of intentionally greeting those relationships as they enter worship—small gestures that

⁴² Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, “The Place of Honor,” August 31, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁴³ David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Lift up Your Eyes,” September 7, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁴⁴ David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Saints, Sinners, and the Savior’s Table,” November 2, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁴⁵ Interview INT-001, January 2026; Interview INT-003, January 2026; Interview INT-002, January 5, 2026, Zoom transcripts.

enact shared life.⁴⁶ Another (INT-004) described entering worship keenly aware that the congregation is not politically uniform yet still experiencing the sanctuary as a place where community can be practiced without immediate sorting. In these accounts, belonging is not an abstract ideal but a practiced pattern of recognition, shared habits, and staying in relationship.

The worship-context ledger corroborates this formation without serving as a separate coded dataset. On July 6, the post-sermon hymn is “We All Are One in Mission” (GTG 733),⁴⁷ giving the congregation a sung response that reinforces togetherness as vocation. On July 13, bulletin art highlights Van Gogh’s “The Good Samaritan,” visually echoing the sermon’s neighborly reversal, while the post-sermon hymn (“Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak,” GTG 722) frames speech as vocation rather than weapon.⁴⁸ Across the season, these communal and neighbor-focused hymns reinforce the sermons’ emphasis on belonging. What the congregation hears in proclamation is then voiced back together in song.

Finding 2: Authority as Love-Shaped Power

A second cross-sermon pattern is the repeated redefinition of power. Across the sermons, leadership is not presented as domination, and interview narratives largely describe authority in relational rather than coercive terms. Instead, it portrays authority as witness exercised through mercy, truth, and self-giving presence. The culminating articulation appears in the final sermon, “This Kind of King,” which explicitly rejects coercion as a Christian mode of influence: “Not the power to coerce, but the power to bless.”⁴⁹ The sermon extends this claim by defining power in terms

⁴⁶ Interview INT-001, January 2026; Interview INT-004, January 12, 2026, Zoom transcripts.

⁴⁷ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

⁴⁸ Worship Context Ledger, July 6, 2025 (post-sermon hymn: “We All Are One in Mission,” *Glory to God*, no. 733); Worship Context Ledger, July 13, 2025 (bulletin cover art: Vincent van Gogh, “The Good Samaritan”; post-sermon hymn: “Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak,” *Glory to God*, no. 722).

⁴⁹ David Forney, sermon manuscript, “This Kind of King,” November 23, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

of love, self-giving, and endurance. It offers an account of authority that is non-competitive and non-triumphal.

This reframing is echoed in other sermons as well. “Belay On” uses climbing imagery to portray dependence and trust as normal: “On belay?”/“Belay on.”⁵⁰ Courage becomes possible because someone holds the rope. The metaphor functions as a formation claim: noncoercive public posture becomes possible when worshipers learn to be held, by God and by one another, rather than securing themselves through control. Several midperiod sermons extend this posture by resisting status and honor games, “The Place of Honor,” and by framing witness as a form of sustained presence rather than public dominance; see “Praise from the Underside.”⁵¹

Economic and material life has become a particularly concrete site of this authority reframing. In “The Fool Says,” the sermon interprets Luke 12 with disarming directness: “He builds bigger barns.” Hoarding is framed not merely as private vice but as a deformation of imagination and trust. “Make It Fifty” presses mercy into practice through debt relief—“Eh, make it fifty”—suggesting that public witness includes material practices that resist scarcity and domination. “Worship on the Edge” likewise frames faithfulness in terms that do not rely on social security or cultural control, reinforcing the broader claim that worship reimagines power as a different kind of authority.⁵²

Interview narratives describe this leadership posture as pastoral guidance rather than partisan messaging. One participant (INT-007) described sermons as “empowering” because they highlight how ordinary people in scripture “made a difference.” Another (INT-008) described the congregation’s approach to political material as consistently nonpartisan and therefore “comfortable,”

⁵⁰ David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Belay On,” July 27, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁵¹ Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, “The Place of Honor,” August 31, 2025; and David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Praise from the Underside,” September 28, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁵² David Forney, sermon manuscript, “The Fool Says,” August 3, 2025; Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, “Make It Fifty,” September 21, 2025; and David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Worship on the Edge,” August 24, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

even with people on “completely opposite sides.” A third (INT-003) emphasized that the congregation is not a space of right-answer compliance, but a community that can “talk about things” honestly.⁵³ In these accounts, authority is experienced not as pressure to conform but as an invitation into durable communal posture.

Worship-context indicators strengthen this finding. On weeks where vocation and speech are foregrounded, postsermon hymns place the congregation’s voice in prayerful truth-bearing (“Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak,” GTG 722). On Christ the King Sunday, November 23, “Crown Him With Many Crowns” (GTG 268) relocates authority in Christ’s reign, reinforcing the sermon’s refusal of coercive power.⁵⁴ Here, hymnody functions as the congregation’s embodied uptake of the sermon’s authority claims: it gives worshipers shared words for truth-bearing that are not reducible to social victory.

Finding 3: From “Gotcha” to Repair

A third pattern becomes especially clear in the October–November period: conflict itself is treated as an arena of formation. The late arc does not deny polarization, but it refuses to let it define the congregation’s identity. “Grace to Begin Again” offers a diagnostic that functions as a parable of relational reality: “underneath every agreement lies a field of unhealed wounds.”⁵⁵ The sermon suggests surface settlement is insufficient where injury remains untreated; the community must be trained in practices of repair rather than rhetorical triumph.

“Gotcha!” intensifies this formation by naming the temptation to treat disagreement as point-scoring. It describes an “absurd gotcha question” and then reframes how truth is borne: “The

⁵³ Interview INT-007, January 16, 2026; Interview INT-008, January 22, 2026; Interview INT-003, January 2026, Zoom transcripts.

⁵⁴ Worship Context Ledger, July 13, 2025 (*Glory to God*, no. 722); Worship Context Ledger, November 23, 2025 (*Glory to God*, no. 268).

⁵⁵ David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Grace to Begin Again,” October 19, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

real answer...is to live it.”⁵⁶ In context, this becomes a critique of performative argument and a turn toward integrity. Truth is not only spoken; it is embodied. The November 2 table sermon gathers this conflict posture into a concrete communal practice: “What was damaged begins to heal.”⁵⁷ Healing is narrated as changed relational economy, namely, sharing rather than hoarding, re-entry into communion rather than exclusion. Durable communion is sustained through practices strong enough to hold difference and resist escalation.

Interview narratives resonate strongly with this posture and supply situated accounts of how conflict feels in the congregation. Participants repeatedly described entering worship aware of political difference. One interviewee (INT-004) described looking around the sanctuary and thinking, “I know we are not all united in how we see the political world.” Another (INT-008) described worship as consistently “comfortable” even with people on “completely opposite sides,” attributing that comfort to the way public themes were engaged without partisan sorting. A third (INT-007) said sermons were “not politically based,” yet still influenced how they thought about public life. Conflict formation occurred indirectly. The sermons did not tell people what to think but reshaped how they hold difference and frame public responsibility.⁵⁸

Interviews also contain micro-level examples of holding difference without rupture. One participant (INT-004) described being invited into conversation about contested worship language and interpreted the invitation as thoughtful engagement rather than shaming. Another (INT-001) framed diversity of opinion as a durable feature of the congregation rather than a crisis.⁵⁹ In these accounts, conflict posture appears as capacity: staying in relationship, speaking carefully, and refusing to turn difference into

⁵⁶ Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, “Gotcha!,” November 9, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁵⁷ David Forney, sermon manuscript, “Saints, Sinners, and the Savior’s Table,” November 2, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁵⁸ Interview INT-004, January 12, 2026; Interview INT-008, January 22, 2026; Interview INT-007, January 16, 2026, Zoom transcripts.

⁵⁹ Interview INT-004, January 12, 2026; Interview INT-001, January 2026, Zoom transcripts.

expulsion. That lived capacity aligns with the sermons' repeated movement away from "gotcha" and toward repair.

Finding 4: Hope as Defiant Endurance

Finally, this preaching encourages hope as durable rather than triumphalist. Hope appears not as denial of strain but as practiced refusal of despair. "The Defiant 'Yet'" compresses this formation into a memorable sentence: "When life strips away control, faith does not flinch. It dares to say 'yet'."⁶⁰ The sermon's repeated "Yet..." clauses ("Yet God heals... Yet God restores... Yet God redeems") train worshippers to name God's future without pretending the present is whole. This pattern offers a vocabulary of endurance that does not depend on optimism or victory.

This resilience is prepared through repeated attention to nonanxious trust and ordinary fidelity. "An Unexpected Hour" centers the scriptural exhortation not to fear and locates security in God's generosity rather than in control. "Saints and Scoundrels" frames communal identity as capacious; belonging is secured by grace rather than moral achievement, which supports resilience because failure does not automatically eject a person from communion. "Ordinary Acts, Extraordinary Impact" returns hope to the scale of everyday life, stressing that public leadership is not only exercised in dramatic moments but is sustained through repeated practices of attention, kindness, and faithfulness.⁶¹

Interview accounts align with this ordinary, future-oriented hope. Participants frequently describe worship as a perspective shift rather than a command. One (INT-007) summarized the effect: "That's what worship does... it makes you look... from a different perspective." Others connect hope to concrete service rather than abstraction. One participant (INT-006) described worship as "an awakening... a call to... serve alongside others," linking hope to embodied engagement.

⁶⁰ David Forney, sermon manuscript, "The Defiant 'Yet,'" October 12, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

⁶¹ Rachel Thompson Orfield, sermon manuscript, "An Unexpected Hour," August 10, 2025; David Forney, sermon manuscript, "Saints and Scoundrels," August 17, 2025; and David Forney, sermon manuscript, "Ordinary Acts, Extraordinary Impact," November 16, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

Another (INT-005) noted that congregational service can be “siloed” and that worship can expose gaps in understanding about local need, an account that frames hope not as vague uplift but as the willingness to see, learn, and act.⁶²

The worship-context ledger offers corroborating context for this hope formation. On October 12, the post-sermon hymn is “O for a World” (GTG 372), placing congregational voice in the register of longing and future-shaped desire that matches the sermon’s “yet.” On August 3, where the sermon critiques scarcity (“bigger barns”), the post-sermon hymn is “God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending” (GTG 716), embodying generosity as communal response.⁶³ Bulletin art and hymnody frequently echo mercy, neighborliness, and endurance, reinforcing hope as a practice enacted through worship’s visual and sung ecology.

Integrative summary

Across sermons, interviews, and worship-context indicators, the case displays a coherent trajectory. The congregation is repeatedly addressed and drawn into practices of belonging as public witness (neighbor, house, table), invited to reimagine authority as love-shaped power rather than coercion, encouraged to resist “gotcha” dynamics through a repair-oriented conflict posture, and sustained by hope practiced as endurance. Interview narratives largely align with this trajectory, describing a community able to remain together amid differences and to carry worship’s patterns of speech and attention into everyday life. In the context of the Virginia election season, these converging patterns suggest that worship can sustain a communal capacity that enables a congregation to inhabit polarization without mirroring its escalatory scripts.

⁶² Interview INT-007, January 16, 2026; Interview INT-006, January 14, 2026; Interview INT-005, January 13, 2026, Zoom transcripts.

⁶³ Worship Context Ledger, October 12, 2025 (post-sermon hymn: “O for a World,” *Glory to God*, no. 372); Worship Context Ledger, August 3, 2025 (post-sermon hymn: “God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending,” *Glory to God*, no. 716).

Discussion

The case invites a reframing of public life not as a contest of persuasion but as a question of communal posture. What emerges across sermons, interviews, and worship-context indicators is not a strategy for managing polarization but a patterned way of inhabiting shared life: remaining together across difference, speaking truthfully without humiliation, and enduring tension without retreat. In this congregation, durable communion appears less as a newly generated capacity than as a communal posture enacted and sustained through worship's repeated practices. In polarized settings, such a posture may function as a public good, not because it resolves disagreement, but because it makes disagreement livable.

Authority is likewise reimaged as love-shaped power. In both content and tone, preaching consistently detaches influence from domination and reattaches it to blessing, mercy, and integrity. This modeling does not occur abstractly; it is embodied in the pastors' mode of address, the restraint with which they name contested realities, and the refusal to caricature those with whom they disagree. Leadership here is not a strategy for mobilization but a relational posture enacted in speech and presence. Preaching becomes the steady cultivation of a disciplined public posture, with conviction joined to restraint and clarity joined to care.

Conflict, finally, is approached not as a threat to cohesion but as a site where shared life is tested and clarified. The refusal of "gotcha" dynamics and the emphasis on repair-oriented practices suggest that worship cultivates a grammar of speech and relation capable of interrupting reactivity. In this light, worship's public significance lies less in issue advocacy than in sustaining a community able to inhabit contested life without mirroring its escalatory scripts.

1) Durable communion as communal posture

The central contribution of this study is to name durable communion as a patterned communal posture with public implications. In the sermon corpus, belonging is consistently presented as something practiced through neighborliness, household scenes, and table imagery rather than assumed. Communion is not treated as mere theological status or interpersonal preference; it

appears as a posture enacted through repeated patterns of attention and shared practice. Interview accounts reinforce this portrayal, describing a congregation in which social and political differences are real but not determinative of belonging, and where worship is experienced as a space that can hold searching without reducing faith to compliance.

Durable communion functions as a communal capacity strong enough to hold disagreement without defaulting to the relational logic of high conflict. This is significant in light of Ripley's account of escalation and reactivity: in polarized environments, conflict often becomes identity-forming, pulling people into scripts of suspicion and caricature. The case suggests worship can help rehearse an alternative script in which difference is acknowledged but not weaponized as a basis for sorting. The implication is not that churches should avoid public issues but that they attend to how worship shapes the habits by which people engage those issues: the speed of their judgments, the dignity they grant opponents, the patience with which they listen, and the ways they interpret power.

2) Recasting power: from persuasion to blessing

A second thread running through the corpus is the reframing of authority and influence within worship's speech and imagery. Across the sermons, leadership language is consistently detached from coercion and reattached to blessing, mercy, and integrity. The culminating phrase, "not the power to coerce, but the power to bless,"⁶⁴ condenses this theological claim. Rather than presenting authority as control or mobilization, the sermons place it under the grammar of love-shaped responsibility.

The interviews do not narrate dramatic shifts in political conviction or newly adopted views of power. Instead, they resonate with this sermonic grammar, describing authority in relational rather than coercive terms and emphasizing restraint, patience, and responsibility in public engagement. What appears, then, is less a report of changed minds than a shared vocabulary made explicit and sustained through worship's repeated practices.

⁶⁴ David Forney, sermon manuscript, "This Kind of King," November 23, 2025, First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA.

Two implications follow for preaching in polarized contexts. First, this grammar challenges the assumption that effective preaching must be measured by immediate agreement, impact, or mobilization. Under secular pressures and an accelerated attention economy, the church is tempted to compete through technique, relevance, and persuasive force. In contrast, preaching may function as a steady articulation of truthful speech that does not depend on domination to be real. Second, truth-bearing without domination is not passivity but a disciplined public posture in which moral clarity is joined to restraint, conviction to patience, and witness to a refusal to treat opponents as enemies.

In this way, Brueggemann's prophetic imagination and Root's formation lens converge. The alternative consciousness enacted in worship is not an ideology. It is a way of seeing and speaking shaped by God's reality and God's future. When hope is grounded in God's coming reign, political alignment need not bear the weight of ultimate meaning. Congregants may still care deeply about public life, yet worship rehearses a way to carry that care without panic, contempt, or the compulsion to force outcomes as though everything depended on them.

3) Conflict as a formational arena: resisting "gotcha" life

A third contribution is the treatment of conflict as formation. In the late-series arc, sermons explicitly name and refuse "gotcha" patterns in which truth becomes a tool for humiliation and belonging becomes contingent on rhetorical competence. The series frames conflict not merely as a problem to solve but as an arena where communal posture is formed. Interviews corroborate this posture by describing worship as "comfortable" amid recognized political differences and by valuing searching, dialogue, and the capacity to remain together.

This pattern matters because high conflict is simply not more disagreement; it deforms relational imagination. Ripley notes that high conflict narrows attention and reduces complexity, making people more certain and less curious. This case suggests worship can function as a counter-practice within a broader relational ecology: it slows down the rush to judgment, returns attention to God and

neighbor, and trains language that does not require enemies. The point is not to avoid hard truths but to bear truth without the relational violence of contempt.

For worship leaders, conflict-posture formation is a primary pastoral task rather than a secondary “communication strategy.” Sermons need not mention politics constantly to form a political posture. They form posture by modeling how people speak, listen, and imagine the neighbor. Moreover, they model how to respond to injury. Practices of confession, intercession, and shared song are not ornamental; they are a school of speech and desire that can either intensify reactivity or cultivate repair.

4) Hope as endurance: living from God’s arriving future

A fourth contribution is its account of hope. The corpus does not frame hope as optimism or as confidence in national outcomes. Hope appears as a defiant endurance that can say “yet” when control is stripped away. This resonates strongly with Moltmann’s claim that Christian life is oriented toward God’s future, and that hope is a discipline that sustains faith’s movement through present tension. When worship is received as the weekly practice of inhabiting God’s arriving future, hope becomes less a feeling and more a shared moral ecology: a community learning to endure without despair and to act without coercion.

Interview narratives reinforce this by describing worship as a weekly re-centering in which a shift in perspective steadies participants, clarifies what matters, and sustains engagement in everyday life. Worship participates in shaping public posture not by producing a uniform political program but by cultivating resilience, the capacity to keep showing up, loving neighbors, speaking truth, and practicing communion under strain.

5) Worship’s formative ecology: warrant for hymnody and bulletin art context

Finally, worship-context indicators (bulletin-cover art information and postsermon hymns from Glory to God) strengthen the interpretive claim that formation is ecological. Even when art blurbs are absent, the consistent documentation of what the congregation sees and sings provides contextual warrant for

the argument that worship forms through coordinated attention. Hymnody, especially after proclamation, functions as a shared communal voice—it is an embodied “amen” that trains congregants to speak together rather than merely consume content individually. In this case, the worship-context ledger supports the claim that the congregation’s formation is not limited to sermon text; it is reinforced through visual framing and shared song. These supports treat hymnody and bulletin art as contextual indicators rather than a separate coded dataset. They help describe how worship’s repeated practices stabilize a communal identity capable of holding difference without relinquishing shared life.

This study does not claim that worship generates communion independent of relational history. Congregational ethos, pastoral presence, and long-standing interpersonal patterns shape how worship is heard and enacted. The analysis instead attends to worship as the primary recurring public site in which that relational life is interpreted, disciplined, and, at times, intensified under pressure.

Limitations

Several limitations frame this study. First, it is a single-congregation case bound to a particular season; its claims are interpretive and reader-transferable rather than statistically generalizable. Second, the study does not attempt to demonstrate linear causation between worship and communal outcomes. It does not measure growth in communion, nor does it isolate worship from the broader relational ecology of congregational life. Congregational ethos, pastoral presence, and long-standing interpersonal patterns inevitably shape how worship is heard and enacted.

The contribution of this case is therefore not causal proof but *thick description*: tracing how worship’s repeated practices—proclamation, prayer, song, confession, and table—function as a recurring public enactment of shared life under strain. In this congregation, durable communion does not appear as a newly manufactured capacity but as a posture sustained and interpreted through worship during a season of heightened polarization.

Finally, the study does not claim measurable change in political

attitudes or civic behavior. Its claim is more modest, long-term, and theological: that worship can participate in shaping communal posture by disciplining speech, sustaining attention, and enacting belonging in ways that make shared life more resilient amid contested public conditions. As such, its implications might be even more profound.

Conclusion

Public life today is marked not simply by disagreement but by intensification. Conflict hardens into identity, urgency crowds out patience, and persuasion is easily mistaken for faithfulness. In such a climate, congregations face a decisive question: will their worship mirror the culture's dynamics of domination, or will it enact a different kind of common life?

This case suggests that a congregation's primary public contribution is not partisan alignment or rhetorical victory but sustained participation in a communal posture. Across one congregation's sermons, interviews, and worship context during a contested election season, a consistent movement appears. Difference is not eliminated, nor is harmony guaranteed. Instead, a way of being together is enacted and steadied in which people remain across disagreement, speak truth without humiliation, endure tension without despair, and ground their common life in God's reconciling action rather than political sameness.

Such enactment does not occur apart from relational history. The sermons were heard within long-standing pastoral relationships, shared trust, and an established ethos of belonging. Worship functions here not as an independent engine of communion but as its recurring public expression, interpreting, disciplining, and at times intensifying patterns of shared life already present within the congregation.

This posture may be named durable communion. It is neither consensus nor mere civility, but practiced belonging sustained through prayer, proclamation, song, confession, and table. It is a communal resilience that refuses both coercion and withdrawal. In polarized contexts, such resilience does not resolve conflict, yet it renders conflict livable without surrendering conviction or

communion. Its influence is indirect yet steady. Through repeated participation in shared practices, the congregation rehearses a form of life shaped by God's arriving future. Over time, that rehearsal sustains a people able to inhabit civic life without mirroring its escalatory scripts. Durable communion thus remains not a finished achievement but an ongoing practice, a shared life continually interpreted, disciplined, and renewed through the worship of God.

CULTIVATING FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH: A CASE STUDY IN DEVELOPING LEADERS FOR NEW CONTEXTUAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

DWIGHT ZSCHEILE AND SEAN STEELE

Abstract

In today's missionary environment, new contextual Christian communities are needed alongside established congregational structures to reach neighbors for whom traditional church is not accessible. Developing leaders for these new communities brings specific challenges and opportunities. This article draws lessons from a case study of cultivating leaders of fresh expressions of church within mainline congregations to explore how churches might identify, discern, equip, and empower emerging leaders to form Christian communities that meet neighbors where they are.

Introduction

In many places across the North American church today, missionary strategies focused on attracting people into traditional congregations aren't working well. Despite anecdotal evidence of renewed interest in Christianity among some in the Gen Z cohort (particularly men), the broader trend of generational disengagement from traditional faith communities continues.

To quote sociologist Christian Smith, for Gen X and younger generations, traditional institutional religion has become "obsolete."¹ It is a niche interest among a minority, like a taste for vinyl records or antiques. Most people are turning elsewhere to

¹ Christian Smith, *Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America* (Oxford U.P., 2025).

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find spiritual meaning and purpose, even as contemporary Western culture is saturated with spirituality and displaced enchantment.²

Traditional congregations are inaccessible for all kinds of reasons, even to those who might want to connect with them. As Michael Moynagh observes, any time a church decides to meet in a particular place at a particular time in a particular cultural expression, some people will be excluded.³ Many people today don't trust the institutional church, sometimes for good reason. Most people without a Christian background are unlikely to feel comfortable showing up at worship as their entry point into Christian community.

For these reasons, we need new forms of Christian community that meet in neighborhood spaces and focus on connecting with people who aren't part of traditional churches. We live in a missionary environment that calls for what has become known in the UK as a "mixed ecology" of different forms of Christian community alongside one another.⁴ These include traditional congregations but also church plants, megachurches, microchurches, digital church, and fresh expressions of church.⁵ No one size or shape of church fits all in Western societies today.

This article focuses on developing leaders for fresh expressions: grassroots, largely lay-led new contextual communities that typically meet in neighborhood spaces to love and serve those who aren't part of traditional churches. Fresh expressions ask, "What might church look like among these neighbors?" rather than "How do we get these neighbors into our existing forms of church?" They are connected to inherited congregations and structures but are free to

² See Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (Public Affairs, 2020); William Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry* (Oxford U.P., 2024).

³ Michael Moynagh, *Giving the Church* (SCM Press, 2024), 40.

⁴ Rowan Williams initially used the phrase "mixed economy" when he was Archbishop of Canterbury to describe how traditional parish churches might be complemented by emerging network churches. See Ed Olsworth-Peter, *Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting an Integrated Church* (SPCK, 2024).

⁵ Dwight Zscheile and Blair Pogue, *Embracing the Mixed Ecology: Inherited and New Forms of Christian Community Flourishing Together* (Seabury Books, 2025).

engage neighbors where they are through listening, loving, building community, exploring life with Jesus, and growing disciples.⁶

The fresh expressions movement emerged in the UK over the past thirty years to address advanced secularization. Fresh expressions have focused on contextualizing Christian witness within specific local spaces and populations who are unlikely to engage with inherited congregations. For instance, Messy Church, one of the most popular forms, reaches families with young children. Dinner Church provides a relational, interactive space for people to explore faith while breaking bread with neighbors.

Fresh expressions communities have emerged within pubs, cafés, parks, forests, sports, hobbies, workplaces, and community centers. These communities have been effective in engaging neighbors, making disciples, and bringing spiritual growth and transformation to the people who lead them.⁷ Think of fresh expressions as experimental spaces on the edges of the church's life where local Christians are learning how to be in mission with neighbors, often where people are already gathering in the neighborhood.

Leadership in these communities looks different from predominant models of clerical and professionalized ministry. Most are led by non-stipendiary lay leaders. The primary expectation is not that these fresh expressions will become formal congregations. Many have a close relationship with local congregations for mutual support, equipping, oversight, and accountability, but they are often more provisional and agile. If the mixed ecology is a garden with many different kinds of plants, including the towering oak trees of historic congregations, fresh expressions are like the strawberry runners or flowers that might thrive for a season or two.⁸ They are not expected

⁶ See Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life: Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens* (Monarch Books, 2014), Shannon Kiser, *Opening Space: A Vision for Fresh Expressions of Church and Creative Mission* (Seedbed, 2025).

⁷ George Lings, *The Day of Small Things: An Analysis of Fresh Expressions of Church in 21 Dioceses of the Church of England* (Church Army, 2016) and Church of England/Eido Research, *Fresh Expressions of Church: Fruitfulness Framework Report* (2021).

⁸ We are indebted to Sally Gaze for this image.

to become as heavily institutionalized as traditional churches or even church plants, but they do vital work connecting with neighbors who wouldn't otherwise engage with Christian community.

The ecclesial status of fresh expressions is somewhat contested, depending on one's ecclesiological and theological tradition.⁹ Some fresh expressions include sacraments, but others look to congregations to which they are linked for sacramental life. In the UK context, this mixed ecology has led to a creative redefinition of ecclesiology to move beyond the Christendom-shaped confessions of the sixteenth century, which tend to focus on clergy-centric gatherings around Word and Sacrament. Church is characterized more expansively by four relationships: Up (with God), In (with one another in fellowship), Out (with neighbors in witness and service) and Of (part of the whole body of Christ).¹⁰ Michael Moynagh describes fresh expressions as "on the way" to being full church.¹¹

In the US context, while the fresh expressions concept is becoming more common, it is still relatively unfamiliar in many places and church systems. Luther Seminary's Faith+Lead, with support from the Siebert Lutheran Foundation, led a pilot initiative in 2024-25 to select, discern, train, and coach teams of leaders from Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations in Wisconsin to start fresh expressions.¹² Fresh expressions were not widely known in these congregations or their synods (regional judicatories) as of the start of this process. While some local examples were emerging, the process proposed a new way for most participants to imagine church and engage neighbors.

Over an approximately yearlong process, nine congregational teams started thirteen fresh expressions, twelve of which continue as of this writing. This article explores the leadership dynamics of training and supporting starters of fresh expressions or similar

⁹ See, for instance, Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (SCM Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Archbishops' Council of the Church of England, *Mission-Shaped Church* (Church House, 2004), 99.

¹¹ Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life* (Cascade Books, 2018), 242.

¹² We're grateful to the Siebert Foundation for its support of this project and to our colleague Tessa Pinkstaff who worked alongside us on this process.

contextual missional communities. While the project's results far surpassed expectations, the process posed challenges related to lay leadership more generally, particularly in mainline Protestant congregations. These challenges have become familiar in our work over the past few decades with congregations and their leaders.

The Leadership Formation Challenge

The language of mixed ecology is hopeful and generative. It identifies the church as a creative, missional, and adaptive organism, and it gives us a vision of what congregational life can become. However, in our coaching experience with mainline Protestant congregations across multiple denominations, this movement from vision to enactment has proven difficult. That difficulty, we want to argue, is not primarily a matter of insufficient faith or commitment on the part of leaders, nor is it evidence that the Spirit has withdrawn from these communities.

Rather, the obstacles are formational and cultural, clustering around three interrelated challenges: imagination, motivation, and agency. Naming these challenges clearly is important, because each one calls for a different kind of leadership response. And because each challenge is deeply rooted, small technical adjustments are insufficient.

The Imagination Challenge

Most leaders in inherited denominations have been formed within a remarkably stable picture of church. Church is a dedicated building, a sanctuary ordered around altar and pulpit, an ordained leader presiding, and a gathered assembly at a fixed hour on Sunday morning. This picture is not incidental. It functions as what Charles Taylor calls a "social imaginary," the largely tacit, taken-for-granted background that shapes how a community pictures its common life and what it regards as normal, legitimate, and possible.¹³ Social imaginary is not primarily carried on through specific doctrine. It is the result of repeated practice. Social imaginary becomes, in James K. A. Smith's terms, a matter of habituated desire and bodily

¹³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2004).

memory formed through liturgy and routine.¹⁴ We all have one that operates beneath deliberate reflection or conscious understanding, and because of this, it often constrains our perception.

So, when a leader proposes that church might gather around a dinner table, in a park, a laundromat, a brewery, or a workplace break room, the hesitation that follows is rarely outright rejection. It is, instead, a failure of recognition. These gatherings are difficult to credit as fully church because they do not map onto the dominant inherited imaginary. Leaders attempt and struggle to locate where the Word is proclaimed, where prayer is offered, where Christ is present, and how the sacraments might be administered. Similarly, Walter Brueggemann describes this phenomenon as a captivity to the “dominant consciousness,” which often forecloses alternatives simply by rendering them unthinkable. For him, the corresponding prophetic task is the nurture of an alternative imagination.¹⁵ The imagination challenge, then, is not merely structural but perceptual. It asks leaders to enlarge their picture of what church can be without disowning what church has been.¹⁶

The Motivation Challenge

The second challenge concerns *why* a congregation would undertake the risk of a new contextual ministry at all. When the animating motive is institutional survival because of declining attendance, contracting budgets, eroding cultural influence, or a felt obligation to denominational authorities, a mixed-ecology ministry registers as another reactive strategy, another device or program aimed at fixing an ailing institution. This type of instrumental motivation is fragile, and congregations are, in our observation, weary of novel strategies. Too often, denominational and judicatory leaders have relied on extrinsic motivation, asking congregations to meet predetermined outcomes as a sign of success or faithfulness. This no longer works because extrinsically

¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009).

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (Jossey-Bass, 2006).

motivated congregations are less resilient and less generative than those motivated by interest, conviction, and meaning internal to the activity itself.¹⁷ Mixed ecology ministry requires grit, and that grit is not generated from the outside.

Underneath this motivational deficit lies a deeper question of purpose. Many congregations are not clear about why they exist beyond perpetuating what they have inherited. They are fluent in running programs, sustaining buildings, and conducting worship. However, a striking number of the lay leaders we have trained over the years cannot readily name an experience of encounter, transformation, or participation in God's life. This affirms a confusion that the missional theology literature has long diagnosed at the level of purpose. When a church community understands itself chiefly as an institution to be maintained rather than as a community caught up in the *missio Dei*, maintenance displaces mission as the default telos of its life together.¹⁸ Mixed ecology work requires a compelling account of why the church exists. Such an account is grounded in the conviction that it is called to be a community where people encounter the living God and are drawn into God's reconciling work in the world. Otherwise, the imagination collapses back into maintenance. Ultimately, this motivation challenge pressures congregations with two questions. Do they understand themselves primarily as preserving an institution or as participating in God's mission? And, have their people had the kind of transformative encounter with God necessary to propel them outward?

The Agency Challenge

The third challenge might be the most difficult because it concerns the distribution of authority and the laity's theological self-understanding. Mainline congregations have been formed, often admirably, by impressive structures of discernment and

¹⁷ Edward L. Deci, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (Plenum Press, 1975).

¹⁸ Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998); David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991); and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans, 1989).

accountability. We have committees that deliberate, councils that approve, pastors that initiate, and budgets that authorize. These structures safeguard theological integrity and communal accountability, and we should not dismiss them. And, they often tacitly communicate that ministry flows outward from an ordained center, which usually renders lay members paralyzed and waiting for permission. Fresh expressions disrupt this at its root. They ask lay people to notice where God might already be at work outside of our structures. They ask the laity to initiate relationships, to gather neighbors, to pray, and to experiment without any assurance of success. This requires permission and trust before the proof of measurable outcomes.

This redistribution of agency is threatening, especially within anxious systems. Edwin Friedman's analysis of congregations as inherently emotional systems supports our claim. Friedman showed that under conditions of perceived threat and decline, the reflexive institutional instinct is to tighten control, centralize authority, and reduce risk rather than to release, distribute, and multiply it.¹⁹ Theologically, baptism confers a genuine vocation and agency upon every Christian, and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the whole people of God, poured out upon sons and daughters, young and old, male and female alike. The Spirit is working in and through everybody and is not channeled exclusively through ordained office (Acts 2:17–18; cf. Joel 2:28–29).

The agency challenge is pneumatological because mission is first the Spirit's own work and only derivatively the church's work. The church is drawn into a *missio Dei* that the Spirit initiates, directs, and sustains.²⁰ We must recover a robust pneumatology that refuses to confine the Spirit's initiating, gifting, and sending work to the sanctuary or to those in formal office. Communities must expect and anticipate that the Spirit will distribute charisms across the whole body of Christ, equipping each member for ministry and

¹⁹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Seabury Books, 2007); and Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Guilford Press, 1985).

²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1995).

witness. If we teach and believe that the Spirit characteristically goes ahead of the church and is already at work among neighbors before anyone arrives, then the lay leader's vocation is to discern and join what the Spirit is already doing. Mixed ecology takes baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit seriously.

This language feels new and empowering. Rarely have we found people in our cohorts that think that it is "wrong." Instead, they seem to describe this redistribution as destabilizing. This means that it cannot simply be demanded from below. In our experience, it must be modeled and authorized from above because our institutional culture has trained parishioners to await permission, and most will not act without it. The task of the bishop and pastor is to recognize and release lay initiatives with a robust pneumatology.

Taken together, these three challenges are not technical problems that simply need a procedural adjustment. They are adaptive challenges. This means that they require changes in values, habits, loyalties, and self-understanding, and they cannot be resolved by applying existing expertise.²¹ They demand courage, humility, and trust in the Spirit's work beyond familiar boundaries. The goal of mixed ecology is not just to maintain what congregations love. Fresh Expressions ministry is about expanding what people believe is possible. In the words of one of the lay leaders we worked with in this process, it is not simply making room at an existing table. Instead, it is about building new tables together with neighbors wherever the Spirit is already gathering people for the sake of healing and relationship.

Results

The nine congregational teams from four regional synods of the ELCA in Wisconsin (with nearly forty leaders participating), started thirteen fresh expressions of church over a thirteen-

²¹ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Harvard Business Press, 2009). Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (InterVarsity Press, 2015).

month period. These fresh expressions are mostly focused on forming Christian community with marginalized neighbors. For instance, one team's neighborhood listening led them to focus on families with neurodivergent children. These families felt isolated and disconnected from the wider community, one another, and traditional church. Conventional worship services and church activities were inaccessible to them. The team's fresh expressions brought these families together in different ways for mutual support, spiritual practices, and intergenerational faith activities.

Another team's discernment led them to an assisted living center for seniors who had limited mobility and no access to local congregations. They created a fresh expression around music and singing that the care center residents could join at different levels of cognitive ability. Other groups gathered in cafés, parks, Mexican restaurants, workplaces, breweries, and local nature areas. Many of the expressions involve shared meals. All of these expressions are simple, conversational, and participatory, and they include elements of scripture, prayer, and song. They seek to meet neighbors where they are.

One finding from studies of fresh expressions in the UK is that leading a fresh expression is one of the most powerful ways to deepen discipleship and grow spiritually.²² We saw similar things with our participants. They reported feeling energized, excited anew about what church could be, and better connected to their neighbors and to other Lutherans across the state. By the end, 100 percent of participant-survey respondents indicated that they could articulate the difference the Gospels make in their lives, and 93 percent agreed that they could interpret how God was active in their local neighborhood.

Process Design and Key Learnings

Participant Readiness

To address the challenges named above, we designed a highly

²² Church of England/Eido Research, *Fresh Expressions of Church: Fruitfulness Framework Report* (2021).

intentional leadership discernment and development process. Our first key learning is around participant readiness. We were very deliberate about the invitation, discernment, and screening process for who was ready to engage this journey—a lesson we have learned the hard way in previous efforts with mainline audiences. Working with teams there only because the pastor or bishop asked them to do it does not lead to good results. Often, leaders who are open to trying innovative ministry are primarily motivated by the survival of their own present form of organizational church. This leads to limited ability to discern what new life the Spirit may want to bring forth in contextualizing Christian community in neighborhood spaces. We wanted teams with intrinsic motivation grounded in love of God and neighbor, not institutional obligation or desperation.

We vetted congregational team members through an initial application survey followed by interviews to confirm readiness and expectations. The survey asked questions about people's expectations and understanding of what they were committing to, their reasons for joining, and their spiritual posture. We had applicants self-assess their sense of compassion and curiosity about neighbors who aren't part of traditional church, their identity as disciples of Jesus, their willingness to take risks and try something new, and their capacity to be playful. We also asked them to confirm the support of the formal leadership of their local congregation for participation in the process.

This was followed by 1:1 interviews with applicants. A fresh expressions group is highly relational, and we wanted the process to begin with relational engagement with the leaders who were interested in participating. These interviews provided an opportunity to confirm their commitment and readiness and to answer questions that leaders were bringing to the process. It also set a tone that prioritized listening to them where they were and hearing a bit of their stories, which embodied core commitments of the fresh expressions journey.

This discernment brought to the forefront something that we have discovered in previous work with mainline Protestant leaders: *effective missional leaders have had transformational encounters with*

the living God. Leaders who have not experienced firsthand the difference Jesus makes are unlikely to be able to do the spiritual discernment, listening, and creative risk-taking of forming Christian community with neighbors outside the church. This might seem self-evident, but the reality is that mainline Protestant church life is not necessarily oriented around cultivating transformational encounters with the living God. There are many reasons for this which we are not able to explore here. However, the journey of joining the Spirit's lead in forming a new experimental Christian community with neighbors constituted a significant opportunity for deepening Christian faith for participants. If they had no touchstone experience of why that is important, they were unlikely to sign up for the journey.

Experiential Trainings

Another key learning is around the shape of training the participants. The learning community process was designed around three daylong trainings (two in person and one on Zoom) with online group coaching in between. Our goal was to support these teams in listening to their neighborhood contexts, forming community with neighbors, and taking the first steps of developing expressions of Christian community that included spiritual practices and scriptural engagement in accessible and culturally sensitive ways. The trainings focused primarily on participatory spiritual practices and conversation rather than information sharing. While we did offer teaching around the fresh expressions framework for ministry and shared videos and stories that gave parables of what fresh expressions look like in various contexts among various neighborhood groups, we wanted the trainings to be as much about spiritual formation and relational connection as information acquisition.

In a culture that tends to revert to standardization, franchising, and cookie-cutter models, it was important to cultivate imagination and inspiration while allowing for the process of contextualization to unfold with its own integrity. Fresh expressions must be grounded in deep listening to neighbors in the local setting. What might work in one location or among one set of neighbors won't

be a good fit in another place. We were training these leaders in a fundamentally open-ended process, which brings its own anxieties.

We found that spiritual practices done in community, with conversation, reflection, and sharing across teams from different congregations, were essential to address this. The practices created high levels of energy in the room as they engaged some of the core competencies in the journey, such as listening, storytelling, discernment, design, and prototyping. We introduced these practices in ways that offered a stretch outside participants' comfort zones while limiting the risk. For instance, we asked people to share their stories as deeply as they felt comfortable within pairs, rather than the whole room at first.

The practices also focused on helping people connect the dots between their experiences of God in daily life and their experiences of church. In our work with church teams over the years, we have found that these connections are often not tended well by congregations. For instance, how might experiences of God's hospitality in the Eucharist relate to encounters people have at tables in their homes and neighborhoods? We helped people reflect upon the relationship between the two. Identifying stories of God's activity in their own experience provided motivation for participants and served as the spiritual basis for the kind of risk-taking that is necessary to start new forms of church in relation to neighbors.

Through these trainings and the larger process, we wanted to create a community of collegiality, celebration, and permission to try and fail. This kind of environment was different from what many of them typically experienced at church. What we were asking them to do was unfamiliar for many of them, and so developing a learning environment characterized by grace rather than shame and judgment was essential. This became an important theological theme throughout the journey. With this particular audience, we could tie it into core Lutheran teachings on justification by faith rather than our own perfection.

Group Coaching

Monthly group coaching on Zoom became the backbone of the

formation process, not just for content delivery, but for forming a learning community. We led participants through a nine-session coaching pathway on missional leadership that integrated practical skill development with theological reflection and education. Each gathering followed a consistent rhythm. We began with Dwelling in the Word, a simple practice of listening to Scripture and reflecting upon it together, rooted in traditions of *lectio divina*.²³ From there, we moved into focused skill development, equipping leaders with tools they could immediately apply in their contexts. These included themes such as Missional Presence, Deep Listening, Expansive Questions, Celebration and Encouragement, Truth-telling, Trusting Intuition, Recognizing Burnout, and Naming Limiting Beliefs. We processed the conversations in small groups and the larger cohort, allowing for real-time learning, reflection, vulnerability, and feedback.

Between sessions, we offered individual coaching to support leaders in their specific contexts, helping them navigate challenges, discern next steps, and feel supported. After the initial nine modules, we continued meeting monthly, and the remaining gatherings shifted toward more peer-based learning. We shared best practices, troubleshooted specific issues, and celebrated what God was doing across the different expressions. Over time, the cohort itself became a source of wisdom, support, accountability, and encouragement.

Rather than driving the process through a rigid timeline, this structure allowed leaders to move at a pace that matched their context, while still being held in a clear and intentional formational pathway. This pacing proved important because fresh expressions cannot simply be franchised or mechanically reproduced. The process required leaders to cultivate attentiveness to their particular neighborhoods, relationships, and contexts. Our participants needed freedom to experiment, fail, reflect, and adapt without the pressure of traditional success metrics.

In many inherited church systems, leadership formation is often primarily informational. Leaders are given theological

²³ Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (Allelon Publishing, 2006).

content, strategic frameworks, or technical ministry skills to implement. These forms of training have been proven to be useful for many people, but we have repeatedly found that they can be insufficient for the adaptive and relational work required in mixed ecology ministry. The work of fresh expressions needs leaders who are capable of listening deeply, navigating ambiguity, discerning relationally, and engaging neighbors without predetermined outcomes. These are not merely technical competencies. They are spiritual and emotional capacities that must be cultivated over time within community.²⁴

Many participants entered the process with deeply internalized assumptions about ministry and leadership. Even highly committed lay leaders often lacked confidence in their own spiritual authority or ability to initiate ministry and create meaningful relationships. Some participants openly questioned whether they were qualified enough to lead spiritual conversations outside church walls. Others wondered whether what they were imagining would “count” as church at all. While many affirmed ideas like baptismal vocation or the priesthood of all believers intellectually, they had little practical experience of being trusted to initiate ministry in creative or experimental ways. In many cases, participants had spent decades in church environments where ministry primarily flowed from clergy, committees, or institutional structures outward.

For this reason, the coaching process was not designed simply to teach participants about fresh expressions. It was intentionally designed to slowly create a relational and spiritual environment capable of reshaping imagination, confidence, attentiveness, and agency. The recurring rhythm of gathering together became especially important. Participants needed time to build trust, practice vulnerability, experiment with new behaviors, and internalize new ways of imagining ministry.

The opening rhythms of the gatherings became formative in ways we did not fully anticipate. Practices such as tactical breathing,

²⁴ Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 1991); and David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Prentice-Hall, 1984).

silence, and Dwelling in the Word slowed participants down and cultivated attentiveness. Rather than beginning with productivity, problem-solving, or institutional anxiety, the gatherings invited participants into a posture of listening and presence. Dwelling in the Word helped participants engage Scripture communally through reflection and discernment, not analysis alone. Participants were invited to notice what caught their attention, what questions emerged, and what God might be saying through the passage. This simple but consistent practice helped create a culture of attentiveness that is critical to the thriving of any fresh expression.²⁵

The themes of the coaching sessions reflected our experience and what we learned about the adaptive challenges participants would face in this work. Deep listening became foundational because many participants realized they had rarely been trained to enter relationships or neighborhoods without assumptions about what people needed or what ministry should become. Deep listening requires humility, curiosity, and the willingness to release control. Similarly, the sessions on powerful questions challenged participants to move away from performative expertise and toward genuine relational curiosity. Rather than trying to fix or persuade people, participants practiced asking questions that opened space for storytelling, reflection, and connection.²⁶

Several sessions directly addressed the emotional and psychological dimensions of leadership formation. Conversations around burnout, limiting beliefs, and the inner critic became especially significant for many participants. Leaders frequently named fears around inadequacy, failure, rejection, and not being spiritually competent enough to lead. Others carried assumptions that meaningful ministry belonged primarily to ordained professionals or highly extroverted personalities. Naming these

²⁵ Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed. (Jossey-Bass, 2010); and Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed. (Westminster John Knox, 2005). On communal discernment and the inner life of leaders, see Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

²⁶ Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (Berrett-Koehler, 2013); Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Berrett-Koehler, 2008).

beliefs communally seemed to be liberating. Some participants named the impact that institutional culture, perfectionism, and anxiety have had on their understanding of ministry and even their understanding of themselves as a member of the church.²⁷

The emphasis on celebration and encouragement also became an important counter-practice within the cohort. Many church systems are shaped by scarcity, exhaustion, institutional anxiety, and an ongoing awareness of decline and the overwhelming work that is in front of them. We intentionally created space for celebration to demonstrate the power of recognizing the work and impact that has already been done. As participants began sharing stories of small experiments, shared meals, meaningful conversations, and unexpected connections, the cohort itself became a space of renewed imagination and hope. The power of feasting in mind and spirit became an essential part of the way formation was taking place.

Over time, the emotional atmosphere within the cohort noticeably shifted. Early sessions often carried hesitancy and uncertainty. Participants were cautious in sharing ideas and unsure whether their instincts or experiments were valid. As trust developed, conversations became increasingly vulnerable, honest, and creative. Participants openly discussed failures, anxieties, disappointments, and hopes. They encouraged one another through challenges and celebrated emerging signs of life together. The cohort was never meant to be merely a training environment. It was designed to become and eventually did become a relational learning community marked by mutual support, discernment, and accountability.²⁸

²⁷ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Harvard Business Press, 2009). On shame, vulnerability, and the conditions for creative risk, see Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (Gotham Books, 2012). On burnout as a relational and organizational rather than merely individual phenomenon, see Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, *The Truth About Burnout* (Jossey-Bass, 1997).

²⁸ Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

In addition to the monthly cohort gatherings, we made individual coaching available to participants throughout the process. This was important because the challenges participants encountered at times were highly contextual and adaptive rather than merely technical. In many cases, participants simply needed someone to help them trust their instincts, slow down, pay attention, and recognize where the Holy Spirit might already be at work. This process was highly focused on finding the right question for their time and place. We found that people did not have a lot of experience in ministry environments where experimentation, uncertainty, and failure were treated as normal parts of the process.

The coaching dimension of the process was essential to addressing the imagination, motivation, and agency challenges through creating an experiential holding environment in which the posture and values of the fresh expressions journey were embodied: attentiveness, participation, vulnerability, experimentation, relational presence, and openness to the movements of the Holy Spirit. Participants repeatedly described renewed faith, deeper spiritual attentiveness, increased courage, and a stronger connection to their neighbors and God's activity in their daily life. Many reported that the process helped them to reconnect to their own legacy congregation in a new and inspired way.

This suggests that leadership formation for mixed ecology ministry requires more than strategic innovation or organizational adaptation. It requires sustained environments of spiritual formation and communal discernment, environments capable of helping lay Christians recover confidence in their baptismal vocation and capacity to participate in God's wildly active mission in the world.

Limitations and Conclusion

This case study focuses on the particular dynamics of mainline Protestant congregations in the upper Midwest, with a specifically ELCA Lutheran audience. The predominant culture in these congregations tends to be rather reserved, and they are not

particularly known for evangelism.²⁹ While we have seen similar dynamics in other mainline Protestant churches, leaders in other cultural contexts, regions, ecclesial traditions, and denominations may experience different challenges and opportunities. While we are continuing to walk with the teams involved in this process in a coaching capacity, the long-term viability of the communities they started is unknown as of this writing. A future longitudinal study would shed additional light on outcomes.

The future of the church in North America and other Western contexts will probably look more like a mixed ecology than traditional congregations exclusively. Historically, the church has always had a mixed ecology, whether through monastic orders, hush harbors, base communities, or house churches. Many of these communities emerged on the edges of the predominant institutional church to serve those otherwise excluded or marginalized. What might God's vision for a mixed ecology look like in our contexts today?

The leaders for these emerging contextual communities will come from the whole people of God, not just clergy or those with formal theological training or credentialing. They will need a different kind of engagement, equipping, and support than our systems are typically designed for. Our inherited systems across the denominations are generally not set up to support these leaders. The established culture of mainline Protestantism in particular is not oriented around cultivating these forms of church, and the same could be said for much of evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism. Clergy-centric and professional models of ministry predominate.

For congregational, judicatory, and denominational leaders to help their communities and leaders take this journey, sustained attention must be given to the deeper realities of shifting cultural expectations, cultivating transformational encounters with God, and giving permission to try, risk, and fail for the sake of learning in mission. In our experience, most congregational, judicatory, and denominational systems are not yet focused on these shifts.

²⁹ See Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Lutheran Voices, 2005).

Even where espoused language encourages innovation, deeper established culture and expectations tend to restrict or shut down openness to this work. A genuine mixed ecology imagination is not yet a reality or priority.³⁰ One learning from the UK is that the vision, support, and permission-giving of key leaders (such as Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in that context) are essential in opening the church's life and structures to these emerging communities alongside established forms of parish life.

Perhaps most powerfully, this way of being church involves a deep change of posture. The humility, openness, willingness to surrender preconceived agendas and designs, and patient discernment of the Spirit's guidance in relationship with neighbors are counter-cultural for many churches in North America, particularly in the dominant culture. This journey involves sharing leadership authority (with oversight and accountability), cultivating communal discernment practices, and surrendering the managerial approaches to church, mission, and leadership that have been so predominant in late modernity. It invites us into the kind of Spirit-led missionary experiences we see in Acts.

While many established church and leadership development systems struggle to embrace these shifts, the Spirit is nonetheless stirring followers of Jesus with compassion for neighbors, a heart for the gospel, and willingness to experiment. This imagination and calling might be present more among a remnant at the moment than widespread. Unlike western Europe, we are early in this process here in America. Those of us responsible for stewarding the church's life and structures have an opportunity to develop the imagination and practices to help these leaders participate in what God might want to create in this new era of mission.

³⁰ In contrast, the Church of England's 2020-30 Vision and Strategy identifies making the mixed ecology "normative" as one of three key priorities. <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>, accessed June 26, 2026.

THE FOX AND THE FALSE SELF: MACHIAVELLI, MERTON, AND PROPHETIC PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

SETH DAVID CLARK

Abstract

Prophetic leadership can fail through cowardice and misperception: leaders may read power shrewdly while misreading the self invested in the cause. Bringing Erica Benner's republican Machiavelli into conversation with Thomas Merton's account of the false self, this article develops a dual diagnostic for prophetic public leadership. Political judgment tests appearances, interests, and means; contemplative judgment tests the leader's identity, desire, and susceptibility to a prophetic persona. The author's experience at the Border Church/La Iglesia Fronteriza illustrates why both judgments require testing beyond their bounds. Reliable discernment requires communal contestation and attention to how witness is enacted.

Introduction

Prophetic witness can fail even when the leader is brave. Witness can fail when the cause is just, the congregation anxious, the words true, and the timing wrong. Failure can also come when the leader reads the room while misreading the self. Religious leaders are trained to ask what faith requires in public. Formation also needs to ask whether the leader's own need to be necessary has entered the argument.

In these cases, prophetic failure is a failure of perception. Prophetic leaders misread what they face. They misidentify who holds power and why. They mistake symptoms for causes and confuse allies with adversaries. They also misread themselves,

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confusing personal grievance with prophetic calling, institutional anxiety with righteous anger, and the desire to be seen as courageous with actual courage. The result can be witness that is passionate but misdirected, morally sincere but politically illiterate, or politically astute but spiritually dishonest.

The fence gave me this thesis before the literature did. The Border Church/*La Iglesia Fronteriza* is an interdenominational Christian ministry that gathers weekly for cross-border communion at Friendship Park on the San Diego-Tijuana border.¹ I served that community for eight years, first as a volunteer, then as its U.S. pastoral director, and finally as its lead pastor, stepping down in 2025. In that work, I learned to read the external field: which officials controlled access to our worship space, which coalition dynamics were in play, and where stated policy diverged from enforcement practice. I was also attending to my interior life. The imbalance lay in how each reading was tested. The external field faced concrete checks: evidence, affected people, decision rights, and review practices. My interior reading faced fewer such checks. I could ask about my motives; the less-tested question was whether those answers were being shaped by the rewards of being needed. The asymmetry between public testing and interior testing is the problem taken up here.

The *Journal of Religious Leadership's* own conversation about prophetic leadership already resists the heroic truth-teller model. Walter Brueggemann warns that advocacy for social justice can be confused with prophetic ministry when it takes the form of authoritarian certainty, anger, indignation, or scolding.² Chloe Lynch understands prophetic leadership through utterance, enactment, and embodiment: the prophet's person and practices

¹ Friends of Friendship Park, "Border Church/*La Iglesia Fronteriza*," accessed June 26, 2026, <https://www.friendshippark.org/borderchurch>.

² Walter Brueggemann, "Prophetic Leadership: Engagement in Counter-Imagination," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 1–23, esp. 1, 22–23.

are part of the truth being made present.³ Eileen Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen place perception at the center of pastoral imagination: seeing what is actually present, recognizing the theological stakes, and learning a fitting response in relation to the community.⁴ These accounts establish the stakes. Prophetic leadership is judged by whether its claims are just, whether it sees clearly, and whether its practices carry the truth it names. This article turns to a specific distinction: prophetic judgment has two irreducible objects, the political field and the leader's self. Accuracy in one leaves the other still to be tested. A sound analysis of power leaves motive open to examination, and sincere self-examination leaves political judgment open to correction.

The argument works with two disciplines of sight. Machiavelli, read through Erica Benner, gives me the fox: the one who learns to recognize political snares before stepping into them. Thomas Merton, the twentieth-century Trappist monk and contemplative theologian, gives me the false self: the constructed identity that can mistake itself for vocation. The pairing is deliberately asymmetrical. Machiavelli speaks to public leadership at its most exposed: rulers, factions, institutions, interests, and the visible contests through which power is acquired and kept. Merton speaks to the depths of the self, where desire, fear, and identity bend perception before action becomes visible.

Prophetic leadership lives at that crossing, because public witness is enacted by people whose hidden attachments shape what they can see. The fox tests the public account of a situation. Merton's contemplative diagnosis tests the identity invested in that account. Together, the two disciplines leave prophetic leadership fallible and make some of its evasions harder to hide. The article treats the pairing as a theoretical account, names a double exposure

³ Chloe Lynch, "Prophetic Leadership: Making Present the Truth of Ecclesial Hope," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 51–73, esp. 61–62.

⁴ Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Christian Scharen, "Ministry as Spiritual Practice: How Pastors Learn to See and Respond to the 'More' of a Situation," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 125–144, esp. 125–126, 142–144.

in prophetic leadership, and asks how communities test public claims and the selves that make them. Its practical implication is modest, ecclesial, and institutional: leaders and communities need disciplines of discernment that keep political reading and self-reading answerable to shared judgment.

The word diagnostic here names a disciplined account of what must be seen before prophetic action can be trusted. A diagnostic does not certify a leader's righteousness. Rather, it tests perception. Political judgment asks about actors, decision rights, interests, framing, available means, likely effects, and disconfirming evidence. Political judgment has to answer to public facts and to the people who bear the consequences. Interior judgment asks about attachments, fears, rewards, identity stakes, and the leader's capacity to receive correction. Interior judgment is tested by habits, relationships, responses to dissent, and the way stated intentions withstand correction. The evidence differs in each case.

The first test asks whether the public account remains true when the leader's preferred narrative is challenged. The second asks whether the self who tells that story can be corrected by people outside the leader's approval structure. Skill in one leaves the other vulnerable to failure. Political sophistication can serve the false self. Interior sincerity can coexist with political naiveté. The danger is letting either achievement certify the other.

Methodologically, I read two primary-text traditions closely and then display and probe them through an autobiographical practical-theological case. The scope is limited: this is a focused use of Machiavelli and Merton studies, and a single ministry narrative cannot validate the entire proposal. The case probes whether this pairing can expose distortions that remained hidden inside competent, sincere action. The practical claim is limited: a leader can be right about an injustice and still wrong about the self who wants to address it; a leader can also be honest about the self and still misread the political field.

A Note on Position and Method

Several disclosures are necessary before the argument proceeds. I write as a white, male, ordained American Baptist pastor who has

served as lead pastor and chief operating officer of the First Baptist Church of National City, California, since 2017. National City sits less than ten miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, and that proximity drew me to volunteer with the Border Church in 2017 after visiting in 2016 and working with its United Methodist founder and pastor, Rev. John Fanestil, on other projects. The cross-border ministry I describe in Section III is my own: I served as a volunteer minister (2017–2019), U.S. pastoral director (2019–2022), and the pastor (2022–2025) before stepping down in May 2025.

My doctoral research at Columbia Theological Seminary used participant-witness ethnography to examine how God is experienced in Christian practices at the border fence, particularly the weekly communion service.⁵ I am currently a Ph.D. student at the University of San Diego, where my research centers on self-identification and meaning-making amid major vocational and life transitions.

The argument below reads Machiavelli primarily through Erica Benner's republican reappraisal. The article works with Benner's republican Machiavelli; wider Machiavelli scholarship remains outside its scope. The dependency is acknowledged: the fox in this argument is Benner's fox, and the argument stands or falls with the persuasiveness of her textual work.⁶ The source tradition remains narrow: two male, European or Euro-American thinkers working within Western philosophical and Christian contemplative traditions. The limitation is conceptual as well as representational. The border is where I met this problem; it is not this article's full object of analysis. The article's unit is a conceptual pairing probed through one autobiographical practical-theological case, not the borderlands as such.

⁵ Seth David Clark, "Open Wound, Open Table: A Theological Exploration of Holy Communion as Practiced by the Border Church/*La Iglesia Fronteriza*" (D.Min. diss., Columbia Theological Seminary, 2020).

⁶ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and *Be Like the Fox: Machiavelli in His World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).

Isabel Docampo argues that religious identity is relational and power-laden, and that self-critical theological reflection must be practiced collectively. Her account makes Merton's false self relationally accountable: people affected by a leader's action participate in discernment because they also bear its results.⁷ A fuller treatment would need to engage borderlands, migration, Latinx, liberationist, *mujerista*/Latina feminist, and womanist theologies as primary interlocutors rather than background sources. I name that work here as the next conversation this proposal needs, not as a lens I can adequately carry in this piece.

I. The Fox: Political Diagnosis and the Snaring Problem of Appearances

Recovering Machiavelli

The suggestion that religious leaders might learn from Machiavelli will strike many readers as perverse. His name is synonymous with cynical manipulation, and the reading of *The Prince* as a handbook for amoral power has shaped its reception for centuries. To bring Machiavelli into a conversation about prophetic witness requires a willingness to distinguish the historical Machiavelli from his caricature. The conversation also requires acknowledging something that his caricature obscures: Machiavelli's relationship to religion was critical, sustained, and contested. His personal religiosity remains contested. Maurizio Viroli reads him as a thinker shaped by republican Christianity, for whom religion could support liberty and civic virtue. Other scholarship emphasizes his criticism of Christianity or his analysis of religion's political uses.

One point is clear in the *Discourses*: Machiavelli diagnoses institutional religion as a source of political corruption. In Book I, chapter 12, he argued that the papacy had kept Italy divided and weak and that "those peoples who are closest to the Roman church,

⁷ Isabel N. Docampo, "Identity, God-Talk, and Self-Critical Reflection in Religious Leadership: Contributions from a Latino/a Perspective," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 17–39, esp. 18–19, 33–38.

the head of our religion, have less religion.” At this point, the fox’s eye turns toward religious institutional power and anticipates the account developed here.⁸

In Book II, chapter 2 of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli deepens the critique. The ancient religion, he argues, glorified “captains of armies and princes of republics” and celebrated worldly glory; “our religion” has glorified “humble and contemplative more than active men” and placed the highest good in “humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human.” The result is a citizenry that values suffering, neglects self-defense, and has “rendered the world weak” and given it “in prey to criminal men.” Machiavelli’s qualification is essential: this apparent weakness arises more from “the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not according to virtue” (*secondo l’ozio, e non secondo la virtù*).⁹ The point is this: corrupted religious interpretation bends faith into passivity and evasion of reality. Merton will later ask how spirituality becomes an evasion of reality within the self.

Erica Benner’s three major studies, *Machiavelli’s Ethics* (2009), *Machiavelli’s Prince: A New Reading* (2013), and *Be Like the Fox* (2017), offer a sustained philosophical reappraisal of Machiavelli. Her central argument recasts Machiavelli as a diagnostician of political failure; his most shocking passages teach dialectically and resist prescriptive reading. His writings, she argues, “are not how-to manuals, whether for aspiring princes or for citizens who want to rebuild crumbling republican ‘orders.’” Their “underlying purpose” is “philosophical in the specific, very ancient sense”: to “challenge, exercise, and improve readers’ capacities to make discriminating moral and political judgments.”¹⁰

⁸ Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1–18; Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli’s God*, trans. Antony Shugaar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), chapter 1; Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), I.12, 37.

⁹ Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Mansfield and Tarcov, II.2, 131–132.

¹⁰ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 484.

Benner's point reaches beyond Machiavelli's reputation. She treats misreading as part of the lesson. In her account of chapter 18, some princes accept bad arguments as wise or useful, while readers trained to see through appearances can detect the irony and self-defeating logic. The text tests judgment and exposes credulity.¹¹

The overarching evaluative structure of *The Prince*, as Benner reconstructs it, is organized around the opposition between *fortuna* and *virtù*. *Fortuna* represents dependence on external, unreliable forces: luck, patronage, inherited position, and the favor of powerful allies. *Virtù* is so multivalent that Mark Musa translates it twelve ways across the text, using "ingenuity" as his broadest approximation.¹² In Benner's reading, it names capacities for acquiring and maintaining power through one's own abilities and orders, without dependence on fortune or on the arms and favor of others.¹³ For prophetic leadership, the distinction concerns preparedness. Witness grounded in *virtù* has done the work of understanding the situation it addresses; witness grounded in *fortuna* relies on favorable conditions, sympathetic audiences, or the hope that righteous intentions will produce just outcomes. When decline makes a religious institution anxious, leaders may respond with charisma, brand management, and cultivated audiences. The fox's republican discipline points instead toward the community's capacity to govern itself, read its situation, and resist the concentration of power.

The fox asks how a situation has been staged, framed, or simplified by people with interests. The discipline asks how the available story relates to the political field itself, especially when a leader's convictions make one account feel morally obvious.

The Fox as Diagnostician

In chapter 18 of *The Prince*, *Quomodo Fides a Principibus Sit*

¹¹ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 220–221.

¹² On Musa's translation of *virtù* and its twelve English renderings, see Mark Musa's introduction to Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. and ed. Mark Musa (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), xi–xv.

¹³ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xxxvii–xxxix.

Servanda (“How a Prince Should Keep His Word”), Machiavelli counsels that a leader must know how to employ the nature of both the man and the beast, specifically the fox and the lion. The Italian is precise: “*Bisogna adunque essere golpe a conoscere e’ lacci, e liono a sbigottire e’ lupi*”: “So one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten the wolves.”¹⁴ The conventional reading takes this as instruction in duplicity. Benner redirects the emphasis.

The fox’s defining skill is *conoscere e’ lacci*, to recognize snares as they appear. The skill is defensive and diagnostic. As Benner writes, “His imitation-worthy foxes are not cunning fraudsters; they are simply good at recognizing snares.”¹⁵ The fox sees through traps. The fox’s virtue is perceptual: the ability to discern the difference between what political actors claim to be doing and what they are actually doing, between the surface of political rhetoric and the reality of political interests.

Musa’s translation of chapter 18 renders the consequence:

He who has known best how to use the fox has come to a better end. But one must know how to disguise this nature well, and how to be a fine liar and hypocrite; and men are so simple-minded and so dominated by their present needs that one who deceives will always find one who will allow himself to be deceived.¹⁶

Read on its surface, the passage commends deception. Benner’s reading focuses attention on the passage’s reversals: the fox’s positive skill is seeing through appearances; princes who imagine themselves consummate deceivers are repeatedly deceived; and short-term gains create more dangerous future necessities. On this reading, the passage exposes both why deception works and why deceivers misread their own power.¹⁷

¹⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 18, quoted in Erica Benner, *Machiavelli’s Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 217. The Italian reads: “*Bisogna adunque essere golpe a conoscere e’ lacci, e liono a sbigottire e’ lupi*.”

¹⁵ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Prince*, 217.

¹⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince: A Bilingual Edition*, 147.

¹⁷ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Prince*, 220–221.

Means, Ends, and the Structure of Corruption

Benner's reading yields a second insight critical for prophetic leadership: unjust means corrupt good ends. Benner contests the standard interpretation of Machiavelli as a consequentialist. Benner argues that stable freedom depends on means that respect justice and free agency. Agents who adopt unjust means in pursuit of just ends discover that the means immediately and structurally transform the ends. The leader who lies to protect the community creates a community habituated to deception. The leader who consolidates power to serve the people creates a people habituated to dependence.¹⁸

Benner argues that Machiavelli's ethics are "at bottom deontological": the seemingly consequentialist surface of his arguments is dialectical rhetoric, while "the bedrock of his reasonings are obligations of justice that should hold irrespective of anticipated or actual results."¹⁹ For Benner, the corruption of means is itself the central political catastrophe because it erodes the conditions (trust, transparency, respect for free agency) without which no political order can sustain itself.

Self-Deception as Political Catastrophe

The deepest layer of Benner's reading concerns self-deception. Machiavelli's account of human nature holds that human beings possess both corrupting dispositions and genuine capacities for self-ordering virtue, an "incurably unstable mix of animal drives and capacities for self-discipline."²⁰ The corrupting dispositions (ambition, partisan passion, the desire for dominance) operate most dangerously when invisible to the person acting on them.

Political actors become especially dangerous, on this analysis, when they are self-deceived: when they take partisan interests for universal goods, ambitions for vocations, and the will to power for commitment to service. Benner invokes Francis Bacon: avoiding

¹⁸ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 495–496.

¹⁹ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 495–496.

²⁰ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 492. Benner describes human nature in Machiavelli as "an incurably unstable mix of animal drives and capacities for self-discipline."

“ruinous errors of moral judgment” requires one to “know exactly all the conditions of the serpent,” so that the serpent’s operations become recognizable in oneself and others.²¹

For prophetic leaders, the political problem becomes a pastoral one, for the leader’s soul. While Machiavelli and Benner identify the danger of self-deception, Merton the monk gives theological language for the self that can remain hidden from itself.

II. The False Self: Contemplative Diagnosis and the Interior Life

The False Self

Thomas Merton’s account of the false self, developed in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), provides a theological interior complement to Machiavelli’s political diagnosis. The fox tests deception in the public field, and Merton’s account tests deception in the leader’s account of self.

“Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self,” Merton writes. “This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him.”²² For Merton, the false self names an ontological problem: a constructed identity without ground in the reality known by God. The false self is sustained by desire and social recognition: “I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real.”²³

For religious leaders, the false self can take the form of a pastoral identity constructed through congregational approval, denominational advancement, theological reputation, and the rewards of being perceived as prophetic. At its most distorted, this self may speak truth to power partly because that act confirms the person the leader wants to be. Merton describes the evasion

²¹ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 486–487, quoting Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), 169.

²² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 34.

²³ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 34–35.

of responsibility through masks: “We can evade this responsibility by playing with masks, and this pleases us because it can appear at times to be a free and creative way of living.”²⁴ Here the mask names an enacted identity through which responsibility is avoided; repeated performance can fuse with vocation itself.

The false self is interior, and it can be socially reinforced. Jack Barentsen is a scholar of religious leadership whose work brings social identity theory into conversation with leadership in religious communities. His social identity model helps specify how a prophetic persona is produced in community. Religious leaders gain trust and influence as embodiments of a group’s identity; when that standing is threatened, leaders may simplify ambiguity, cast internal critics as threats, or reframe the group’s story in ways that preserve their representative standing. The process can be sincere: a community rewards a leader for performing the identity the community wants, and the leader may experience that reward as confirmation of calling.²⁵ Whereas Merton names the attachment, Barentsen identifies a social mechanism that can reinforce it.

The Moral Theology of the Devil

Merton’s chapter “The Moral Theology of the Devil” in *New Seeds of Contemplation* shows how false-self logic reaches moral theology and political judgment. False-self logic extends from private identity into religion itself, which becomes an instrument of distortion. The devil’s theology “is really not theology but magic.” It transforms faith from the acceptance of mercy into “a psychological, subjective ‘force’ which applies a kind of violence to reality in order to change it according to one’s own whims.”²⁶

When faith becomes an instrument for compelling reality to conform to the leader’s vision, prophetic witness is compromised from within. Merton describes a theology of absolute rightness: “the important thing is to be absolutely right and to prove that

²⁴ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 32.

²⁵ Jack Barentsen, “Reimagining Religious Leadership through the Social Identity Model,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 2023): 40–72, esp. 50–55, 66–68.

²⁶ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 94. Both quotations in this paragraph are from the same page.

everybody else is absolutely wrong.” The distinctions between good and evil become “irreducible divisions.” No longer is there “any sense that we might perhaps all be more or less at fault.”²⁷

Merton writes about monastic conversion in a passage which still lands uncomfortably close to contemporary prophetic leadership. Those who preach most vehemently about evil may be, in his phrase, “really unconscious haters of other men” who “think the world does not appreciate them, and this is their way of getting even.” Merton’s point is unsparing: he refuses to exempt the person making the diagnosis.²⁸

Merton’s Political Turn

Thomas Merton is writing as a monk and contemplative theologian. By the early 1960s, his contemplative theology had turned explicitly toward public questions of war, power, and truth. In “The Root of War Is Fear,” a chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton argued that “at the root of all war is fear: not so much the fear men have of one another as the fear they have of everything.”²⁹ The public turn was concrete. In 1962, after his Trappist superiors restricted his publication on war and peace, he assembled and privately circulated letters in mimeographed collections titled *Cold War Letters*. Kaplan identifies the first collection as forty-nine letters; the circulation of the letters expanded among Merton’s friends as the project developed.

Merton explicitly denied communist affiliation and described the letters as biased by a “frank hatred of power politics” and contempt for those who use power “to distort the truth or to silence it altogether.” His stated target was the distortion of truth by power. In the version of “The Root of War Is Fear” reprinted in *Passion for Peace*, he called the abolition of war “the one task which

²⁷ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 96. All quotations in this paragraph are from the same page.

²⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 93.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, “The Root of War Is Fear,” in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 112.

God has imposed upon us in the world today.”³⁰ Merton’s “Moral Theology of the Devil” chapter puts the connection in interior terms: “Having become disgusted with faith, and therefore with God, we are now ready for the Totalitarian Mass Movement that will pick us up on the rebound and make us happy with war.”³¹ For Merton, the false self and totalitarianism are joined by a common flight from reality.

An objection may present itself here: I, a reluctant institutionalist by nature and a congregational-polity American Baptist by choice, am using Merton to resist absolute institutional certainty, even though Merton himself remained a committed Catholic and Trappist monk under a vow of obedience and subject to his superiors’ restrictions on publishing about war and peace. He did not openly defy the order. He published through permitted periodicals and, in April 1962, began privately distributing mimeographed collections of letters marked confidential. Edward Kaplan describes this strategy as circumventing the censors while straining the limits of Merton’s obedience.³² The tension gives the dual diagnostic a hard case. Machiavelli’s fox asks what the chosen channel does to institutional trust and to the distribution of power; Merton’s account asks whether obedience or resistance has become a self-protective identity. The episode shows why accountable discernment must examine both institutional effects and interior attachments.

The tension guards against a real objection: pairing Merton with Machiavelli could instrumentalize a contemplative thinker for purposes foreign to his concerns. In “Rain and the Rhinoceros,”

³⁰ Thomas Merton, “The Root of War Is Fear,” *The Catholic Worker* (October 1961), reprinted in *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 11–19. For the censorship, chronology, circulation, and quotations from Merton’s preface to *Cold War Letters*, see Edward K. Kaplan, “Incarcerated Prophets: Crisis Letters of Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *The Merton Seasonal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 22–26, esp. 22–24.

³¹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 96.

³² Edward K. Kaplan, “Incarcerated Prophets: Crisis Letters of Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *The Merton Seasonal* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 22–26, esp. 22–24.

collected in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966), Merton ties contemplation to social responsibility. Contemplation moves through solitude and the desert, confronts poverty and the void, and renounces the empirical self.³³ For leadership, the claim is constructive: public judgment resists projection when the leader can face the fears, attachments, and self-serving narratives that distort perception.

Merton's analysis also permits a structural reading of the corruptions Machiavelli diagnoses politically. A church organized by absolute rightness becomes an apparatus of control and loses its character as a community of discernment. Leaders formed within it can carry that distortion into public witness, mistaking the will to control for the call to justice and the appetite for certainty for the discipline of truth.³⁴

III. What the Border Taught Me

The theorization thus far becomes concrete as an autobiographical practical-theological case analysis, not as proof that the proposal is universally valid. I use the Border Church narrative to display and probe what the paired diagnostic can reveal when a leader's public reading of power and private reading of self come under pressure.

The Border Church gathers weekly for communion at the San Diego-Tijuana border fence at or near Friendship Park.³⁵ In my doctor of ministry research, borrowing Gloria Anzaldúa's phrase *una herida abierta* (an open wound),³⁶ I described the ministry as existing at the intersection of "the open wound" and "the open table": a border region deliberately divided by fence, policy, and enforcement, met by Christianity's practice of open-table communion. I began volunteering and presiding at communion

³³ Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 17.

³⁴ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 90–97.

³⁵ Friends of Friendship Park, "Border Church/La Iglesia Fronteriza," accessed June 26, 2026, <https://www.friendshippark.org/borderchurch>.

³⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

occasionally in 2017. By 2022, I was the congregation's pastor, managing a cross-border leadership structure, recruiting and onboarding clergy from Episcopal, evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Nazarene, and Unitarian Universalist traditions, negotiating access to the worship space with federal enforcement authorities, and sustaining a congregation that existed in the gap between two national jurisdictions and multiple denominational polities.

This border ministry trained my political eye, and the training held. The fox's first question, who holds power, had concrete answers: Customs and Border Protection officers held discretion over whether more than ten of us could approach the fence, and that discretion, not stated policy, determined whether worship could occur. The second question, whose interests an arrangement serves, was answerable, too. Though generous partners, our 501(c)(3) fiscal sponsor's priorities did not always match the ministry's, and the ecumenical team I recruited carried ecclesiologies that aligned more on some weeks than others, with differences in culture, theology, and language just on the other side of the fence.

Where rhetoric and reality diverged, I could usually locate the gap. What made these readings trustworthy was not my skill but their exposure. Each one answered to someone other than me: an officer's decision, a funder's conditions, a partner's dissent, an enforcement practice that either let us through or did not. The political field corrected me, whether I invited it or not. The snares appeared, and I dodged them or not. My reading of myself had no comparable corrector.

Worship at that frontier was bodily before it was conceptual. People gathered on both sides of the fence, close enough to see faces through the steel mesh, and received bread and cup with that mesh standing between them. The practice lived inside its contradiction: each week, the liturgy claimed a communion the architecture denied. That contradiction also offered pastoral authority. Each week, I had to ask how much I was tending the wound versus how much I was drawing identity from tending it. A ministry organized around a visible wound can teach its leader to experience necessity as vocation. It did that to me, at least in part.

The questions of motive and identity required another kind of reckoning, and I did not face them fully until 2024. After nearly seven years in widening responsibility, I was exhausted. Burnout and depression are accurate descriptors. I told a group of trusted clergy colleagues how depleted I had become and asked for prayer. In leadership coaching, I told my coach more starkly: I felt as polluted and spent as the Tijuana River, the sewage-laden waterway,³⁷ which I crossed weekly to reach the worship site. A week after asking clergy colleagues for prayer, the Rev. Manuel Retamoza, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America minister, offered to assume pastoral leadership of the Border Church. I received his offer as a gift I had only asked God for. The succession was discussed through 2024, announced to key partners in early 2025 and to the public that spring, and completed at the end of May that year.

The transition gave me concrete external questions: Who would fund the ongoing ministry, especially if fewer American Baptist dollars supported it? How would the cross-border leadership structure adapt to a new pastoral voice? Which denominational relationships would continue, and which would fade? I worked on those questions for a year with others who carried leadership responsibility within this borderlands ministry.

The questions of motive and identity resisted that kind of resolution. Had my identity become so fused with the pastoral role that stepping down felt like a form of death? Was my exhaustion partly the false self's insistence on indispensability? The Tijuana River image cuts both ways. It fairly named depletion; it may also have dramatized vulnerability in a way that protected me from the sharper question: had I stayed too long for reasons closer to identity than calling? I do not think so, but I am not the only judge. I leave the ambiguity unresolved because that unresolvedness is part of the discipline: to notice interior snares without converting self-examination into self-acquittal.

³⁷ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "USMCA Tijuana River Watershed," accessed June 25, 2026, <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/usmca-tijuana-river-watershed>.

The transition relieved my exhaustion, but more importantly for this argument, it supplied evidence private reflection could not produce. Another pastor's willingness to lead and the community's capacity to receive new leadership tested the story that the ministry required my continued indispensability. I had prayed for someone to take the mantle, and I knew others were capable. Still, I was overidentified with the role. Once another leader stepped forward, my account of my own motives became contestable in a new way. Private reflection became communal discernment.

Set side by side, the two readings expose the article's asymmetry. My reading of the political field was concrete and externally tested; my reading of myself was sincere but less answerable to correction. That is the difficult case: competent political judgment paired with a self-account no one else can easily verify. The risk of misreading power never disappeared, but the field pushed back. The false-self risk was subtler. Fluency in reading power could make exhaustion look like fidelity and indispensability look like call. Manuel Retamoza's willingness to lead, and the congregation's readiness to receive him, did what introspection could not: they moved the claim that the ministry required me into a shared field of testing. One "should" of my false self dissolved.

The case shows the distortion the pairing helps expose: competence and sincerity can together keep the decisive question just out of view.

What These Two Thinkers Share

The two thinkers meet at one narrow point: good appearances can protect bad judgment. In Machiavelli, private interest learns to speak as public good. In Merton, the false self learns to speak as faithfulness. Both accounts are especially sharp about sincerity that leaves no room for correction.

The two can be read as disciplines of attention, although their objects and theological commitments differ. The fox reads the public field diagnostically. Benner places Machiavelli in a Socratic tradition concerned with examined life and judgment; his writings "teach discerning readers how to spot potentially ruinous defects

behind good appearances, not how to create them themselves.”³⁸ Merton attends to the identity of the reader. Merton’s contemplative practice strips away the masks through which the self avoids reality. Technique and spiritual achievement are the wrong grammar for that work.

Benner also shows how Machiavelli treats means as constitutive of ends: unjust means reshape both the agent and the community, corrupting the very ends they are meant to serve. Merton helps explain how that corruption becomes difficult to see from within. His false self reshapes perception until a self-serving means appears faithful. Machiavelli’s deceivers “color” their means “so that they appear for a time to show a decent respect for laws and justice.” Merton’s practitioners of the devil’s theology clothe control in the language of faithfulness and obedience.³⁹ The connection is constructive: political deception and false-self deception converge in the practice of means.

An Integrated Diagnostic

Merton gives interior judgment a theological criterion. He describes humility and integrity as coincident in the saint; humility consists in “being precisely the person you actually are before God,”⁴⁰ without letting a role script the self. Machiavelli’s political demand asks leaders to see appearances, interests, and consequences without dependence on fortune or flattering narratives. The argument needs both: truthful creaturely identity before God and disciplined judgment in a field of power.

If the two questions are kept apart, four failure patterns appear. When political diagnosis is strong but interior diagnosis is weak, witness can be strategically competent and self-serving: the cause becomes a vehicle for the leader’s identity or power. When interior honesty is strong but political diagnosis is weak, witness can be sincere and misdirected. When both are weak, prophecy becomes

³⁸ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 484.

³⁹ Benner, *Machiavelli’s Ethics*, 484, for the description of Machiavellian deception; Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 93–96, for the account of the devil’s theology.

⁴⁰ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 98–99.

performance and then control. When both are strong, accountable witness becomes possible because the work remains fallible and open to correction. I use these patterns to name the failure mode of a particular judgment or action. Success in one diagnostic can hide failure in the other.

The standards do different work, and real life tangles them. A leader who misreads the political field may treat resistance or harm as proof of prophetic faithfulness, which strengthens attachment to a heroic self. A leader attached to that self may then discount facts, voices, or consequences that threaten that identity, further weakening political judgment. Means are the hinge because they make interior commitments public. Secrecy, coercion, humiliation, and concentrated authority are political choices, and they also reveal what the leader and community are protecting. Review has to happen over time: before action, during action, and after action, when facts and relationships can no longer be held at the distance of intention.

The paired account requires communal validation. Docampo locates self-critical theological reflection within the faith community and the power relations that shape identity; Forney and Small show why a public performance of humility cannot certify the justice of a leader's practice; and Zscheile locates Christian discernment in the Spirit's work through the community, including perception from the margins.⁴¹ Together, these accounts give the diagnostic a rule: claims about the political field must be contestable by affected people and disconfirming evidence, and claims about the leader's motives must be contestable by people who are not rewarded for agreement. Communal contestation functions as the condition that keeps both judgments from becoming self-certifying.

Communal validation still leaves the leader in danger. Because self-deception is at issue, the declaration "I have examined myself, and I am clean" may be the failure in its most sophisticated form.

⁴¹ Docampo, "Identity, God-Talk," 33–38; David G. Forney and Kyle J. A. Small, "The Ghost of Servant Leadership: Power, Performance, and the Illusion of Virtue," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2025): 7–28, esp. 23–27; Dwight J. Zscheile, "The Trinity, Leadership, and Power," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 43–63, esp. 59–62.

Groups also protect shared identities and reward the leader who performs them. The paired account acknowledges the unresolved problem and makes it harder to miss by separating two kinds of judgment, multiplying the people able to contest them, and treating discernment as a revisable practice, never a verdict. The limit is structural. Acknowledging it belongs to the method.

Theoretical Contribution and Implications

For religious leadership studies, the contribution is a distinction between two failures of perception that often collapse into each other. Political failure misreads power, interests, and means. Spiritual failure misreads the self invested in the cause. Prophetic leadership becomes accountable when both judgments can be contested. The proposal should stand or fall by whether that distinction explains a recurrent puzzle: truthful public action can become unreliable when the leader's reading of power is sharp and the leader's reading of self remains under-tested.

As the introduction argued through Brueggemann, Lynch, and the work of Campbell-Reed and Scharen, *JRL's* conversation already resists the heroic truth-teller model. The dual diagnostic extends that conversation in one specific way: by separating the two objects of prophetic judgment, so that accuracy about the political field and truthfulness about the self can no longer stand in for each other.

The article therefore explains why securing trustworthy witness is difficult. Prophetic leadership gathers goods that can come apart in practice: courage, political and ecclesial discernment, truthful self-knowledge, just means, and communal accountability. A leader can analyze power accurately while using the cause to stabilize a needed identity or cultivate prayer and spirituality while staying insulated from the people who bear the consequences. The paired account gives names to those separations.

The pastoral succession in Section III made my self-understanding more visible and, therefore, contestable. Another minister's willingness to lead, the community's capacity to receive leadership, and the loosening of the story that continuity required one particular self all functioned as evidence. The case offers

practical-theological knowledge generated when a lived practice probes an account of leadership.

The diagnostic becomes concrete as evaluative questions. Before public action, a community can ask: Who actually holds decision rights here? Whose interests does the current arrangement serve? What evidence would disconfirm our account? Who has authority to slow the process? It can also ask about the leader: What does the leader gain from this role, fight, or public claim? Who outside the leader's approval structure can name that gain? Would stepping away feel like a form of death, and what does that reveal?

During and after action, the questions turn to means and repair. Are we using secrecy, shame, coercion, urgency, or concentrated authority, and what kind of community do those means form over time? What harm appeared, who was not heard, and what must be repaired before the next witness?

Those questions belong in particular institutional venues. Congregations can build review-after-action into consequential decisions and protect a named role for dissent. Judicatories and denominations can reward slower judgment in ordination, deployment, and conflict processes rather than rewarding urgency alone. Seminaries can pair political literacy with contemplative practices tested by people able to name what the leader gains from a role. Cross-border and coalition ministries can give affected people real interpretive authority, not only an advisory voice.

Formation, therefore, requires both political literacy and tested contemplative practice. Leaders should learn to map decision rights, interests, incentives, and likely effects, while also asking who benefits from their public role and who can name what they gain from it. Barentsen's account of socially rewarded religious identity shows why solitary introspection is inadequate: the self that is rewarded by a group usually needs correction from people not rewarded for agreement.⁴²

The institutional stake is close to the article's own settings. In Benner's reading, Machiavelli's republican commitments orient diagnosis toward free orders, self-government, and resistance to

⁴² Barentsen, "Reimagining Religious Leadership," 50–55, 66–68.

domination.⁴³ Merton's critique of absolute rightness turns attention to the concentration of certainty inside religious leadership.⁴⁴ The fox asks where power gathers and whose agency is diminished. Merton asks where certainty protects a leader's or an institution's identity.

Because the case occurs at a border, future uses of the Fox and False Self should bring the diagnostic into fuller conversation with borderlands, migration, Latinx, liberationist, *mujerista*/Latina feminist, and womanist perspectives. Those traditions do not become lenses governing this article. They mark the limits of its present scope and the conversation the border context presses next: coloniality, race, gender, displacement, community agency, and power. A fuller treatment would take these up before extending the diagnostic to that setting.

These implications remain modest. Instead of the diagnostic offering a program, it makes institutional habits theologically and politically visible: how leaders read power and themselves, who can contest those readings, and what the chosen means form in the community.

Conclusion: A Person Who Sees

Prophetic public leadership fails when conviction outruns perception. Conviction cannot correct a field or a self it has misread. I have developed a dual diagnostic from Benner's republican Machiavelli and Merton's account of the false self: the fox's recognition of snares tests the public account of power, and Merton's contemplative diagnosis tests the identity invested in that account. Their force comes from keeping those judgments distinct and making both answerable to communal contestation.

The pairing is deliberately irritating, perhaps not unlike prophetic ministry. Borders expose inherited categories under pressure: nation and neighbor; security and communion; law and mercy. Religious leaders accustomed to drawing models of public engagement from biblical prophecy, liberation theology, or social

⁴³ Benner, *Machiavelli's Prince*, 315–322.

⁴⁴ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 93–96.

gospel might find Machiavelli an unwelcome guest. The discomfort is part of the argument. The fox recognizes snares, including the snare of assuming that one's own tradition has already supplied everything one needs. Merton recognizes the false self that takes offense when its prophetic identity appears fragile.

Benner's Machiavelli insists that the "core teaching" of all Machiavelli's political writings is a "realist" teaching, "but not in the usual sense. It says in effect that the true foundation of any agents' own security, victories, greatness, and glory is respect for justice."⁴⁵ Merton's account converges at the level of practice: prophetic witness depends on the capacity to perceive what is actually there, in the world and in the self, without turning justice into self-assertion.

Leaders remain spiritually and politically fallible. The dual diagnostic offers no guarantee of right judgment. Instead, the diagnostic asks harder questions before action and after it. Who benefits from this public claim? What self is being protected by it? Who can contest both readings? And what do the chosen means form in the community? A leader or community may be right about an injustice and still become unreliable in the way it pursues repair. Being like Machiavelli's fox and noticing Merton's false self do not solve that danger. They do make it harder to hide.

⁴⁵ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 484.

A CASE STUDY OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL CHURCH

AARON TETER

Abstract

What does it mean to be a cross-cultural community of faith, and how can this kind of faith community provide prophetic leadership in the world today? This article addresses these questions by highlighting the ministry and community of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a congregation led by its mission to be “Christ-centered and intentionally cross-cultural.” The community of Eastminster offers a model for how diverse groups of people in the church can come to know one another in ways that allow for mutual respect, love, and justice to flourish.

Introduction

Martin Luther King Jr. once famously claimed Sunday morning to be the most segregated time in America. He made this claim in his book *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, where King attempted to explain to the American public the reasons for the Montgomery bus boycott and the ensuing civil rights movement. King recognized the prominent role the American church had played in facilitating racial segregation, so he spoke to the church in America, particularly to those in the White church, to convince them of the aims of the civil rights movement in its efforts to desegregate the United States. King writes,

The church must remove the yoke of segregation from its own body. Only by doing this can it be effective in its attack on outside evils. Unfortunately, most of the major denominations still practice segregation in local churches, hospitals, schools, and other church

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institutions. It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing, "In Christ there is no East nor West."¹

Nearly seventy years later, it could be said that some progress toward desegregating the American church has been made. Many denominational governing bodies in the United States have condemned segregation and racism.² Other Christian denominations have directed their communities to create and implement antiracism policies to prevent discriminatory practices in their ecclesial bodies.³ A wide range of American churches have tried to remove the "yoke of segregation" from their beliefs and practices since the time of King's prophetic critique of the church.

And yet, sadly, King's critique still rings true. The most segregated hour of Christian America remains eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. The statistics are telling. In the United States, 79 percent of Mainline Protestant adults are White, 70 percent of Evangelical Protestant adults are White, 54 percent of Catholic adults are White, and 80 percent of Pentecostal adults are Black.⁴ The American church trends toward racial homogeneity in its major denominational branches, creating an environment in which

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 479.

² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2020/2024* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), paragraph 162. The Book of Discipline states, "We condemn racism, ethnocentrism, tribalism, and any ideology or social practice based on false and misleading beliefs or ideologies that one group of human beings is superior to all other groups of human beings. ... We likewise urge governments, businesses, and civil society organizations to renounce statements, policies, and actions aimed at promoting exclusion, discrimination, and violence."

³ *Book of Order 2025–2027: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2025), G-3.0106.

⁴ Gregory Smith, Alan Cooperman, Becka Alper, Besheer Mohamed, Chip Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, Asta Kallo, Jeff Diamant, and Dalia Fahmy, "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Levelled Off," Pew Research Center, 2025, doi: 10.58094/4kqq-3112.

interracial churches in the United States are rare. In fact, one study concluded that only 16 percent of congregations in the United States could be described as multiethnic in attending membership.⁵

Despite the paltry statistics of multiethnic congregations in the United States, there are still churches that believe it is important for Christians to learn how to become community with one another across the boundaries of culture, ethnicity, gender, and race. The community of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is one such church. It has changed from a predominantly White, Presbyterian congregation to a racially and culturally diverse community of faith that declares its mission to be “Christ-centered and intentionally cross-cultural.”

This article will describe what I have learned from that congregation after I began to work with it in 2018 and became its pastor in 2023. In that time, I conducted a series of reflective listening sessions with the church, exploring its cross-cultural identity and learning the practices used to develop and sustain relationships and mission.

To share the congregation’s insights, I will briefly detail the church’s historical context to highlight the social challenges that confront the congregation as it tries to be cross-cultural. Then, I will explain how Eastminster uses “cross-cultural” to describe the relationships the church envisions. Next, I will share an example of congregational life in Eastminster to portray the characteristics of a cross-cultural community of faith. Finally, I will offer the lessons I have learned as pastor, providing three leadership practices used to develop and sustain ministry.

Historical Context and Social Challenges Confronting the Church

Eastminster Presbyterian Church was founded in 1856 in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty neighborhood. It was originally established

⁵ Mark DeYmaz, “New Research on Multiethnic Church Statistics,” *Outreach Magazine*, last modified March 29, 2020, <https://outreachmagazine.com/features/multiethnic/53748-multiethnic-church-statistics-research.html>. The study defines a multiethnic congregation as “having at least 20% racial or ethnic diversity in their attending membership.”

as Sixth United Presbyterian Church but was later renamed to avoid confusion after a denominational merger. The congregation grew wealthy over time, building financial trusts and endowments that still support its ministries. The church's prosperity can be traced to unjust land seizures from Native Americans by the British army in the early 1800s.⁶ Eventually, the land ended up in the hands of Thomas Mellon who used it to establish his fortune and turn East Liberty into a hub of industrial wealth. Anecdotal stories of the church in the early 1900s tell of the days in which members were dropped off at the church by horse and carriage and then, in later years, by limousine. The veracity of those stories is difficult to ascertain, but the reason for them can be understood when one considers the congregational resources that accrued throughout the early years of the church.

I relate this history to paint a picture of the cultural environment that birthed the early congregation of Eastminster. It was established in a predominantly White community. It had amassed its wealth and power through the people and systems that disregarded and mistreated people of color. And then it consolidated its resources into a racially segregated community of faith that went on to remain a significantly, if not completely, White congregation until the early 2000s. And though documentation of the congregation's original racial and cultural biases is elusive, the history of the church alludes to their presence.

However, this history overlooks the experiences of African Americans who later helped to reshape Eastminster. Pittsburgh's Black population emerged during the Great Migration and concentrated mainly in the Hill District neighborhood.⁷ In the 1950s, the Urban Redevelopment Authority declared the Lower Hill "blighted" and used eminent domain to demolish it for a Civic Arena, destroying 1,300 buildings and displacing more than 1,500

⁶ John Fulton Stuart Collins Jr., *Stringtown on the Pike* (Printed by Edwards Brothers; sales office, East Liberty Chamber of Commerce, Pittsburgh, 1966), 10.

⁷ Joe W. Trotter and Jared N. Day, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 3.

mostly African American families.⁸ Around the same time, a failed suburban-style redevelopment plan in East Liberty triggered White flight as displaced Black residents from the Hill District moved into new public housing in East Liberty.⁹ Combined with the collapse of Pittsburgh's steel industry in the 1970s, East Liberty's population decline led to a racially stratified neighborhood, where many African American residents struggled with poverty, blight, and crime.¹⁰

Slowly, East Liberty began to redevelop. Local leaders and organizations facilitated change in the East End neighborhoods throughout the late 1990s–2000s so that a new economic prosperity began to take hold and reshape East Liberty. Additionally, the neighborhood's racial and economic stratifications became less apparent as the community diversified with mixed-income housing. However, many residents still vividly recall the governmental overreach, economic neglect, and racial discrimination that affected the neighborhood in the 1950s–2000s.

As the neighborhood has changed, certain political and socioeconomic issues have become more complicated. For example, those who are familiar with the threat and destruction of gun violence now live alongside those who may never have experienced the ramifications of a shooting in their neighborhood. And those who remember the racialized and economic displacements of the 1950s now encounter an influx of residents and wealth into the neighborhood that threatens to displace them once again. Thus, a complex array of motivations, interests, and experiences confront the population, leading some to call East Liberty a “crossroads between wealth and poverty.”¹¹

Eastminster Becomes Cross-Cultural

Like the neighborhood around it, Eastminster underwent a transformation from a racially homogeneous church into a racially and culturally diverse congregation. In the early 2000s, Eastminster's

⁸ Trotter and Day, 55–56.

⁹ Trotter and Day, 70.

¹⁰ East Liberty Development Inc., “2023 Impact Report,” 22.

¹¹ East Liberty Development Inc., 22.

leadership began to discern a call to become cross-cultural. Leaders hoped to develop a ministry that would connect to neighbors across the boundaries of race and culture, even if the implications of this ministry for the church remained unclear. In time, the leaders of Eastminster hired a pastor who had experience in cross-cultural and interracial settings. The pastor led the congregation in forming a mission statement that would direct the church for many years to come. The statement read, “Eastminster will be Christ-centered and intentionally cross-cultural.”

With this mission in hand, the leadership began to restructure the church’s teams and worship services, holding them accountable to a cross-cultural worksheet that was used to ask the hard questions of who the church was hiring, who the congregation was asking to serve in leadership, and who the leadership was inviting to lead in worship. Furthermore, leaders regularly discussed the content and style of the church’s ministries to ensure teams offered appropriate racial and religious tradition diversity. The aim of this mission was to achieve meaningful racial diversity within the congregation, leadership boards, teams, and staff.

Eventually, these efforts resulted in the recruitment and hiring of a new minister of music in 2004. She came from the Black Pentecostal tradition and brought with her a vast network of connections from the Black Church community in Pittsburgh. Through these connections, the consistent leadership of the pastor and minister of music (who went on to become the head of staff), and the church’s intentional efforts to change its institutional structure, Eastminster began to become a cross-cultural community of faith.

Today, Eastminster is 54 percent White, 41 percent Black, and 5 percent multiracial or of international ethnicity (meaning that a member has immigrated to the United States).¹² The congregation is also multigenerational: 48 percent of members are fifty-six years old and older, while 52 percent are under the age of fifty-six. The worshipping community, which includes participants who have yet to become members, further diversifies these figures to create a community that is not dominated by any group.

¹² Eastminster Presbyterian Church, “2023 Church Statistical Report.”

Instead, the diverse community brings together a variety of experiences and religious traditions that have stretched and expanded the church's traditional, Presbyterian roots. The congregation regularly highlights and embodies a variety of forms of worship, from singing Protestant, Presbyterian hymns accompanied by an organist, to shouting out praise at a Black Gospel tune accompanied by a band. Worshippers recite written, liturgical prayers but also pray freely when prompted.

Congregants celebrate the sacraments (e.g., baptism and communion) with a sense of formality but also raise their hands to shout and praise during worshipful moments. In other words, Eastminster has become diverse in its people, traditions, and cultural makeup. It has become a different kind of community from what it once was, so that now the congregation is no longer intentionally segregated but beginning to depict the diversity of God's kingdom. And though it could be tempting to think this change has come about because of the neighborhood's demographic changes, that would be a mistake. Many churches still remain racially segregated amid diverse communities and entangled in their context's historical challenges. So, though Eastminster's surroundings may have provided the church with a cross-cultural opportunity, that opportunity only began to develop after the church decided to take up its mission to be "Christ-centered and intentionally cross-cultural."

What Eastminster Envisions with "Cross-Cultural"

Eastminster uses "cross-cultural" to explain what has changed—or at least what the congregation hopes to change—in its congregational relationships. Primarily, the church uses the phrase to describe the biblical work of Jesus Christ to break down the dividing walls of hostility that stand between people on account of their social, cultural, and religious differences (Eph. 2:14). But Eastminster also uses the phrase to depict a church that confronts the issue of racism in its context. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention once defined racism as "a system—consisting of structures, policies, practices, and norms—that assigns value and determines opportunity based on the way people look or the color

of their skin. This results in conditions that unfairly advantage some and disadvantage others throughout society.”¹³ Unfortunately, under the present political administration, that definition has been removed from the CDC’s website. Nevertheless, this statement encapsulates the pernicious quality of racism, which can affect and distort a society’s social and cultural attitudes and practices even when its presence is intentionally hidden.

Cornel West’s idea of the “normative gaze” explains how racism changes the way we see and value others. He argues that Western culture treats whiteness as the ideal standard and then measures everything else by that standard.¹⁴ Sociologist Douglas Massey’s concept of stratification shows how racism distorts our practices and laws by enabling dominant groups to exploit and disempower vulnerable groups through spatial segregation. He writes, “Spatial segregation renders stratification easy, convenient, and efficient because simply by investing or disinvesting in a place, one can invest or disinvest in a whole set of people.”¹⁵ Thus, racism distorts the values, norms, and practices of a culture.

In response to this analysis, Eastminster uses “cross-cultural” to describe a community that will reject the normative gaze of whiteness and instead learn to value multiple cultural expressions in congregational life. Moreover, Eastminster uses the term to express a desire to desegregate the church so that members can share their lives with one another across the lines of race and culture. In the congregational listening sessions of 2023, where I invited congregational members to reflect on their understanding of Eastminster’s cross-cultural mission, one member said,

The goal is to share our lives in Christ, inside the building, and outside as well. To be forming relationships that are

¹³ Office of Health Equity, “Racism and Health,” Minority Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified September 18, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/racism-disparities/index.html>.

¹⁴ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), location 467. (Location references refer to the Kindle edition of *Prophesy Deliverance!*)

¹⁵ Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* (New York: Russell Sage, 2007), 19.

friendships in Christ. They may not all be of the same depth outside of the church building and its activities, but there is still that effort to know and be known—to take risks with one another—to forgive one another in cross-cultural committed community.¹⁶

Thus, Eastminster uses “cross-cultural” to describe a hoped-for and intentional change in their congregational relationships. They hope to become a congregation that will reject the normative gaze of White, American culture and strive to become a community that will value, honor, and practice a variety of cultural expressions in the church. They hope to desegregate the church by intentionally committing themselves to equitable relationships in a racially diverse congregation. And, finally, they try to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit into relationships of mutuality with those who are different from themselves so that they can encounter the presence of Christ in and through one another.

Ultimately, Eastminster grounds its understanding of what it means to be cross-cultural in the book of Acts, particularly the stories of Philip’s encounters with the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch (cf. Acts 8). These narratives show the Holy Spirit pushing Philip beyond his comfort zones and cultural boundaries to establish relationships with those he had previously deemed unacceptable or impure. In so doing, the Holy Spirit modeled a church not owned by any single culture but established through the practice of mutual love in cross-cultural relationships. According to Michael Welker,

When the Spirit of God is poured out, the different persons and groups of people will open God’s presence with each other and for each other. With each other and for each other, they will make it possible to know the reality intended by God. They will enrich and strengthen each other through their differentiated prophetic knowledge. From various perspectives and

¹⁶ Rebecca, interview by Aaron Teter, September 2023, Interview Transcripts, Eastminster Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA. Rebecca and all other names from interviews are pseudonyms.

trajectories of experience, they will direct each other's attention to the agent responsible for their deliverance.¹⁷

An Example of Cross-Cultural Congregational Life at Eastminster

With Eastminster's interpretation of "cross-cultural" in mind, let me offer one example of the congregation's lived experience. One Sunday afternoon, a group of congregation members visited the various sites of the Underground Railroad in Pittsburgh, which is a historic series of geographical routes that enabled slaves to travel from the southern United States to the North. These routes often followed the physical features of the natural landscape, leading through forests, fields, and waterways.

Escaping slaves traveled on foot and were vulnerable to the natural elements. They faced the constant danger of being captured by slave traders. However, along the way, enslaved people could find refuge at "stops" on the Underground Railroad. These stops offered protection and concealment to fleeing slaves. They were organized by other freed slaves, abolitionists, and people sympathetic to the cause of freedom. They gave the fleeing slaves cover from the light of day, hiding them away until the freedom seekers could continue their journey north at night. The slaves often knew what places were considered safe along the Underground Railroad through a secret information network and a system of coded communication at each site. Furthermore, they were led by "conductors" along the paths of the Underground Railroad. The conductors were people familiar with the routes and the stops of the Underground Railroad, and they knew the dangers to avoid on the way to freedom.

Nevertheless, no journey along these routes was safe, and no stop on the Underground Railroad was completely secure. The fleeing slaves were in constant danger of being caught and sent back to the bondage of slavery. Organizers of the stops also faced the peril of going against the system of laws that held slavery in

¹⁷ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 151.

place. The journey to freedom required great courage from both the freedom seekers and the organizers of each Underground Railroad stop.

Out of their journey came remarkable stories of bravery and perseverance, which have been passed on from generation to generation and encapsulated in historical markers around the city of Pittsburgh. It was to these Pittsburgh historical markers that members of Eastminster traveled to consider the stories and experiences of freedom-seeking slaves and abolitionists.

On the day of our field trip, a group of us gathered after worship to determine how we would arrive at each site. We were a diverse group of participants. We were composed of African Americans, Whites, and people of international ethnicities. We had children of five to adults of ninety. Though most of the participants were members of the church, a few had been invited as guests of the Eastminster members. All told, we had around twenty-five to thirty participants ready to go on the field trip. As we gathered, several drivers organized the participants into their cars to form a caravan. And then we set off.

Upon arriving at the first site, we experienced some confusion. We had driven to the Allegheny Department of Human Services in downtown Pittsburgh, which was situated in a modern building with no historical marker to indicate its importance to the Underground Railroad. However, our guide gathered us in and began to explain the importance of the site to which we had come. She told us that the place used to be the Monongahela House, a prestigious hotel in the region. It had served the rich and famous who traveled to Pittsburgh, including several presidents of the United States. But it also acted as a stop along the Underground Railroad. The hotel staff members were known to assist slaves on their quest to freedom. According to one documentarian,

Many of the hotel's staff of free African-Americans were also active abolitionists and supported the movement through secret meetings and by undermining slave owners who lodged at the establishment.... When slave owners from the south would bring their slaves here,

the free men who worked at the hotel would whisk the slaves away to places like John Vashon's barbershop and bath house, located where the PPG Building stands today. The ex-slaves would get a new hair style and wardrobe to help them elude capture on their way to freedom in Canada.¹⁸

As we listened to our guide's description of the place, several participants commented on how often they had passed by the location without ever knowing its history. We began to wonder how and why these historical stories of freedom had been covered over with the passing of time.

The next stop on the Underground Railroad was 100 yards away in a downtown alleyway. We gathered in that obscure spot, surrounded by buildings and parking lots, as our guide pointed out the historical marker for the Bethel AME (African Methodist Episcopal) church in Pittsburgh. The congregation was one of the first African American congregations in the city. As such, it was a significant stop along the Underground Railroad, acting as a place of care for freedom-seeking slaves.

Bethel AME also served Pittsburgh's African American community with education and resources. The church was a vital community hub. However, its story was being told to us in the context of a nondescript downtown alleyway. Bethel AME had long ago moved, and the strangeness of the present-day setting made it hard to envision the significance of the original site. But that strangeness fell to the background as the various members of our group began to share their own knowledge of the church and its importance to the city of Pittsburgh. Some spoke of where the church is located in the Hill District of Pittsburgh and discussed the congregation's present-day struggle for reparations from the city.

Others referred to the historical tradition of the AME Christian denomination in Pittsburgh and opened side conversations on

¹⁸ "Monongahela House Hotel: 1839–1935," Brookline Connection, accessed April 23, 2024, <http://brooklineconnection.com/history/Facts/MonHouse.html>.

what they were learning and experiencing. As we walked to the next location, I could tell that the group was engaging in something more than a historical tour. We were unearthing stories that would impart to us new understandings of ourselves, stories that would allow us to see one another differently if we were humble enough to receive them, not just as individuals, but as a community.

This community formation became more apparent at the next few sites. In one place, we learned about Martin Delany, a Pittsburgh renaissance man who had started the city's first African American newspaper called *The Mystery*. He was a Black activist and self-trained physician who encouraged Black liberation and empowerment. Through his connections and prowess, Delany went on to become the highest-ranking African American commissioned officer of the Civil War.

As our guide told Delany's story, I noticed the beaming face of one of our elderly participants. She is an African American woman with considerable influence in our congregation. The people of Eastminster deeply respect her. So, we paid attention when she began to engage the tour guide and share her knowledge of Delany. She had grown up hearing stories about him and learned more of Delany's story in her later years. From what she shared, it became evident that she was proud of Delany and what he represented to her and her people. This made the rest of us proud and humbled to hear Delany's story through her experience as an African American woman who grew up in Pittsburgh.

At another site in the Market Square of downtown Pittsburgh, our guide told us of a location that had played a significant role in the Underground Railroad. It was a barber shop that helped fleeing slaves take on a new look and identity. Eventually, this place of business became an Oyster House restaurant known as a welcoming place for the African American community throughout the civil rights period. Upon hearing this, one of our participants began to share her story of connection with this place. She spoke of how her father had always told her and her siblings to go to the Oyster House restaurant whenever they went to downtown Pittsburgh. He had wanted them to eat there because the restaurant was one of the few places in Pittsburgh where African Americans could gather

and eat without fear. But she had never known of its connection to the Underground Railroad. As she told her story, we could hear the amazement in her voice as her own history was illuminated in a new way.

For our final stop, we traveled to the Bigham House, a farmhouse owned by Thomas Bigham, an abolitionist and Pennsylvania state representative and senator in the 1850-60s. Bigham used his house as a stop along the Underground Railroad. With the help of his wife, Maria, and their family nurse, an African American named Lucinda, Thomas Bigham provided refuge for fleeing slaves in the Pittsburgh region. Slaves would have to traverse the forested land and climb the steep hill that led to the Bigham House. But because the Bigham property overlooked the rest of the land, it became a secure location for fleeing slaves to hide while in Pittsburgh.

When we arrived, a host of the property took us on a tour. We began outside on the trail the freedom-seeking slaves would use to reach the Bigham House. It was still a functional trail, so we decided to walk a part of its path. The climb was steep, and the terrain was uneven, causing some of our older members to bypass the trail and go directly to the house. However, this difficulty only served to heighten our awareness of the perilous journey along the Underground Railroad.

At the house, we heard the story of Thomas Bigham. Most, if not all of us, were unfamiliar with his history. We began to ask the host questions, seeking more information. Even the children who were with us participated in this inquiry session, which delighted the whole group as it revealed the children's interested engagement with the story of the Underground Railroad. It was clear that the tour had an effect on all of us.

As we concluded our time at the Bigham House, the congregation members gathered outside to reflect, take a picture, and pray. One elderly African American member shared how thankful she was to God that she was able to take this journey at this stage of her life (at the age of ninety). A White member commented on how special it was to share the field trip with the rest of the group. Another member shared some personal history she had with our guide, which then prompted our guide to share

some of her personal history with the member. It was a Spirit-filled moment, leading us to know one another more deeply. It was fitting, then, to conclude that moment with prayer, thanksgiving to God, and a benediction for the group because in so doing we were able to acknowledge the cross-cultural work into which we have been called.

What Are the Leadership Lessons Eastminster Has Learned to Develop and Sustain Cross-Cultural Relationships and Ministry?

In this section, I will share what the congregation has taught me as their pastor. These are the practices I have seen the church use to develop and sustain its cross-cultural ministry, but they are also the practices revealed in conversation with church members throughout our season of reflective listening in 2023.

First, Eastminster initiates its cross-cultural relationships at the crossroads of their lives and neighborhood context.

During the trip to the Underground Railroad sites, our group met at the crossroads of history. We came as African Americans, Whites, young, old, men, and women. We brought our personal histories and encountered the historical sites in our own personal ways. Yet, in the crossing of paths and the sharing of our stories we were changed.

We formed new understandings and deeper relationships with one another. We shared a peace that came through the presence of God's Spirit, allowing us to unite as one community. We were no longer separate but knit together by a common experience that happened at the crossroads of our lives.

Likewise, the congregation of Eastminster meets at the crossroads of the East Liberty neighborhood. Some bring to the community their stories of displacement and neighborhood upheaval, while others bring their experiences of privilege and expected opportunity. We have disparate paths and life experiences at Eastminster; yet, through sharing our lives and one another's stories, we form new bonds of healing and peace that change everyone in the community of faith.

This cross-cultural and cross-relational change is a gift of the Holy Spirit. However, it is initiated by sharing the content of our lives with one another at the crossroads of our lives. This crossroads engagement is essential to the cross-cultural community of faith. It is what Philip did as he engaged the Ethiopian eunuch. He formed a new relationship with the eunuch, offered the healing presence of God's Spirit, and united with them as the community of faith. But Philip did not just impart change to the Ethiopian eunuch. He was also changed by his encounter with the Ethiopian. This mutual change is an essential characteristic of the cross-cultural community of faith, and it begins at the crossroads of our lives and contexts.

In the church, Eastminster initiates these kinds of relationships by inviting members into worship services that employ a variety of musical and liturgical styles, engaging them with a racially diverse group of leaders, teachers, and preachers, and drawing them out into the neighborhood through community activities or events.

One example is the church's yearly Praise in the Park worship service, where the congregation hosts its worship service in the local park setting and shares a meal afterward. Through this event, passersby intersect with members in a casual way, allowing them to see, hear, and experience the characteristics of Eastminster's community of faith in a moment of praise and fellowship. But it also draws members into new connections with their neighbors, enabling them to establish cross-cultural relationships at the crossroads of their lives and contexts.

Second, Eastminster establishes cross-cultural relationships through the practice of listening to one another.

In 2023, I embarked on a project of reflective listening within the church. I interviewed members who had originally helped to bring forth Eastminster's cross-cultural mission. Then I reflected on their comments with the governing board of the church (i.e., session). Then I shared the session's reflections with the congregation and invited feedback. We created a circle of listening to consider the nuances of our cross-cultural ministry. What quickly became apparent through this project of reflective listening was that the

congregation was already accustomed to listening to one another. Indeed, they used it to establish new cross-cultural relationships. For instance, one member said,

I think spending time having conversations with people outside of your comfort zone is an important practice. Whether it's your ethnic comfort zone or socio economic or, you know, whatever the isms are, having relationship with people outside of those comfort zones is important... it leads to you saying, You know, maybe I'll try to have more conversation with that person, or give an invitation to lunch, or pick up the phone and have a conversation. This helps to establish or deepen those types of relationships.¹⁹

Listening is an essential practice for the cross-cultural community of faith. It gives an individual the courage to reveal her/himself to others because that individual trusts the community will listen in return. But listening is not just about the courage to reveal oneself. Listening's true power is in the ability to position a listener to hear a speaker on the speaker's terms. It requires one to hear others as they would communicate themselves. In that sense, it puts the listener in a posture of learning instead of assuming that one already knows everything there is to know about others.

When a person listens to others it allows the speaker to feel heard, but it also confronts the listener with the possibility that he or she might be changed by what the speaker has said. Listening leads to transformation. In speaking about what it means to be a cross-cultural community of faith, a member named Sarah said, "[Cross-cultural community] is not just welcoming people and being diverse but receiving other people's culture and trying to understand and learn about each other until Jesus calls us home. When you want to know one another's culture, you can have true fellowship and true relationship."²⁰

¹⁹ Rebecca, September 2023, Interview Transcripts.

²⁰ Sarah, September 2023, Interview Transcripts.

True fellowship and true relationship in the cross-cultural setting come through the practice of listening to one another. For example, in the Underground Railroad field trip, participants listened to the tour guide as she told the stories of survivors. Then, participants listened to one another as members reflected on what they had heard. They took relational risks with one another as they shared their own stories. They listened to the host at the Bigham House and tried to understand what the experience meant for the group as a whole and not just for themselves. They questioned and paid attention and listened to one another in a way that was risky.

At any moment, an individual from the group could have demanded his or her own way. She could have asserted her own story as the story to be heard. He could have denied the lived experiences of another and insisted that his was the standard. During that time, an individual could have destroyed the possibility of cross-cultural community by refusing to listen. But that was the risk the group took with one another. They became vulnerable and listened to one another on purpose. In so doing, they established bonds of fellowship that crossed their social and cultural differences.

Before I move on to the third leadership practice for the cross-cultural community of faith, I want to mention something that was not specifically addressed in my ethnographic data: the role of confession and repentance for the cross-cultural community of faith. Throughout my interviews, only one participant referred to repentance in relation to the cross-cultural community of faith. Peter, a White interview participant, said, "the great sin of America is our treatment of Blacks and Native Americans. It was sinful from the beginning. And because of that, I think that Jesus wants to circumcise the sin. He wants to cut this out, and to build something new...where we figure out how to live together."²¹ However, this lack of direct reference to the role of confession and repentance in a community of faith that is striving to be interracial in the United States did not lead me to believe that confession and repentance were unimportant to the community of Eastminster. My experience of the community tells me otherwise.

²¹ Peter, September 2023, Interview Transcripts.

Confession and repentance are critical to the health and well-being of Eastminster's cross-cultural community of faith, especially when they draw the White participants of Eastminster into a more just and loving way of being with African Americans and other people of color. Nevertheless, the people of Eastminster do not highlight confession and repentance as public and communal practices for the cross-cultural community of faith.²² I believe the reason for this dearth of reference is to be found in the experience of the Eastminster community as it strives to bring forth sincere cross-cultural change. In that experience, repentance is always necessary; but it begins in the practice of listening to one another's stories and lived experiences and rarely needs to be demanded.

Indeed, if listening is truly practiced, then listening becomes a form of repentance for the White community at Eastminster. Through listening, the White community is drawn into the stories and experiences of those whom they have historically ignored or forced from their view. They change from that previous way and open themselves up to the stories and lives of their African American brothers and sisters. By learning to listen with respect to people of color, the White community walks the long, slow road of repenting from the racial injustices and prejudices of this land.

I experienced how the practice of listening stirred a spirit of repentance within myself. At the end of the Racial Reconcilers field trip, I was asked to pray for the group. As I prayed, the images of people fleeing slavery came to my mind. The indignities and racial injustices that continue to be inflicted on African Americans came to my mind. The courage of the conductors of the Underground Railroad and the abolitionists came to my mind. The pride on the faces of the people of color as they heard the stories of notable African Americans in history came to my mind.

All these images came to my mind because I had listened to my brothers and sisters during the field trip. As I prayed, I was stirred to ask for repentance for the evils of racism in this country and

²² It should be noted that the community of Eastminster publicly confesses and repents each Sunday in the worship liturgy. But this practice was not referred to by participants in the reflective, listening project.

how I have been complicit. It is important to note that no one had asked me to repent. Nor had we made any public invitation for members of the community to repent in this manner. Rather, I was led into repentance because I had listened to the stories and lived experiences of my brothers and sisters of color. Listening makes us vulnerable to one another. It opens our lives to others so that we want to change and reorient ourselves for the benefit and good of those who have shared their stories with us. In other words, we repent and in so doing we help to establish Christlike cross-cultural relationships.

Finally, Eastminster sustains its cross-cultural commitments through the practice of giving thanks to God for the cross-cultural community of faith.

Eastminster understands that the cross-cultural community of faith is a gift from God in the name of Jesus Christ. In the most fundamental of ways, the Holy Spirit creates this community, not our own efforts. Certainly, we participate in God's work to bring forth what the Lord wants as we gather in the name of Jesus Christ. But when we thoroughly explore the questions of how, what, and why we are a cross-cultural community of faith, a great mystery is revealed.

Precise answers cannot be achieved. Something deeper than our beliefs, experiences, and actions has drawn us toward one another to form a community that can declare the possibilities of something new—a community where people willingly pursue racial justice, reconciliation, and love in the name of Jesus Christ. To the person of faith, this is evidence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is at work in and through us, sending us out to the crossroads of life to share the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who would receive it in faith. The community that results is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As I consider the Racial Reconcilers field trip and the group that shared the experience, I am left to wonder why those individuals came. Why were they willing to use their time on a Sunday afternoon to travel around with others who were different from themselves to hear stories that would unsettle and challenge their own histories? Why did the White people listen when the stories

of the Underground Railroad revealed a present-day complicity with the White privileges of many of the attendees? Why did the African Americans travel in cars with the White participants, actively engaging in friendly conversation and dialogue with a cultural group that has historically acted unjustly toward African Americans? Why did our multiethnic children come and pay attention? Why did the group give thanks to God at the end of the experience and pray with one another? Why do some of them still talk about the field trip? And why do I see some of the members who did not previously know one another now regularly greeting one another at worship?

As I take these questions further, I wonder about the church. Why have longtime members of the church remained as the demographics and worship styles changed? Why have African Americans in the congregation willingly entered community with White people when the history of Blacks and Whites in America is so fraught with danger? Why have White congregation members agreed to let go of their privileges so that they can no longer simply get their way in the church? Why do we try to become friends and agree to spend time with one another outside of Sunday morning worship? Why is this congregation intentionally trying to be a cross-cultural community of faith in the name of Jesus Christ?

I believe that I could offer a semblance of answers to all these questions. I could invite the responses of church members to hear their personal reasons for why they did what they did. We could share the truth of our reflections, and I would discover a little more depth about what it means to be a cross-cultural community of faith through that truth. In a sense, that is what I did throughout the reflective, listening project in the congregation. But I also believe that if we kept on digging, we would discover something underneath our personal reflections. We would unearth the histories, cultures, and worldviews that influence each of us to believe and act in certain ways. From this, we would learn something more about what it means to be a cross-cultural community of faith. But it still would not be the bedrock of the truth.

If we returned to digging, we would discover more depth, more nuances, more mystery, underneath everything else that had

already been discovered. We could dig and dig and dig, causing all our previous answers to appear too simplistic or close to the surface, until we arrived at the fundamental truth of the cross-cultural community of faith. It is that truth that seems to be the only certain truth that can be claimed for this community. That truth is this—the cross-cultural community of faith is what it is, with the people that make it up, because the Holy Spirit has brought it forth in the name of Jesus Christ. It is a glimpse of the picture revealed in the book of Revelation where people from every tribe and nation and tongue gather together in one community to praise the Lord. It is a gift from God.

In the end, the community offers this answer to the question of what it means to be a cross-cultural community of faith: no matter from where we come or how we come to the community, we understand ourselves as gifts from God to one another. We value one another not because we have created the cross-cultural relationships of the church but because the Holy Spirit has brought us into this community with one another, offering us to one another as gifts. At the deepest parts of ourselves, we know that we could never have brought forth such a rich and complex community on our own. It is by God's grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit that we have become intercultural and interracial. That is the fullness of the truth. Therefore, we encounter the interior and exterior difficulties of our cross-cultural mission with humility, hope, and perseverance because we trust that, ultimately, the community is in God's hands.

The story of the church in Acts proclaims the truth that the cross-cultural community of faith is God's creation and gift to the church. The disciples confined themselves to their own familiar kind until the resurrected Lord commanded them to go out and proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. They sheltered away in fear until the Holy Spirit filled them and compelled them to speak in a way that could be heard at the crossroads of the Jewish pilgrims at Pentecost. They stayed in Jerusalem until God used a persecution to scatter them to the regions beyond. They went to whom God told them to go and formed community with whom God revealed as their community. And when they struggled to understand the consequences of their actions, they asked the Holy

Spirit to instruct them and reform them into the community that God desired. Throughout the story of Acts the reader is stirred to ask the question, “Why are the disciples doing this?” so that the scripture can repeatedly answer, “Because God wants it to be so.” As Willie James Jennings writes,

The deepest reality of life in the Spirit depicted in the book of Acts is that the disciples of Jesus rarely, if ever, go where they want to go or to whom they would want to go. Indeed the Spirit seems to always be pressing the disciples to go to those to whom they would in fact strongly prefer never to share space, or a meal, and definitely not life together. Yet it is precisely this prodding to be boundary-crossing and border-transgressing that marks the presence of the Spirit of God.²³

The community of Eastminster Presbyterian Church bears witness to the fundamental truth that the cross-cultural community of faith is a gift given to us by God in the name of Jesus Christ and brought forth by the Holy Spirit. In the right context, the Spirit of God can take any action of the faith community and use it to bring forth cross-cultural relationships. But, without the Spirit, the community’s actions and efforts fail to bring forth that result.

This mystery of the Spirit’s work is why Eastminster members asserted that the cross-cultural community of faith is always more than just being in the same room, or serving one another, or engaging socially. They were attesting to the underlying work of the Holy Spirit—that no matter what we do, something more is always needed to bring forth the cross-cultural community of faith. The Holy Spirit is needed to draw them into a deeper community with one another across cultural and racial boundaries, to enable them to know and love one another more fully, and to provide a cross-cultural unity in the name of Jesus Christ, prompting the

²³ Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 11.

congregation to give thanks to God. In reflecting on this work of God, one White member of the church commented to the gathered community in one of our reflective listening sessions, “Eastminster has changed me as a person. When I look and see one homogeneous group in a place, I notice. I’m different now because of Eastminster.”²⁴ And then he gave thanks to God.

Conclusion

What does it mean to be a cross-cultural community of faith? It means that we follow the Holy Spirit to the crossroads of life, so that we can initiate relationships across the lines of race and culture, so that we can be changed by one another through the practice of listening to one another, so that we can create a community that respects and honors a variety of cultural perspectives, traditions, and experiences, so that we can give thanks to God.

²⁴ David, September 2023, Interview Transcripts.

BOOK REVIEW***THE THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP: SERVANT, SACRIFICE, SHEPHERD, LEADER***

BY: PETER M. DANILCHICK

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Peter Danilchick offers insights from fifty years of leadership experience in the corporate and religious world. He serves as a protodeacon in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which offers him a specific vantage point. Danilchick is passionate about bridging the gap between theology and leadership with a holistic perspective on Christian living (www.christianleadership.co).

The author is concerned that despite all the leadership books, seminars and training, Christians still are not leading very well. He views general leadership frequently through a dark lens: "leadership is not the desire for power or the projection of influence. It is not a means to assert ourselves over others, or to attract followers who will admire us" (xiii). The alternative is "The Theology of Leadership" (note the definite article), as if there is no other theory or theology of leadership that could be wholesome.

The author defines leadership as "simply a responsibility given to all of us to fulfill the will of God, to be called to action by Jesus" (xiii). As we experience divine leadership in transforming our lives, we can lead others in similar transformations. When we lead, we extend Christ's leadership; we join in God's mission. Leadership is therefore *pastoral*, truly concerned with people and their salvation; *missionary*, engaging religious and secular realities; and *prophetic*, confronting the fundamental issues in this world. Thinking about leadership requires a new language, which the author derives from the fountain of Holy Orthodox tradition (pp. 3-8, 14).

Leadership is founded upon the pillars of obedience, integrity, service, sacrifice, and shepherding. The first two are derived

from the narratives of Israel's (dis)obedience and Paul's teaching on moral soundness. The last three are derived from the church offices of deacon (those who serve), priest (who administer the Eucharist), and bishop (the church's shepherd). These five pillars "build the leadership house of the soul" (p. 21). In support, many scriptures and Orthodox practices are briefly explained, but there is no argument to prove that these five are foundational, nor is there any engagement with leadership, theological or exegetical literature about these pillars of leadership. The opening chapters are a passionate and personal plea for Christlike living (according to Orthodox insights) in whatever walk of life we might find ourselves.

As the chapters unfold, the five pillars of leadership are illustrated by brief biographical sketches of five ancient and contemporary leaders within the Orthodox tradition. Next, the leadership of Moses and Jeremiah is narrated within the five-pillar structure. The leadership of Jesus is first examined through the three Temptations and the Beatitudes, after which the five pillars return as narrative structure.

The longest chapter in the book studies the texts of St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Gregory the Great as they discuss priestly leadership in the church. Curiously, the first two were ordained to church leadership against their will but ultimately found themselves responsible for many people who, though formally church members, had low morals and little commitment. The five pillars do not shape the narrative structure here, but the concepts frequently return.

A short chapter on leadership pathology mentions the false shepherds of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jesus' woes against the Pharisees, a bullet list of bad leadership characteristics under the headings of the five pillars, and an extended discussion of the problems of church hierarchy. The book closes with assorted leadership advice from Proverbs, based on the readings in the Orthodox liturgy, and the *Philokalia*. Though there is much here to direct one's soul, it appears to be a personal collection of quotes and advice.

The book is acclaimed as a heroic effort to integrate theology and leadership, supported by ten pages of raving endorsements (mostly

from Orthodox colleagues). It is as if Danilchick has embarked on a journey never made. Perhaps this is so within Orthodox circles, but from a wider perspective, this book represents one of the many personal, Christian proposals for healthy leadership. It presents an unusual combination of Orthodox voices not heard elsewhere and common-sense re-narrations of Scripture and sensible leadership advice.

Curiously, the book makes little attempt to make the Orthodox tradition accessible to outsiders. What is a protodeacon? What is the *Philokalia*? How should we date the various Orthodox authors cited? Nevertheless, the book offers important reminders of the priority of Christ in all of life, including in all forms of leadership.

However, being published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, the book appears to present scholarly work on leadership theology. If readers are looking for that, they will be disappointed. The readings of Scripture are only informed by a few select ancient commentaries; current exegetical or historical studies are absent. The readings from the Orthodox Fathers cite no academic studies, and it is unclear to what extent the selected texts are representative of the Orthodox tradition. The engagement with leadership research is almost entirely absent (except for an appendix that briefly mentions the best-known leadership theories). Hence, at an academic level, the book fails to bridge the theological, exegetical and management discourses on leadership.

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BOOK REVIEW

THE VINEYARD LEADER: A JOURNEY TO CULTIVATING A THRIVING TEAM

By: MIKE BODIE

Independently Published, 2024

99 pp. paperback

ISBN 979-83-0-162-4117

Mike Bodie is a leadership coach and public speaker. In *The Vineyard Leader*, he examines leadership lessons unexpectedly learned from a skilled vintner. Bodie's work is allegorical and centers on John Matthews, the CEO of TechVision Solutions, and how his company was transformed by observing what it takes to make a California vineyard thrive.

In the book, John Matthews and his wife, Sarah, meet vineyard owner Elena Sterling on a tour. John's mind had been consumed with his growing tech company, but that thought was interrupted when Elena began to explain how farming is less about control and more about nurturing. Although TechVision Solutions is not exactly a failing company, CEO John Matthews learns there is much room for improvement. The nature of the grapevine's growth, the care needed to help them thrive, and the intention behind a knowledgeable vintner's intervention all help instigate a new way of thinking about leadership for John.

For example, as John considers the structure of his company, he recalls a lesson from the vineyard. Bodie states, "Elena's words echoed in his mind: 'The trellis doesn't make the vine grow – it gives it direction'" (13). This causes John to consider what types of corporate leadership structures can function as a trellis for TechVision. The lessons Elena teaches John through the vineyard are applied to the context of TechVision. Bodie's allegory follows the entire process of creating a successful vineyard and then shows how natural processes can be applied to leadership.

The Vineyard Leader helps the reader to consider multiple aspects of leadership. Bodie covers practical topics like structure, culture, support, and even succession planning. Bodie particularly focuses on two areas: how TechVision learns to become self-reflective and how he approaches leadership overall. Whether someone is familiar with a tech company or not, most everyone has experienced the frustration of a piece of software being difficult to use.

Bodie explains how TechVision Solutions had all the benchmarks of success but still missed the mark with its end users. TechVision Solutions' leadership realizes they have more pruning to do for their customers to be truly satisfied with their products. The leadership principle is clear: Leadership is only effective if the people being served are prioritized. Bodie's lessons continually exemplify intentional leadership where pain points are addressed.

The next major focus is Bodie's philosophy of leadership, which is summarized well when he states, "the true essence of leadership lay not in creating perfect systems, but in fostering an environment where individuals could thrive, where imperfections were embraced as opportunities for growth, and where the pursuit of excellence was a continuous, ever-evolving process" (82). Each lesson from the vineyard expresses that growth needs the right conditions and support much more than it needs control. In other words, Bodie views culture as equally important as the structure of an organization. The allegorical nature of *The Vineyard Leader* makes complex leadership principles accessible through his grapevine illustration.

Though Bodie's work inspires and challenges, it should not be viewed as a comprehensive guide; rather, it is a peek into one team's journey that focuses on identifying solutions to their leadership issues. The book would have been strengthened by including more detailed instructions for implementing the principles espoused. For instance, when John the CEO is learning how to apply the necessary support for multiple grapevines to his company, Bodie articulates, "Leadership wasn't about forcing everyone onto the same trellis; it was about providing the right support for each individual to reach their full potential" (30). This is true, but the book includes no application to help the reader replicate his results.

This advice works for a church leader managing a small staff, but it would be challenging to prioritize individuals at a large church. Additionally, large ministries have dozens if not hundreds of volunteers in each ministry. Providing a specific support system for each person is not sustainable or perhaps even recommended within any Christian organization. Bodie ends the chapter abruptly, leaving the reader to fill the gaps based on his or her personal context. *The Vineyard Leader* is best suited for churches where a senior pastor bears the responsibility for developing a staff team. Bodie's concepts, though helpful, would be best utilized as a starting point for developing a team. More specific instructions on development are required to strengthen Bodie's arguments about employing the principles of *The Vineyard Leader*.

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BOOK REVIEW***FLOURISHING IN MINISTRY: HOW TO CULTIVATE CLERGY WELL-BEING***

BY: MATT BLOOM

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019

129 pp. paperback

ISBN 978-1-538-11896-2

As a business professor at Notre Dame, Matt Bloom became interested in well-being, which he defines as psychological, social, and spiritual health (3). Well-being is not simple physical health. It requires thinking more broadly. Over time, Bloom became interested in clergy, focusing on their challenges and the possibilities for their well-being. A researcher, Bloom gathered data from over ten thousand pastors representing more than twenty denominations. He and his team asked three research questions: What are the signature characteristics of well-being for clergy? What factors and conditions foster flourishing, and what factors and conditions impede or diminish it? And how does the well-being of clergy and their families change over a lifespan? In this book, he presents their findings, along with research-based paths forward for clergy well-being.

Bloom has four dimensions of well-being: daily well-being, resilience, authenticity, and thriving. For daily well-being, there are three forms of alignment that are important. There needs to be alignment between the pastor's duties and competencies. Bloom notes how challenging this can be, given the myriad expectations upon a pastor. The needs of the pastor (and family) should be aligned with what the congregation supplies. In this section, Bloom addresses the important but rarely discussed issue of compensation for ministers. When ministers are not adequately compensated, daily well-being is significantly (negatively) affected. Finally, Bloom points to the need for alignment between the values of the pastor and the values of the congregation. In this section, Bloom

addresses leadership directly, stating that “each pastor has his or her own unique style or approach to being an effective leader – there is no one best way for all pastors to lead” (15). For daily well-being, pastors are at their best when there is alignment between themselves and the congregations they lead.

Resilience is also important for clergy well-being. Noting that ministry is high stakes, complex, continuous, diverse, often interrupted, and with little external structure, Bloom makes the case that clergy need to cultivate the ability to maintain and enhance emotional health. This is the section where Bloom addresses clergy burnout. He calls for congregations to reduce the workload of pastors so they can flourish while they are doing ministry.

Authenticity calls for self-integrity and dignity. We need to know ourselves, be ourselves, and be treated with respect by others. Authenticity can be challenging for pastors as they interact with many people, each with different expectations and maturity levels. For Bloom, helping pastors develop a complex, integrated narrative identity means that they will be better equipped to manage the challenges that come from working with real people – people with problems and challenges that often get attached to the person’s sense of who the pastor is supposed to be.

Finally, thriving means that the pastor has a sense of meaning and purpose in their work. They are connected to others and able to have meaningful relationships. Here is where Bloom speaks about the challenges of jobs that often have porous time boundaries and the impact pastoral work can have on a family.

Turning to suggestions for healthy clergy, Bloom advocates for increased support for pastors. Pastors need friends – often those in their own denomination. Pastors need mentors – often from those who have traveled the paths of ministry. Pastors need support from their congregation – often from those who can help set boundaries and advocate for clergy wellness.

Bloom’s work is not a theological work, and he does not present it as such. It is social science research on what helps clergy to flourish in their work. Combining this book with something like Miroslav Volf’s *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized*

World would give both a theological framework for flourishing and excellent research on what helps clergy to flourish.

While not directly on leadership, Bloom's book helps to form the backdrop of what is needed to sustain leadership in ministry settings. Bloom has done important work on understanding the challenges facing clergy who are actively leading. He has provided paths forward for clergy and the systems around clergy so that clergy can flourish while they lead. For those who are working in denominational settings or coaching/supporting clergy, this is vital research to create structures for clergy to maintain their wellness over the course of ministry.

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