

# 8 HABITS OF EVANGELISM



Worship • Generosity • Justice  
Radical Welcome • Sacraments  
Teaching • Prayer • Fellowship

# 8 HABITS OF EVANGELISM



**Office of Theology, Formation & Evangelism  
Presbyterian Mission Agency**



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
**Presbyterian Mission**



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# PREAMBLE

Ray G. Jones III

Director, Theology, Formation,  
and Evangelism

It is interesting to me that evangelism, the very word that means to declare good news and glad tidings, has become a dirty word. When an essential ministry of the church is distorted by religious zealots and used to judge others to determine who is “in” and who is “out” of the community of faith, the message of glad tidings is turned into judgment and exclusion—a dirty word. The proclamation of good news is no longer perceived as news worth sharing or hearing. To address this situation, churches have developed evangelism committees and searched for ways to train people in evangelism. These committees are formed and faith sharing training is sought after to grow and support declining churches, not to bear witness to good news.

If evangelism is simply a tool to bring more people into our churches, evangelism is not good news. Evangelism is not good news when it is used to focus on one aspect of the faith, like eternal life. Separated from justice, evangelism is bad news. The gospel is meant

to bring both hope and restoration to the world. The prophet Isaiah paints a compelling picture with words of those who bring a message of good news:

*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’*  
(Isaiah 52:7, NIV)

The good news of the gospel is that God fiercely loves us and is actively at work reconciling broken systems, relationships and lives; indeed, all of Creation.

The problem with evangelism is that we have reduced the good news of the gospel to growing our churches and going to heaven when we die. Now, do not misunderstand me; my heart’s desire is for growing, healthy churches and the promise of eternal life. However, the good news of our salvation is much more expansive. Salvation is God’s rescue plan for Creation. God’s plan has

nothing to do with souls escaping the physical world. Salvation is about the transformation of lives, relationships, communities, peoples, nations and Creation.

We have lost our way when it comes to the ministry of evangelism. Proclaiming glad tidings cannot be merely relegated to a committee's responsibility. Beyond church evangelism efforts, no one needs training to share good news. Good news flows from our mouths as water freely flows in a mountain stream. Have you ever needed to go to a training workshop to learn to share the good news of a brand-new puppy or a good report card?

Many years ago, I was praying about and discerning a call to serve the denomination in the ministry of evangelism. I still remember the words of my mentor, Ben Johnson, telling me there is no way we can train people to share news that is not already good news inside of them. He went on to say that discipleship formation is the key to shaping people in the faith, who will then have hearts filled with good news to share.

As the church is struggling with loss of influence, declining membership and the reduction of the gospel, we are called to engage again the gospel message of good news in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. At the end of Christendom, we are called to move from an attitude of "what the church can do for me" to a posture of bearing witness to the gospel through a community committed to living the new life of Christ. In his book "Becoming the Gospel," Michael Gorman describes the essential nature of Christ's body:

Ultimately, the integrity and the impact of all Christian witness depends on the integration of message and mission. When the church, or an individual Christian, preaches the gospel but does not live the gospel, or deliberately lives only a slice of

it, perhaps even publicly criticizing those who focus on other slices, the witness is likely to have no effect—or the wrong kind of effect. However, as the church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, becomes the gospel in its fullest by participating fully in the life of God manifested in Christ, the church offers an appropriate and credible witness to the gospel. This does not in any way guarantee 'success,' at least as success is typically measured by humans, but it does increase the likelihood that those who both hear and see this embodiment of the gospel will have had an encounter with the living God.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the urgent call of the church in our time is to make disciples. Discipleship formation requires that we are following Jesus along his way. As we are forming one another in discipleship, we are nurturing and equipping people for apostleship. We are equipping people to join God's mission of justice, liberation and hope. In other words, we gather to scatter. As we scatter, we engage God's work of dismantling racism and eradicating poverty. Also, we share along the way the hope we have in Christ (*1 Peter 3:15-16*).

The church is a Holy Spirit movement. According to The Acts of the Apostles, the early disciples were instructed by the risen Lord to wait in Jerusalem. Power would come upon them and fill them for the purpose of bearing witness to this life-changing way of life. The context of the Holy Spirit's activity that day was the temple in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, when a diverse group of people from around the known world were gathered together for worship (*Acts 1-2*).

The Holy Spirit worked through the disciples and this diverse group of people so that those gathered for the Pentecost celebration would hear in their own languages the life-giving work of God in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the power by which the church

bears witness to the kingdom of God. And because of this unique witness, people were curious about how they were hearing this beautiful message in their own languages. Peter boldly presents the life, death and resurrection of Jesus within God's salvific activity and mission in and through Israel. Upon hearing the explanation and seeing the transformation of human life, their hearts break. They repent and turn to God.

The result of the power of the Holy Spirit in the breaking and opening of human hearts is the embodiment of the gospel in formation practices. The early church identified the following four essential practices that by the power of the Holy Spirit transform us into the very life of Christ: they devoted themselves to the apostles teachings, the church is a diverse fellowship, the church engages in breaking bread and the church prays. Through these practices, disciples are shaped and sent to join in God's mission of justice and hope.

The purpose of these practices is to make us a peculiar people. We become what we practice. Practices shape and change our lives. God is using our changing lives for the transformation of the world. When people catch a glimpse of generosity, they want to know more. When they encounter a fellowship that is diverse and welcoming, they desire to be included. When worship and prayer are engaged in life-changing ways, people take notice.

Because of the power of the Holy Spirit working through these practices, people encountering the community of faith of the early church liked what they heard and saw, and the church enjoyed the favor of the people around them (*Acts 2:47*). People desired to know more about the healing, justice and hope emanating from this distinctive community. And the Lord added to their

number daily those who were being saved (*Acts 2:47*).

In this resource, you will engage eight habits that are designed to take you on a deeper journey into faith, the lives of others, justice, hope and the wonder of God. When these habits are formed over time, we encounter the process of our baptisms: dying daily to the old ways and being raised into the new life of Jesus Christ (*Romans 6:4*). People around us are longing to know that there are people who will do God's justice for and with them. There are people in need of love, hope and purpose. There are people struggling under the weight of racial injustice. They want to know that others see the injustice and will join them in bringing justice to our neighborhoods and communities. There are people who have been shunned by the church and other institutions for simply being the people God has made them to be. They, too, need partners along this journey.

The following habits develop within us a love of God, neighbor and Creation: prayer, generosity, sacraments, worship, teaching, justice, fellowship and radical welcome. Over time these habits change us and offer discernment and guidance for following Jesus through the trials, structures and systems of our nation and world. These habits enable us to hear God's voice over all the other voices calling out to be heard. These habits cause our hearts to break over and open to the needs of and hurt in people around us. These habits provide the words of good news to which we bear witness and proclaim. By the power of the Holy Spirit, these habits enable us to lay down our lives so that others can live.

Evangelism in the 21st century North American context must be experienced as a journey of going deeper in our faith, relationships around us and God's mission of rescue and reconciliation. This journey of

faith engages formation habits that change our lives and the world around us. When we open ourselves to God's love, justice and the people around us, we encounter the reconciliation of all things and the saving grace of Jesus. The beauty of this journey is that this transformation process always opens us to the wonder of God. And along the journey we realize that all people can breathe. Oh my, all people breathing the breath of God! Now that's a story worth living and telling.

I am grateful for the wise, diverse voices that have contributed to this evangelism resource. Their partnership has been a beautiful expression of the goodness and richness of Christ's body. As you work through each habit, may you experience the Holy Spirit transforming you and the world around you.

Our prayer is that this resource will take you more deeply into God's love, the habits that change our lives and the good news that is always worth living and sharing.

My closing thought is a prayer for you and the church:

*So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus would be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus attractive to all, getting everyone in on the glory and praise of God.*

*(Philippians 1:9-11, MSG)*

**NOTES** 1. Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), p. 317.



# 1

# RADICAL WELCOME

Shanea D. Leonard



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*God, who is sovereign and loving to us all, open our hearts and minds as we seek you in this lesson.*

*Help us to see the value in welcoming the stranger, loving our neighbor and seeing people the way you do.*

*God, help us to not center our own fear but open us up to the beauty of radical welcome.*

*And God, even when the task at hand gets difficult, give us the strength to push past the discomfort so that we may know more fully the bountiful blessings of beloved community.*

*Amen.*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF RADICAL WELCOME

I can remember the first time I truly felt “at home.” I was in a setting with folks whose diversity vastly ranged in race, orientation, age, income level and background. No two people were alike in every way and yet we all felt the same. It was as if a mini United Nations was in this unique gathering space. And I must admit, it was in this particular environment that I felt a sense of self and community that I had never felt before. Within this lack of homogenous ascetic, I found what I believe many of us are looking for, a sense of belonging . . . a place of being. I felt, for the first time in a public space, real welcome. For I had found home. And this was the first time in decades of living that I truly experienced what I could later only define as radical welcome.

**Radical welcome** is the spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts,

presence, voices and power of The Other: the people systemically cast out of or marginalized within a church, a denomination and/or society.<sup>1</sup> Radical welcome is beyond the spirit of hospitality or the presence of a visitors' repass after morning worship. Radical welcome is a deterrent from the germane into a world of equity and equality for whom-ever the Lord sends to your ministry. It is an embrace of the alterity that exists in a fundamental effort to live into the mandate of *whosoever will, come*.

In radical welcome, the idea of othering someone who does not fit a dominant structure is cast out in exchange for the benignant desire to be changed and freed from the comfort zone of conformity to dominance. Radical welcome frees all who participate to let go of the mindset of us verses them. Rather, no one is the other for all are of one body with differing parts. The fear of the unknown is replaced with the excitement of embrace for the what could be. This virtue is truly the epitome of the call of the Christian to be a breach mender, a safe haven and the reflection of the welcoming love of God in the world.

I think the best example of this is clear in the dichotomy of multicultural versus intercultural. Multicultural means all are welcomed at the table and their differences are seen. Everyone is represented as their humanities are displayed for their diversity, each within their own understanding. However, interculturalism has a different approach to community. Radical welcome shows up in interculturalism not just by putting each other's differences on display but by actually taking the next step to learn about one another and to shift the narrative to create a platform that incorporates the culture, identity and sense of self of all into the life of the community.

In its most simplest form, radical welcome is the spiritual ability to see the will of God to create, foster, make room for and be an active participant in beloved community that calls us outside of our proclivity to fear and into the brave loving strength of togetherness. It is the difference between inviting visitors in your home and welcoming family. One is temporal and the other is belonging.

### III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

Scripture references for the practice of radical welcome are all throughout the Bible. In fact, the essence of salvation and the reason for Christ's crucifixion are based in an idea of the radically welcoming nature of God inviting the "whosoever will" to the table of fellowship, family and faith. Our collective root narrative as Christians should always point us to a place of openness and welcome to those God places in our path. However, here are some additional Scriptures to ponder:

*You shall love the stranger.*

*(Deuteronomy 10:17-19)*

*See, I am doing a new thing!*

*(Isaiah 43:18-21)*

*Those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will find it.*

*(Luke 9:23-25)*

*Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me.*

*(Matthew 25:31-46)*

### IV. ILLUSTRATION

When Heather contacted me via email one Wednesday night, I didn't know what to expect. She said that she had gotten my information from a community partner of the

church and was directed to me for spiritual guidance. She said that she was a 19-year-old transgender woman who was struggling with understanding if and how God could love her. She said she had been agonizing over, and was even suicidal about, the notion that God had turned God's back on her, especially given her religious upbringing. She didn't give much detail

about her story but just asked me how I could possibly help since she clearly thought if I was a minister, then I would just condemn her as well.

I opted for an alternative response. I welcomed Heather to join me, free of charge, at a conference that our church was hosting the coming weekend. I told her that it was designed specifically to address the areas of hurt, harm and disconnect between the church and the LGBTQIA+ community. I also shared with her that nothing she had told me or could ever tell me would cause our loving God to turn away. I reminded her that she was fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image not in spite of being trans but in connection to it. I also told her that I, too, was a part of the LGBTQIA+ community and that a variety of people would be attending and leading workshops who would definitely help to provide a safe and brave atmosphere for thoughtful engagement.

When she arrived that chilly Saturday morning in November, I could immediately tell it was her. No, she wore no name tag, nor was she the only transgender person in attendance. However, the look of fear in her eyes and a smile that said this may be my



last hope pointed my spirit in her direction. I admired the strength and fortitude it took for her even to get to us that day. The first thing I did was introduce myself and offer her a hug. I assured her she was in the right place, got her an informational packet and some food and helped her get settled in for the plenary. She was introduced to one of the members of the church who offered to be a conference buddy for Heather so she wouldn't have to navigate the terrain alone. She stayed all day and even came back for the second portion the following day.

Heather eventually became a member of the church and was even active in our outreach to other trans college students. She became an integral part of my ministry, being an intern for my secular job and even inviting me to do a seminar at her corporate job once she was out in the working world. Years later, Heather and I are still in contact. She is no longer suicidal. She has a restored relationship with God and is thriving in her authentic self. I truly believe that God worked through the radical welcome we extended as a church to help this young lady blossom in her sense of faith, sense of call and sense of self identity. To God be the glory!

## V. HABITS FOR RADICAL WELCOME



### **Develop a plan that all can participate in.**

Do not limit the responsibility of creating a radically welcoming space to one part of the congregation. Develop a plan for how you will outreach to communities and make sure your space is open and affirming to all and then make that a part of the mission and vision of your church. It should be the desire of the entire congregation, and not just a certain committee, that extravagant, radical welcoming is a part of the DNA of the congregation.



### **Don't always expect them to come to you.**

One of the downfalls of folks looking to diversify their congregations is that they open the doors and expect folks to just flood in because they are there. That never works! The best way to provide radical welcome is to become a part of the community around you. Exemplify your welcome by being the salt and light of Christ outside the church walls. Connect with organizations, churches or individuals that are actively involved with marginalized communities. Do more than just seek to be a savior of the community; become a partner. Partnership is mutual reciprocity that alludes to radical welcome. This trip outside of your comfort zone is well worth it when extending radical welcome.



### **Reflect diversity in who leads.**

Most people who are typically “othered” take notice of how they are, or are not, reflected in the make-up of those who lead in worship and in senior leadership. In order to make

sure radical welcome is tangible, be intentional about diversity and inclusion in the voices that lead your congregation.



### **Worship should not always be how it has always been.**

Consider the style of liturgy, choice of music and elements of worship. Are they reflective of a variety of traditions, cultures and representations of people? Part of where some become stuck between attempting diversity but lacking inclusion is the rote practice of using dominant cultural ways of doing things that only uplift diversity during certain ritualistic times of the year. That is not radical inclusion. Not only is who is involved in the worship imperative, but how the worship is conducted helps to create a space that is reflective of radical welcome and extravagant inclusion.



### **Do your own work.**

Before you look to extend the olive branch of welcome and inclusion to those who have been “othered,” make sure you do the work of acknowledging, confessing and working through the implicit and explicit biases that may exist in your congregation or group. It would be a shame to do all the work of preparing a place and then when folks show up, the welcome is rife with words or behaviors that deter the very point of welcome.



### **Even if not on the first try, don't give up.**

Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day. You may have done all your foundational work and have created the most radically welcoming space possible, and no one shows up. And that's OK. What is key to remember is

persistence and patience. People who have felt harm or alienation may need time to see consistency before they are emotionally and mentally able to extend trust. Stay focused on your job, to be there with open arms. Leave it to the Spirit to do the rest.

## VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which communities of people are absent from your space?
2. What do you feel have been the barriers to you living into radical welcome and what do you hope to reimagine for your future?
3. How have you prepared personally to engage in connection with those who have been “othered”?
4. In what ways have you practiced radical welcome in your faith community?
5. Where do you see places where your community can extend more radical welcome?

## VII. CLOSING PRAYER

*Loving and merciful God, help us daily.*

*First, to see where we have held on to a mindset that has not pleased you nor served us.*

*We confess that we have often operated in fear and ignorance in an effort of self-preservation and willingness to reside only in that which is familiar and comfortable.*

*Dear God, help us also to live into the idea of what it means to love all different types of people in the ways that you do.*

*Help us to see radical welcome as an opportunity for growth and not a hindrance to conservation.*

*God, who is a loving parent to us all, grow us into the image of Christ as we seek to see others in the same manner.*

*And finally, God, give us the wisdom to know that we are all merely vessels sent to do your will and be conduits of your spirit in harmony with humanity.*

*We pray this prayer knowing that you are faithfully pushing and pulling us into that which we are yet becoming.*

*And for this we are thankful.*

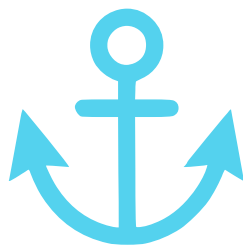
*Amen.*

**NOTES** 1. Radical Welcome as defined in Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation* (Church Publishing Inc.: New York, 2006).

# 2

# WORSHIP

Bruce Reyes-Chow



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*God of the chaos—  
In the confines of a binary and calcified world  
grant us the courage to embrace nuance in  
ourselves and others,  
awaken humility that manifests generosity  
toward things we do not understand,  
unleash the creativity of our souls that  
expands our experience of you,  
and strengthen our resolve to persevere  
through the messiness of seeking justice in  
the world.  
This we pray.  
Amen.*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF WORSHIP

### ***A Generous and Expansive Table: The Beloved Community Gathers***

It would be disingenuous to write anything about worship in 2020 without acknowledging the impact of the worldwide pandemic upon our worship life. Yes, COVID-19 has impacted all aspects of our congregational life, but I would argue that worship, the center of so many of our gathered communities together, has faced the most jarring disruptions.

One of the dangers of this moment of unrelenting disruption, especially when it comes to worship and the shift to online and digital spaces, is the pull toward immediately searching and seeking solutions, practices and tactics that can preserve what we have been doing all along. Make no mistake, this is a time when these are natural instincts, especially for pastoral leadership.

We want our people to feel loved and cared for, so we offer as much that is familiar as possible. In the process, we too become over-extended and overwhelmed when the last thing we want to do is spend more time engaging in the nuances of worship and church life.

As we settle into digital space and online worship, I hope we all choose to reject false dichotomies as a justification for stagnation, and instead choose to embrace nuance. Yes, rejecting false dichotomies is generally a good life lesson, but when it comes to worship, in-person or online, there are some strong ones that demand too much of our energy and devalue our ability to faithfully live and deftly navigate the wonder and chaos of life.

To name a few assumptions regarding in-person and online worship:

***In-person worship builds deep relationships; online worship does less than.***

FALSE. In-person as an ideal is built on the assumption that all of our in-person relationships are ones of depth. We know that many people have powerful relationships in online spaces *and* we are well aware that in-person relationships are anything but a guarantee of meaning.

***Online worship is exclusive; in-person is inclusive.***

FALSE-ISH. Yes, online experiences can be exclusively based on a variety of issues, but in-person worship can be just as exclusive for the same or different reasons. Online or digital, we must always seek to be more welcoming, but we cannot use this as justification to reject online experiences without examining our in-person offerings with the same lens.

***Online worship is the future; in-person is the past.***

FALSE. One of the reasons that I chose to be part of a denomination is that we together can be many things to many people. We are joined together by a commitment to the holy and that transcends style or space. We must be careful not to see online worship as the next great tactic to save the church, but rather as another among many manifestations of how communities gather.

***You can spend time on the look OR the content of digital worship.***

FALSE. This is a tough one because pastoral leadership is tired, so thinking about mastering or learning one more skillset (design) can be overwhelming. We then run the danger of falling into a mindset where we believe that we can either make our digital space visually meaningful *or* provide good content. We have been doing both in our physical spaces for some time now, so we should bring the same diligence and discernment to tending our digital spaces.

There are more, but you get the idea.

All of that said, the easy place to go when thinking about the future of worship is to curl up in this binary place of pandemic/pre-pandemic or online/in-person worship. I choose to believe that we can, and must, do better. I challenge us all to see this time as a mandate to reflect on our theological understandings of worship, release practices and thinking that hold us back, and reimagine how worship can be expressed in both in-person and digital spaces.

At the end of the day, this is not even about in-person *or* online worship, but about creating and curating a space for God's people to gather, no matter "where" that is. We have

always done the work to make sure these spaces are contextually appropriate, visually tended to, inclusive of broad participation, and built upon the love, hope, peace and joy of Christ Jesus. Today we have been given the chance to expand that experience even more.

Online, in person, today or tomorrow our worship experiences should always seek to give expression to God's possibilities for humanity. Pandemic has magnified the opportunity to do so, so let us not turn inward and constrict our experience of God, but let us look all around us and stay open to ways we are being beckoned toward a more expansive expression of God's hopes for us all.

### III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

*Although I'm free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them. I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. I act like I'm under the Law to those under the Law, so I can recruit those who are under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law). I act like I'm outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, so I can recruit those outside the Law (though I'm not outside the law of God but rather under the law of Christ). I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means. All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it.*

*(1 Corinthians 9:19–23, CEB)*



## IV. ILLUSTRATION

### ***A Pandemic Story***

Online worship is not for everyone, but we must be careful about what assumptions we make in order to justify upholding structures and practices that are in need of reimaging.

The congregation I serve is predominantly older—feisty and super active in faith-based social justice work—but most are in their 60s, 70s and 80s and many are living in retirement communities and assisted living. Even though we are located in Silicon Valley, one might assume that these folks would not adjust well to Zoom Worship.

Wrong.

When we moved to online worship in March of 2020, a week before the mandated shelter-in-place happened, we sent out some Tech Deacons and they helped lower anxiety about what was to come by helping people get set up, answer questions, and generally offer a presence of generosity and hospitality.

Without going into the twists and turns of our worship experience, technological and content-wise, we have managed to



collectively create a worship experience that has been meaningful to not only our current participants but to folks who have connected or reconnected with our community over the past months.

I can guarantee that the elements of our worship that made our in-person experience genuine (focus on social justice, playful and engaging, creatively traditional, and centered on the divine) did not change. What changed was how we manifested these things in a new space, how we expanded invitation, and how we reimagined what it means for our community to worship together.

Every time 90-plus-year-old Francis shares in our post worship “coffee hour” or a grandchild in Hawaii greets their grandmother joining from New York, or our new friends from Brazil or the Philippines share what happening in other parts of the world, I am reminded about what a gift this moment in time can be. No one would wish for the pandemic to have happened or see any kind of “silver lining” with the backdrop of hundreds of thousands of deaths, but we can say that we have adapted and found ways to see the hope, care and possibilities that God is revealing before us.

When Paul speaks of being all things to all people but remaining in the law, we are being given permission to embrace ever-changing and expanding expressions of faith. Hold on to the elements of worship that give worship depth, texture and meaning and let go of this or that, right or wrong, online or in-person thinking that only limits how we speak to the world.

## V. HABITS FOR WORSHIP



### Reimagine rather than replicate.

One of the dangers of moving to an online worship experience is trying to replicate what happens during the in-person gathering. While this is somewhat possible, this does not take advantage of the digital space itself. If a physical sanctuary transitioned from pews to chairs, worship would look different and the ability to reconfigure seating would be taken advantage of. Likewise, on Zoom or other video platforms, there are features that can help to make the experience differently meaningful. Again, worship is still happening, it just happens to be virtual.



### Add more seats to the table.

Both from a participant and leadership perspective, online worship opens up a wealth of possibilities to expand who can play a part in the worship experience. Either recorded or live, take advantage of the ability to transcend boundary, border or wall and bring in voices that might not otherwise be able to be present. Community leaders, artists, preachers or mission partners can now attend to share, lead and connect the congregation to the community.



### Think DJ.

DJs curate space that draw people into a communal experience. They create the general vibe, they read the room for reaction, they adjust the music and beat, and they are always thinking about how to create space

where the spirit can move most freely. These days, this adaptive muscle must be exercised more than most of us have had to in the past. Leading worship has always been an adaptive experience, but the online experience has turned the dial up to about 10 for most of us. Do not be eager to turn the dial back; rather, embrace the moment and see this as a chance to keep the spirit dancing.

## VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Focusing on worship during a time of pandemic, I offer these process questions to help move conversations about worship forward.

1. **SORROW:** What have you lost? What losses have we grieved?
2. **JOY:** What have you gained? Where have we seen new life and growth?
3. **LEARNINGS:** What have you learned about yourself as a congregation, as participants and as leaders during this time of pandemic? What has surprised you about how you have navigated this season of life together?
4. **POSSIBILITIES:** What worship practices or perspectives might God be revealing before your community as you move forward?
5. **WONDER:** What are you still wondering about?

## VII. CLOSING PRAYER

*God of the chaotic skies and of the calming waters—*

*Call us again and again into the beautiful burden of faith, service and worship.*

*Gather your beloved people in ways that are generous, loving and just.*

*Send us into the world gladly embracing the unknowns of yesterday, today and tomorrow.*

*Amen.*

# 3

# SACRAMENTS

Aisha Brooks-Johnson



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*God of grace and grand invitation,*

*We give you thanks for you have set a table before us filled with love, joy and peace.*

*You invite us to be nourished by your presence, purpose and power.*

*Give us the strength to taste and see that you are good.*

*Help us to know that you have declared that we are good and good enough.*

*We give you thanks for the waters of baptism wherein you have named us and claimed us as your own.*

*Through your sacred waters, we have been sealed and set apart to reflect your goodness and your mercy.*

*We are yours, children of the covenant, people of faith.*

*This day and always, let the waters of peace wash over us again.*

*Let the waters of renewal revive us again.*

*Let the waters of justice and courageous compassion fill our cups till they overflow to the lives of all we meet.*

*For the daily bread and cup that touch our lips and fill our bellies, nourish and nurture us throughout the day.*

*For the moments when we see water and feel water, may we remember our baptism and know that we are beautiful, whole, complete and wholly thine.*

*For those who cannot find daily bread and cup, for those who cannot feel and find water that renews, may we work, fight and pray until all may have their fill and be at peace.*

*In the name of Jesus we pray,  
Amen.*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF SACRAMENTS

### ***Be Present in the Participation of the Sacraments***

One of the gifts of being a minister in the Reformed tradition is the rich language and imagery we have concerning the sacraments. We are taught and have witnessed for ourselves that baptism and the Lord's supper are visible signs of an invisible grace. We have been taught and adopt these essential tenets that declare that through the sacraments we see grace on display in accessible ways. Grace is God's divine gift of love. We cannot work for it. We cannot earn it. We cannot put our fingers on it. And yet, it is through the sacraments that we have an opportunity to experience God's love for us in extraordinary ways. Within our Book of Order, we are reminded that:

The Sacraments are both physical signs and spiritual gifts, including words and actions, surrounded by prayer, in the context of the Church's common worship. They employ ordinary things—the basic elements of water, bread, and wine—in proclaiming the extraordinary love of God.<sup>1</sup>

I love that last line. Ordinary things are employed to proclaim the extraordinary love of God. This language invites us to be fully present in the participation of the sacraments. The shift from ordinary to extraordinary is an invitation to see God's extraordinary activity at work in the everyday and common things. It is an invitation to be present, to take and receive God's extraordinary love and to be made new once again. Participating in the sacraments invites us to practice being fully present in them.

As a minister, I must confess that there have been times when I was so consumed with

the logistics of administering the sacraments that I lost sight of what it meant to be present in the moment of the sacraments. For those in worship leadership, there can be a temptation to get caught up the preparations and mechanics of the day. We check to be sure the liturgy is just right. We want to be sure the families are in place and know exactly where to stand when you call them forth. We want to be sure that the elders and deacons have everything they need and that we don't get in the way of the instructions for administering the sacraments. If we are going to be honest, I know that I am not the only one. Just because we are bearing witness to the sacraments through worship leadership or participation in worship does not mean that we are being present as we do so. I think that it requires that we pause, breathe and remain aware of our surroundings. It requires us to sense the Spirit at work in the breaking of the bread, in the cup of salvation being raised, and in the water being placed on the beloved children of God.

### ***Practice Living Sacramentally in Our Ordinary Days***

At the end of our worship services, we are sent out to be witnesses into the world. Our directory for worship reminds us again of this:

Christian worship and service does not end at the conclusion of the Service for the Lord's Day; we go forth to love and serve the Lord in daily living. In so doing, we seek to fulfill our chief end: to glorify and enjoy God forever.<sup>2</sup>

We are invited be present in the mystery of the moment when the ordinary become extraordinary during the sacraments. It is in the sending that we have a chance to depart from the extraordinary experience

of worship and enter into our ordinary days with hope, wonder, strength, power and peace. We depart the service with an invitation to be present in our daily living and to live sacramentally in our waking and sleeping, in our working and eating, in our resting and in our moments of unrest, in our joys and in our sorrow, and in all the ways we find ourselves in relationship with God, others and ourselves.

The practice of living sacramentally can be equated to the practice of mindfulness and being intentional. I am a latent and slightly reluctant practitioner of mindfulness. I think mindfulness is wonderful, but it does not come easy to me. I have learned that we shouldn't shy away from things just because they might not be easy. For me, it is difficult to quiet the mind in a busy world. It is difficult to center in a season of life that can be disorienting and distracting. Living sacramentally takes an intentional approach to daily practices of living and moves through them with prayer, thoughtfulness and eyes wide open to the miracle working power of God in small and subtle movements.

### III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
my whole life long.*  
(Psalm 23)

*O taste and see that the Lord is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in him.*  
(Psalm 34:8)

*When you pass through the waters, I will be  
with you; and through the river, they shall not  
overwhelm you; when you walk through the  
fire you shall not be burned, and the flames  
shall not consume you.*  
(Isaiah 43:2)

### IV. ILLUSTRATION

I never imagined the joy I would receive in participating in and presiding over infant baptisms. The early part of my life was lived as a Baptist, which has an emphasis on baptizing disciples who can make a public profession of faith. I learned as a child that baptism was a blessing and baptism was serious business. I also remember taking classes in seminary on Reformed worship and how to properly administer the sacraments. We learned how to hold the baby, how to determine the appropriate amount of water to use, the proper place to stand in relationship to the family and the congregation, and other nuances that would be important for a new pastor. I learned that administering the sacraments in the Reformed tradition was beautiful but also serious business. I never

imagined the laughter and joy I would experience through grace on display in that way.

As a Black female leader in the church, a significant number of years of my parish ministry were spent in a predominantly white, suburban and affluent congregation. This congregation was my sending congregation for my theological education and holds a place of sentiment and significance in my heart to this day.

While I served as an associate minister, I can remember taking the time to meet with families in preparation for the baby's baptism day. I was concerned with logistics and everything running smoothly. I was also concerned with a small child being comfortable with a new face who may have been racially different than other faces they may have seen. I would sit with the family, talk about the meaning and beauty of baptism and also make sure I held the child in my arms as a "dry run" to be sure they were comfortable.

While the names and the faces of families and children flow together in my mind, I can remember one child in particular. This child was not weepy or sleepy but was filled with curiosity and wonder. I can remember being concerned with the logistics of walking up the stairs into the chancel, taking the proper stance, turning on the lapel mic, holding my small book of liturgical words and having everything in place. I can remember taking the child in my arms and the child began to smile and coo at all that was happening. I can remember laughing and even commenting that this child was excited about the



baptism. I raised my water-soaked hand and placed it on the child's head three times in the name of triune God of the universe, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The child responded with waving hands, dancing eyes and noises filled with delight. It was there in that moment that I experienced grace on display. It was there in the moment that I was called to be present in the participation of worship and not to be distracted by the logistics of worship. It reminded me of the mystery of God's own hand on us all giving us a chance to respond in joy, excitement and delight at the wonder-working power of God.

## V. HABITS FOR SACRAMENTS

The image of a delight-filled child receiving the sacrament of baptism reminds me that I am invited to delight in God and connect to others on a daily basis. The sacraments are filled with mystery, ritual, intentionality and grace. I believe that we can practice daily intentional habits that remind us that God is present with us in our daily routines.

We can see God's grace on display in our daily living. Here are the habits that allow me to live sacramentally. I pray that they will offer you the space to do the same.



### **Rest.**

The Scriptures command us keep sabbath and to rest as God rested. It is not easy for people to slow down or even stop. Over the past 10 years, I have been more and more convinced and convicted that the spiritual practice of sabbath keeping and rest allows us to be present, mindful and experience a deeper relationship with God and others. Study the Scriptures and theological work on the significance of sabbath keeping and learning to rest. Ask God to help you take a spiritual inventory of how you invest your time. Ask yourself and those in your close circles what would happen if you took the time to sit beside still waters for the renewal of your soul. Ask God for the courage to practice this grace-filled command.



### **Reflect.**

As you take the time to keep sabbath and rest, it will create space in your life to reflect. We must take the time to look at our lives and reflect on our encounters and experiences. In my work with clergy and congregations, we often talk about crafting a spiritual autobiography. During those times, individuals will create a timeline and chart of God's activity in their own lives. We talk about labeling the "blessings" and the "beat-downs" we have experienced in our lives. It is through the practice of reflection that we can give thanks, ask questions, ponder, work through difficult emotions and dream about our hopes for the future.



### **Rediscover.**

In the practice of routine rest and reflecting on our lives, we can rediscover who we imagine ourselves to be as beloved children of God. When we practice rest and reflection, we can rediscover God's vision for our own lives that may have gotten lost or overlooked along the way. We need to rediscover our gifts and dreams. We need to rediscover our love and passion for living. We need to rediscover the promises nestled in Scripture. We need to rediscover hope for a world that is hurting. In our own rediscovery, we can invite others to walk close with the risen Savior who fills our lives with new mercies each morning.



### **Resist.**

In practice of rest, reflection and rediscovery, we must never forget the daily habit of resisting all things that would take us from God's will and intention for our lives. I have been a follower of Jesus since I was a wee one for Christ. In my own experience, it seems to be a tad easier to resist the things that are blatantly offensive to God and others. In this habit, I am talking about resisting the temptation to go through the motions of daily living. For many busy people in the world, we can skate by going through the motions of work, family, church and recreation. We get up, we get it done, we check in with others, we get a little more work done, we call it night, and then we hit repeat the next day. Resist the temptation of going through the motions. Resist living in a way that seamlessly goes from one day to the next. Resist the numbing of your soul so that your heart may remain tender and filled with care and concern for all.

## VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways can you be prepared and present before, during and following a sacrament-filled worship experience? What would change if you were more intentional about this practice?
2. How would you explain the ordinary turned extraordinary nature of the sacraments to a child? What words, pictures, songs or images would you utilize to help them understand?
3. Do you regularly participate in a sabbath-keeping period of time wherein you allow God to place you beside still waters? How could regular sabbath-keeping allow you to live sacramentally in your everyday life?
4. Consider the rhythm of your moments and your days. How could you incorporate mindfulness and intentional practices into your everyday life?
5. In what ways could living sacramentally (mindful, aware, intentional) impact your connection with God? In what ways could living sacramentally proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to others through both your words and your actions?

## VII. CLOSING PRAYER

*Wonder-working God,*

*Take our lives and shape us  
in the image of our faithful Savior,  
Jesus Christ.*

*Take our ordinary days and fill them with  
extraordinary wisdom, endurance, passion,  
mercy and grace that can only come from you.*

*Take our attraction to distraction and  
exchange it for a peaceful pursuit of  
righteousness, hope, truth and love.*

*By the Holy Spirit's power, give us spiritual  
senses that allow us to perceive your presence  
in each moment and to be present with you  
and others each day.*

*Through grace on display for all to see,  
Give us eyes filled with compassion.*

*Give us ears ever ready to hear.*

*Give us hearts reflecting your glory.*

*Keep us mindful.*

*Keep us tender.*

*Keep us present.*

*Keep us gentle.*

*Keep us strong.*

*By your power and by your ever-flowing  
spirit, make us more and more like you.*

*Amen.*

**NOTES** 1. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Book of Order* (2019–2021), W-3.0401.  
2. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Book of Order* (2019–2021), W-3.0503.



# 4

# PRAYER

Tom Bagley



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*To you, Lord Jesus,  
I bow my head and all my thinking;  
I bow my will and all my choosing;  
I bow my heart and all my loving;  
That I may be attentive to your Word  
And live a faithful life.  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

### ***Prayer as a Means of Evangelism***

Of all the activities we associate with spirituality, prayer is probably the most common. A recent report by the Barna Research organization noted that in the United States, 69% of people practice prayer weekly.<sup>2</sup> It is a near universal spiritual activity found in every culture, among every ethnicity, and from the earliest of times.

But in the lives of early followers of Jesus, there was something so uncommon and

attractive about the way they prayed, that it literally drew people to them.

What were the unique elements of early Christian prayer? And what sets Christian prayer apart even today?

First, early believers prayed in a personal way, as if God were close to them, delighted in them, and concerned about their every need. Jesus modeled this way of prayer by addressing God as “Abba, Father” in the Garden of Gethsemane (*Mark 14:36*), and followers adopted his familial way.

Second, early Christians prayed for wholeness in every aspect of life, from the most basic needs of food and health (*Matthew 6:11*), to release from addiction (*Mark 5:1-20*), and protection from systemic oppression (*Acts 4:23-30*). This was only natural, since prayer and healing were broad and constant activities in the ministry of Jesus. His prayers encompassed every joy and every need.

Third, first century followers prayed with confidence in God—boldness even—believing that God heard their prayers and

answered them. Jesus had taught them, “Ask and you will receive . . .” (*Matthew 7:7*). So, Christians dared to persist in prayer, confident that God would provide what was needed. As historian Alan Kreider writes:

Indeed, it was the early Christians’ practice of prayer that empowered them and gave them buoyancy. Because they believed that God answers prayers, they could take risks, live lives that were eventful and imprudent, and be faithful . . . [even when it got] them into hot water . . . [When] . . . outsiders got a whiff of it, they wanted in.<sup>3</sup>

### III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

#### ***Prayer in the Life of Peter and Early Believers***

##### ***Acts 3:1–10***

Jesus had a particular concern for those who were sick; he understood and had compassion for all manner of illness, suffering and sin. When Jesus prayed, he didn’t simply address the issue of physical illness; he restored health to every aspect of life. This same way of praying also characterized prayers of Peter and the early believers.

Notice that the beggar had been crippled from birth and was sitting *at* the entrance of Beautiful gate, but not *inside* of it. Because of his physical infirmity this lame man was thought to have sinned and was, thus, excluded from worship among the people of God. But when God healed through Peter’s prayer, God restored—not only the physical ability to walk—but also the social and religious ability to belong to the worshiping community.

Peter prayed an open-eyed prayer, brimming with confidence in God’s power, spoken spontaneously; it was a command to the infirmity itself. (In ancient times, people believed

illnesses were caused by unseen spiritual forces. They thought of healing as gaining victory over these forces through Jesus’ name. While this idea may seem strange to us, we should remember that medical science has long assumed that many human maladies result from psychosomatic sources.) When Peter prayed in Jesus’ name for this man to walk, he demonstrated the confidence we, too, can have that God will heal many aspects of our lives through prayer.

##### ***Acts 4:18–31***

After Peter healed the man at the Beautiful Gate, he was arrested, then later, released by leaders of the city. Reporting to fellow believers all that happened, the church wasted no time in turning to prayer.

Why did they pray? Certainly, they were grateful for Peter’s release from jail, but also, they felt the fear of threats against them and knew they needed God’s help. Having acted with courage once, now they needed courage again. Courage filled them as they called on God in prayer.

This bold way of praying astonished their enemies and attracted friends. Crowds gathered, and the good news of Jesus spread.

##### ***Acts 12:1–19***

Fast-forward, now, some time ahead. Full-scale violence had broken out against the followers of Jesus, and once again, Peter found himself imprisoned.

But Peter and other believers were committed to prayer:

*So, Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

*(Acts 12:5, NIV)*

The original Greek word for the phrase, “earnestly praying,” indicates their prayer

was a fervent, continuous effort, like the effort of a football lineman who will not be pushed backward but continues straining step-by-step ahead. The church had learned to pray earnestly because the church had seen God's tangible help. Although believers feared, they overcame fear through prayer.

Notice that it was shared prayer the Christians prayed. In shared prayer, faith is multiplied, concerns are widened, and believers gain strength to persevere. The church on its knees prayed late into the night and amazing things happened.

#### IV. ILLUSTRATION

##### ***Distinctive Prayer Draws People to Christ Today***

Dave Culbertson grew up in a family that went to church on special occasions—"holiday Christians," as he called them. His mother was a believer, but except for a time in high school when Dave attended with friends, church and faith had no significance for him. Now, in his mid-30s and married, Dave had been away from church for 20 years.

Hamilton Mill Presbyterian Church (HMPC) was a new congregation in the Atlanta suburbs, and friends invited Dave and his wife, Cheryl, to attend. While Dave had little interest, Cheryl went on her own, seeking answers for their struggle with infertility; they longed for a child. In seeking help, Cheryl joined an Alpha Course, an introduction to Christianity, offered by the church.

Week after week, Cheryl attended Alpha, hoping for answers from God, struggling with a growing doubt about God's love for her and feeling bitter about their inability to conceive a child. Dave says, "She hadn't seen or felt what she needed from it. She was

bitter, angry, dejected, hurting—and had given up on Alpha or God or anything else helping her."

One night at Alpha, the topic was healing and prayer. At the end of the meeting, the group prayed for anyone who asked. The group prayed for Cheryl, gathering around her and laying on hands.

"She came home," Dave says, "sat down with me and told me . . . [the group] had prayed fervently for her, for our infertility and laid hands on her—and she said that it filled her with the Spirit."

Dave was astonished: "What I witnessed was like nothing I'd seen before. She left [home that night] this bitter and broken soul, whom I loved and was helpless to help. . . . She came home transformed and with a renewed hope and a new outlook. I swear it was like her heart had been swapped."

Cheryl didn't necessarily believe that she would get pregnant, but now, she was at peace with whatever the outcome.

This experience of believers practicing shared prayer changed Dave as well. "I had never actually witnessed transformation, but Cheryl was spiritually changed after that. From that experience, we both got involved in HMPC, went through Confirmation and were baptized. And then, with faith and much more prayer (and even more dark days) came Wesley [our son]!"

#### V. HABITS FOR PRAYER

Living the distinctive lifestyle of Jesus is not easy; it can only be accomplished in dependence upon God and in relationship with a community of others. Prayer is one of the marks of this distinctive way of life, but it is also more than that: Prayer is our means of engaging God. It is the fuel that empowers

a lifestyle that proclaims good news and attracts attention. Within this perspective, there are at least five prayer habits that we may strive to develop.



### **A routine of personal encounter with God through prayer. (Daily)**

Jesus prayed with his disciples, but he also spent time alone with God in prayer. This time is vital and basic. It is our personal connection with God that transforms and empowers us to live Jesus' way of life. During this time, it is especially important to be honest about what we deeply think and feel—and to be silent, listening for the Holy Spirit within. The more we disclose of ourselves, the more we experience the tender, gracious, loving presence of God.

Choose a place and time to meet God regularly. Write, draw or think about your life. Talk to God about what comes up. Be honest. Read Scripture. Observe nature and art. Be silent and listen inwardly. Commit to act on what you experience in your time of prayer.



### **A regular practice of praying with others. (Weekly or biweekly)**

When we pray with others it strengthens our faith, widens our horizons and builds confidence in God. Find a prayer partner or gather a few friends at your home. Humbly join in prayer with friends on the margins; plan regular times of prayer with those who are homeless, in jail or in nursing homes. Hold prayer gatherings for racial justice. Hold times of prayer before community events, before government or school board meetings or at protests. Listen as others pray and add your voice to their prayers.



### **A regular practice of expecting, identifying and naming answers to prayer. (Whenever you pray)**

So often when we pray, we forget to look for answers. This practice invites us to look expectantly at events in our lives as answers for what God may be doing. Often events will surprise us, sometimes they will block us and at other times, they will cause us to wait and to pray more. But we will miss God's answers to our prayers unless we look for them intentionally in our daily lives. Keeping a journal or a spiritual diary is useful for this as is a group practice of inviting members to identify and celebrate answers to prayer.



### **A routine of “Prayer Walking” in your neighborhood, place of work or community, looking for the activity of God. (Once or twice a week)**

God is at work in all people, all places and all times; this is a way to look for God and join in whatever God is doing. Wherever we find people curious about spiritual matters, standing with the poor or working for mercy and justice, wherever we find forgiveness, healing or reconciliation or wherever there is new life blossoming in spite of hardship, loss and difficulty, God is at work. We look and listen carefully to our neighbors, co-workers, friends and community. When we begin to see where God is working and what God is doing, that is our invitation to join God in life-changing ministry.



**A regular practice of praying in person with neighbors, co-workers, family and friends. (Whenever someone expresses a deep-felt concern, joy, or need)**

Many people struggle to express deep thoughts and feelings to God, so when you offer to express this for them in prayer, you offer a true gift and blessing. Listen carefully to what people say, and especially to how they are feeling. Bow your head. If appropriate, hold their hand. Verbally, speak to God in your own words to express the thoughts and feelings of your friend(s). Be silent for a moment and listen inwardly for God. Then verbally ask God for help, guidance, strength or healing. Give thanks for God's goodness and blessing.

Remember to come back to your friend(s) and check in with their expressed joy, need or concern. When you see clear answers, point them out to your friend(s). Both your faith and theirs will grow.

**VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is your response to the idea that a distinctive practice of prayer may, in fact, draw non-churchgoers to the good news? When have you seen Christian prayer impact non-church friends?
2. How do habits like the ones suggested contribute to a distinctively Christian lifestyle? Why are habits more powerful for

evangelism than spontaneous, occasional practices?

3. Research indicates that on average it takes two months or more to develop a new habit. What will you and your fellow believers need to do to develop new habits around prayer?
4. Why is it important to have both personal and corporate prayer habits?
5. Of the five prayer habits suggested, which do feel most called to develop now? What specific actions will you take to accomplish your goal?

**VII. CLOSING PRAYER**

*O God . . . my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

*(Psalm 63:1)*

*O God, my God, I long to live my life in such a way that others may be drawn to you, and yet I struggle with the ongoing commitment to do it. Open my eyes to the needs of my neighbors, co-workers, family and friends. Help me experience the gentle touch of compassion for them and a fire of inward conviction for you that I might seek to live in order to be noticed. Draw me ever deeper into your purposes for my life and help me pursue you with all my heart, mind, soul and strength. Grant me your Holy Spirit that I may live faithfully, pointing others to the hope I find in you; in the name of the One who taught us how to live and pray, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

**NOTES** 1. Adapted from Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 20.  
 2. Barna, "Signs of Decline and Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith," *Articles State of the Church 2020*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church>.  
 3. Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 211.

# 5

# JUSTICE

Ralph Watkins



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*God tells us to spread the good news on the mountains, over the valleys, in the “hood,” on street corners, in sanctuaries, in our homes, everywhere.*

*We go in faith and joy to tell the good news of God’s unconditional love for all people.*

*God calls us to be in covenant relationships and covenant ministries:*

*To love and care, to share and clothe, to feed and nurture, to counsel and teach, to be committed to the health and well-being of our communities.*

*We are called to be the living church in the world.*

*The Church is the body of Christ, beyond these walls.*

*We go in faith to minister in hospitals, prisons, schools, high rises, business centers, city centers, rural and urban spaces, in places where people are gathered or scattered we go.*

*Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF JUSTICE

### ***Evangelism and Social Justice: Living the Gospel in the World***

There is a consistent theme throughout the ministry of Jesus, and we see this theme serving as the foundation for the ministry and growth of the early church. While Jesus spent much of his time teaching, his teaching was always connected to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable, the marginalized, the outcast. The connective tissue between Jesus’ teaching and ministry are what resulted in the large crowds following Jesus and the growth of the early church. This word and deed model of ministry that challenged the divide between the haves and the have nots was a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry and the ministry of the early church.

When the disciples set out in Acts 2:14–42 to birth the church the theological foundation for a ministry to the most vulnerable was already established based on their being disciplined by Jesus. They saw *how* Jesus

reacted to the woman of Samaria (*John 4:1-42*). Jesus embraced her, listened to her, had fellowship with her and met her at her point of need. Jesus didn't ostracize outsiders but rather Jesus embraced them. When people were hungry, Jesus was adamant that they should be fed. Jesus made it perfectly clear that the needs of those who were on the margins were more important than the tradi-

tions of the day. Traditions are to be broken when it comes to meeting the needs of those in need. Jesus broke those traditions and fed the hungry.

When you chart the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the foundation is set as Jesus heals many at Simon's house (*Mark 1:29-34*), preaches (*Mark 1:35-39*), cleanses a leper (*Mark 1:40-45*), heals a paralytic (*Mark 2:1-2*) and challenges tradition. Whenever tradition got in the way of ministry that met the needs of the most vulnerable, Jesus challenged that tradition. When the people were hungry Jesus pronounced that feeding the hungry takes precedence over tradition (*Mark 2:23-28*).

There was something new and different about Jesus' ministry and it was evident from the beginning. Jesus was teaching in ways that were transformative. Jesus taught as much by doing as he did by his words. The words of Jesus lived in the streets where he did ministry. In Jesus, the Word truly became flesh and it became real as he pronounced it. "Be healed." "Take up your bed and walk." "Sit them down and feed them." And Jesus' ministry was about meeting the needs of the people and as Jesus did this, the crowds



grew. The people knew something was different about the ministry of Jesus and they responded, they followed because as trite as it sounds, Jesus was a person of his word. He didn't just preach the Gospel, he brought good news in word and deed. Now, let's be clear, Jesus never did what Jesus did so that the crowds might grow, but rather the crowds grew because of the liberative message and ministry that made a real difference in the lives of real people. Jesus did real ministry, that made a real difference, in the lives of real people.

Jesus was showing the disciples and the world that justice is what love looks like publicly. Justice rights the wrongs, challenges systems of oppression, assaults systems of stratification and meets the needs of all. Jesus challenges the traditional order of things, the hierarchy and the staunchness of stale ministry that is locked in a building and rarely hits the streets. As the disciples walked with Jesus, what did they see? They saw him go through the grain fields on a Sabbath and break tradition by feeding them when they were hungry (*Matthew 12:1-8*). This was a lesson that the needs of the people transcend

tradition and Jesus wanted them to literally experience this. They were hungry, they were in need and this was a lesson to them—Jesus did it for them, they were to do it for others. They knew what it felt like to be hungry and they saw Jesus meet their needs. It is one thing to see others hungry and see Jesus feed them, but when you are to lead the development of the early church and you have seen it and experienced it yourself, this makes it real to you. The ministry model of Jesus was real to the disciples and it is obvious why they did what they did when they birthed the early church and managed its growth.

When Jesus met the needs of the people by challenging tradition, Jesus was clear that the needs of the people always have priority. They heard Jesus say in Matthew 15:32, “I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me three days and have nothing to eat; I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint.” As the disciples pushed back and questioned the wisdom of this act, Jesus simply asked, “How many loaves do you have?” (*Matthew 15:32–39*). Jesus took what they had, seven loaves and few fish, multiplied it, fed thousands and they had leftovers. Jesus taught that when you give, it grows. When you meet the needs of the people, you will never be in need. I wonder sometimes, if the reason so many churches don’t grow is because they hold on and protect property, store up resources and give only a small portion of what they have to those in need? Is it their refusal, to let go and give, the very thing that is resulting in their lack of growth as a faith community? The early church reflected the ministry of Jesus and they went and did likewise. The disciples, like Jesus, would go and challenge systems that produced social stratification, meeting the needs of the people.

### III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

#### ***Evangelism and Social Justice in the Life of the Early Church***

*Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.*

(Acts 6:1)

There was a complaint lodged. For there to be a complaint, a norm had to have been established. The norm that was established was that the needs of all were to be met and there wasn’t going to be any discrimination between Hellenists and the Hebrews. A norm of meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and not tolerating a social hierarchy was in place. A complaint was lodged, heard and a response was forthcoming.

*And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not of God in order to wait on tables.”*

(Acts 6:2)

They called the body together to deal with this serious issue. This was a serious grievance and it went directly against what they had been taught by Jesus. They had to respond, and respond they did. Now, don’t forget that the problem had occurred because they had been practicing the spiritual discipline of justice by making sure the needs of all were met and that any hint of social stratification was not to be tolerated. The practice of living a Gospel of justice and meeting needs had resulted in the growth of the church. They also realized that they couldn’t stop preaching because of the need in the community for the distribution of food. The disciples understood the spiritually symbiotic and literal



connection between preaching and the living of the biblical teachings that were fueling the growth of the church. They had to protect both the preaching and the acts of justice. Therefore, they brought the entire body together to address the problem and develop a plan of action. It is interesting that they didn't appoint a committee or a task force. They called the whole body together because the whole body was responsible. They were essentially saying this is not the work of the Evangelism Committee; we are the Evangelism Committee, the entire body; we must respond.

*Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

(Acts 6:3-6)

A plan was developed. Leadership was established. The entire body was ultimately responsible, but a leadership team was developed to make sure the needs of the most vulnerable were met. A team was put in place to make sure when anything that resembled stratification raised its head, it would be dealt with immediately. At the same time that this leadership team was developed, an actual ordained office to see to matters of justice was established. The disciples gave themselves to prayer, preaching and teaching while setting aside this new office to lead in acts of justice. There was a reflexive and

recursive relationship between the preaching of the word and the living of the word, which was attending to matters of justice. Justice is what love looks like publicly. Justice is being an inclusive community.

The disciples and the early church created an ordained office to ensure that they were inclusive. They were going to treat both groups in the text equally. The treatment of both groups was a sign of their commitment to being an inclusive church. The church today, like the early church, is called to be radically inclusive. As Bishop Yvette Flunder says, "Radical inclusivity is and must be radical. In its effort to be inclusive, the church often reaches out carefully to the margin. Radical inclusivity demands that we reach out to the farthest margin, intentionally, to give a clear message of welcome to everyone. Radical inclusivity recognizes, values, loves and celebrates people on the margin. Jesus was himself from the edge of society with a ministry to those who were considered least. Jesus' public ministry and associations were primarily with the poor, weak, outcast, foreigners and prostitutes."<sup>2</sup> Jesus and his ministry were one to those on the margins and the early church reflected what they saw in Jesus. I remember that song we used to sing when I was a kid, "I want to be a Christian in my heart." For me, then and now, it meant that I was a Jesus follower and to claim to be a follower of Jesus meant I had to be like Jesus, love like Jesus and do what Jesus taught us to do by his example during his earthly ministry.

In the end, the body was pleased to embrace the solution that had been designed. It pleased them because, at their core, it was them. When churches resist what is pleasing to God, it puts into question their desire to serve God. The early church hadn't forgotten Jesus' first love, it was those at the margins.

Those Hellenist widows were Jesus' people; they, like all widows of that day, were on the margins. The entire body responded, and we don't hear this complaint again in the book of Acts. The early church responded, and the results were evident.

*The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

(Acts 6:7)

The church continued to grow. The number of disciples increased greatly. People became loyal to the faith and lived lives informed by the word and ways of God. The plan was simple, and the results were miraculous. If we use this story as a litmus test to how we serve in this age, what would it look like?

#### IV. ILLUSTRATION

##### **Hope-Hill Elementary School and Wheat Street Church: Hope at Hope Hill**

While I was the pastor of the Historic Wheat Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, we birthed a partnership with Hope-Hill Elementary School. Hope-Hill was approximately three miles from our church. It was a Title I School; over 98% of the students were on free and or reduced lunch. What could we do? We didn't know, so we went and asked. The answer was simple: Can you provide support for our teachers? Can you help with school supplies? Can you help with tutoring? Can you sponsor our annual awards ceremony? Can you volunteer to be present so that our kids can see older African Americans in the building? Yes, we can, yes, we will and yes, we did. The church decided to develop the

Hope-Hill-Hope Partnership. We gave 5% of our annual budget to the school with our goal of reaching 10%. We did everything they asked and we were the better for it.. Children and families started to come to church events, we got to know the kids, their parents and the people in our community. We knew the children's teachers and administrators. We were changed as a church. We had reconnected with a population that surrounded our church. The church had experienced decline because the church had become disconnected from the community that had changed around the church. When we choose to reach out and love our community, the love was returned. The church was recognized by the Atlanta Public School System as the volunteer organization of the year, and Georgia State University awarded the church the President's Award for Community Service. The view of the church was being transformed in the community and young people began to come back to the church. Our outreach exploded as we found this was the key to what it meant for us to be the church in and of the community in this day and age.



## V. HABITS FOR JUSTICE

### *Living Evangelism as an Act of Social Justice*



#### **If you see something, say something.**

Someone saw that the Hellenist widows were being ignored and they said something. They lodged a complaint. When you see something that is unjust, say something.



#### **If you say something, do something.**

To say something isn't enough; it is only the beginning. You have to say something and then do something. This is what we see in the text: They didn't just share stories and talk about the issue, they did something. They ordained an office to lead the entire body in ways to being just in their actions. If you don't act on the injustice you have seen, you have concealed the will and power of God.



#### **If there aren't enough seats at the table, go get a chair for someone who is not at the table.**

For the church to grow and be just, it must be inclusive. Who is not at the table? It is important to have a big table. Make room at the table for diversity and inclusion because we serve a God who invited those who weren't at the table to be at the table.

## VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is being missed in your community (who are the Hellenist widows)?
2. What do you see that demands that you say something and do something?
3. What can your church do to meet one major need in your community that you aren't meeting at the present time?
4. Who is not at the table?
5. What does radical inclusion look like in your context?

## VII. CLOSING PRAYER

*We acknowledge that often the teachings of Jesus were at the table before, after or during a meal. Bread and wine are sacramental symbols of his abiding presence with us, and of his anticipated return.*

*Whether for food or fellowship, nourishment and nurture are set at the family table.*

*Lord God, make us aware of the hunger in the world: of children who are deprived of an adequate breakfast and of seniors who do not have the income necessary for an adequate diet.*

*As we give thanks for your provision, may we do our part in responding to human need.*

*May we become concerned and involved in the alleviation of hunger, wherever it is found. Help us realize there is much we can do.*

*May we open our hearts and use our resources to ease pain and hurt. Amen.<sup>3</sup>*

- NOTES**
1. "Litany for Urban Ministry" by Rev. Dr. Delores Carpenter, adapt. from *African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago, Illinois: GIA Publications, 2001), p. 78.
  2. Flunder, Yvette A. *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion*. Pilgrim Press. Kindle Edition. Loc. 2237.
  3. Adapted from *African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago, Illinois: GIA Publications, 2001), p. 62.

# 6

# TEACHING

Tod Bolsinger



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*O Lord, in your great commission, you send us into the world to “teach.”*

*In the Scriptures, we are warned that teachers will be held accountable with more strictness than other servants.*

*Lord, we ask that you give us your Spirit to lead us in all truth and make us humble learners and trustworthy teachers.*

*As you walked the countryside of your homeland as a Rabbi, teaching the truth and ways of God’s Kingdom, teach us your ways.*

*As Mary and her sister, Martha, welcomed your teaching into their home, let us sit at your feet and learn.*

*Help us be learners—disciples—first before we are disciple-makers.*

*Enable us to fulfill your commission with humility of spirit, sobriety of mind and the accountability of the Church so that all who hear our words would come to know, believe and be “trained in this way of life.”*

*Amen.*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF TEACHING

### ***Evangelism and Teaching: Training in a New Way of Life***

My wife and I love to cook. I love to experiment, and she loves to explore new recipes. She has had a subscription to *Bon Appetit* magazine for years. She often lays in bed reading the recipes aloud. After a few minutes, I’m so hungry I want to lick the magazine.

So, what do *Bon Appetit* magazine, the United States Constitution, a musical score, a set of blueprints for a new house, a trail map and the Bible have in common?

If you said they are all documents, you would be right, but notice that there is something that this collection of documents has in common that is *different* than a novel, a newspaper, a blog post or a textbook. The purpose of those documents is *reading*. Pure and simple. The transmission of ideas, the communicating of thoughts. And indeed, when my wife and I are reading *Bon Appetit* out loud, we are learning some ideas. But

what if we never actually made the recipe? What if all we ever did was read and not cook?

What a cooking magazine, the Constitution, a set of blueprints, a score and a trail map all have in common is that they are *performative documents*. The purpose of performative documents are to *help someone do something*. They are documents that help you *cook* a meal, *govern* a country, *perform* music, *build* a home, *hike* a trail . . . and wait . . .

If blueprints are for building, cookbooks are for cooking, maps are for traveling, and scores are for singing, *what is the Bible used for?* What does the Bible *do*?

The Bible is for *living*. The Bible instructs us in building our lives on the revelation of God; the recipe for life as a feast of God; for singing the songs of God, and most especially for directing our paths in the ways of God. The Bible instructs us how our ways can be aligned with the ways of God.

*Happy are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the Lord.  
Happy are those who keep his decrees,  
who seek him with their whole heart . . .*

*(Psalm 119:1-2)*

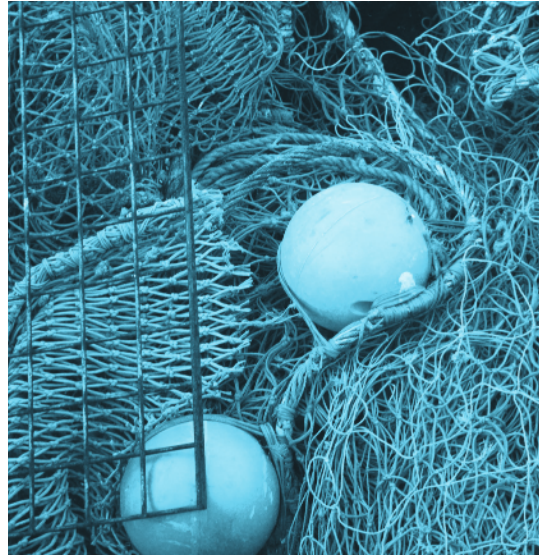
Happy, blessed, fortunate. *How* to walk, *how* to be, *how* to live—what the Scriptures declare is the “good life.”

If you want:

- plans to build a happy life,
- a recipe for the good life,
- the score to sing a blessed life,
- and a map for the joyful life,

Psalm 119 tells us that the Scriptures are the document that helps us *do* that.

The New Testament writing of 2 Timothy says that the God-breathed inspiration



of the Scriptures is for the purpose of being useful, particularly for helping every believer live proficiently—“equipped for every good work,” it says.

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

*(2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

And what the Bible calls people who trust the good news that Jesus brings and *build* their lives on the words that Jesus teaches (*Matthew 7:24*) are *disciples*.

What this means for you and me is that if we hear and believe the good news that Jesus is the loving, just, and rightful ruler who is restoring creation and making the world right again—including forgiving our own sins and making our lives right again—then we must build our lives on this good news, proclaim it to others, and instruct others in this way of life (*Matthew 28:19, MSG*).

Evangelism includes teaching. But teaching the faith is more like teaching someone

to cook than it is teaching someone to pass a class. It's more "know how" than "know what." It may start in a good recipe, but there is more to becoming a good cook than subscribing to a food magazine.

### III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

#### ***The Scriptures in Two Voices***

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you**. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

(Matthew 28:16-20)

*Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and **train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life**, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then **instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you**. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."*

(Matthew 28:18-20, MSG)

The very last passage in the Gospel of Matthew is often called "The Great Commission." It records the words of Jesus charging his disciples with the task of proclaiming the good news that would "make disciples." What we learn from this passage, especially as we

read it in two different translations, the New Revised Standard Version and The Message, is that evangelism (the proclamation of the good news of the inbreaking presence of God's loving and just reign in Jesus) must *always* result in formation. Preaching must always be paired with teaching. When we "make disciples," baptism must always be combined with teaching and training in the way of life of the baptized.

What we learn in this passage is that teaching is also more than knowing truths *about* God, the world and ourselves, but is also training in *a way of life*; a *practice* of life that is modeled after Jesus. What this reminds us is that biblical truths and spiritual renewal must lead to a way of living, to "obedience" to the teachings and commands of Jesus.

Additionally, because this teaching is offered to those who are being "baptized," we know that the intention of evangelism and disciple-making is to create a *community* of disciples, a people who live by—and live together—as followers of Jesus, embodying the Jesus way of life.

So, what does that teaching, disciple-making, training, instructing look like? To me, it looks like my grandmother's kitchen.

### IV. ILLUSTRATION

#### ***Learning to Cook in Mary's Kitchen***

My grandparents were named Mary and Guido Evangelisti. My grandfather was an immigrant from a little village outside of Lucca, Italy; my grandmother was the only child in her family born in the United States after her father emigrated with his wife and older children from Italy in the early part of the 20th century.

My grandparents owned an Italian restaurant surrounded by redwood trees in the most northern part of California. When I was a little boy, my grandmother would watch me during the day at the restaurant while my parents worked and finished grad school. I grew up surrounded by the smells and tastes of delicious food. I love my Italian heritage. I really love Italian food. I used to tease my grandmother that when she got to heaven, God would put her in charge of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb (*Revelation 19*).

The recipes that my grandparents cooked in their family-style restaurant were not fancy; they were the recipes from my grandfather's hometown. They were the tastes that he grew up with, the food that he was fed by his family back in a tiny village in Italy. My grandparents built a business on a family heritage of good food passed around big tables, family style. Today, years after my grandparents have passed away, my cousins and I make the food, and teach the family recipes, and try to pass on a deep love of family meals to our children and their children.

It's worth noting that my grandfather died before I was born. While it was my grandfather's family recipes, it was my grandmother who passed them down to us. It was at Grandma's table that we developed a taste for our family food; it was in Grandma's kitchen that we learned to cook alongside her. While we played at the restaurant, we ate at Grandma's house.

My grandmother's raviolis are still the best food I have ever tasted. They taste like love to me. Cooking was Grandma's love language. When Grandma was getting up in years, my cousins and I all asked if she would *please* make us a cookbook. My grandmother *didn't* give us a cookbook, she just fed us (and we ate a lot!) and let us cook with her. We

all wanted the family recipes, but she didn't really have any written down. So, my cousins cooked with her, watched what she did, wrote down the recipes and passed them down to us. Nothing special. Just a Word doc on all of our computers. And we cherish it.

But when I talk to my cousins, my nieces and nephews and my own kids, here is what we all agree:

We love the recipes, but we all love cooking because we first loved the food, and we all learned to cook from being in the kitchen.

For my cousins and me, it was sitting at Grandma's table and being in Grandma's kitchen; for my kids and my nieces and nephews, it's been eating at their family table and cooking alongside their parents (and later together as cousins and with their friends) that they became the next generation of Italian family cooks.

When I think of teaching (whether it is cooking or faith!) it starts with:

- loving what you "eat" ("*taste and see that the Lord is good*" Psalm 34:8),
- learning while being loved, and
- finding ways to pass on the learning to others so that they may join the feast.

Recipes can get you started and good recipes can keep you from making really bad mistakes, but learning to cook is more about being elbow-to-elbow with a good cook, lots of practice with both the experienced cook and the recipe, and enjoying a good meal with loved ones. Could learning to teach, especially teaching in such a way that "makes disciples" and "trains (people) in a way of life" be more like that?

Let's consider some teaching and learning lessons from my grandmother's kitchen.

## V. HABITS FOR TEACHING

### *Kitchen Practices for Training in the Way of Jesus*



#### **Before you cook for people, eat with them.**

One of my favorite memories at Grandma's house was knowing that whenever we visited her, the first meal we would have would be a big platter of her homemade raviolis. Because she *knew* us, she knew those were our favorites. And she would make our favorites so that *we knew* that she had been thinking of us. It was always a profound act of love and attention. Teaching should be no less. Start with discovering the *hungers* of our neighbors and friends. Learn what those with whom we are sharing the good news long for; know what they love. Pay attention to the pain points in the world where the good news is actually good news. If teaching is going to be part of the work we do to proclaim and demonstrate the good news, then let our listening be part of the demonstration. Be a listener before you are a teacher and when you bring your teaching you will be joining them in the shared experience of being disciples of Jesus.



#### **Follow the recipe, but apprentice with a great cook.**

One of my favorite parts of being a Bible teacher is that it requires me to be a Bible student first. I love to teach because I first love to learn. But the more I studied the Bible, the more I realized that I wanted to not just read it for myself but read it as apprentice to really good teachers. In the same way, learning to cook is always more than following a recipe, learning to teach people the ways of Jesus requires that we know more than

information. We need to learn from good, experienced and wise teachers who remind us that discipleship is always a profoundly relational activity. Love the learning and love the people with whom you learn and the more you'll teach with love.



#### **Let them taste your fingers.**

My cousins and I used to always complain that no matter how much we tried, we just couldn't make any dish taste quite like Grandma's. One member of our family said, "It's because the taste is in her hands. The food tastes like Grandma's hands!" Years later, I learned from my friend and fellow pastor, the Rev. Dr. Theresa Cho, that this is a key belief in Korean cooking also. She described the difference between the taste of sauce when she dipped her finger in the bowl, and when she tasted the same sauce from her mother's finger.

"The taste was different. From my finger, the taste was plain, but from my mom's finger, it tasted full of flavor. I tasted the bitterness through the sweet marinade—the bitterness of her father who abandoned his family; of leaving her mother and sisters to join her husband's family; of marriage to a man who was ambition-oriented; of leaving her first-born daughter in Korea while she moved to the United States with my father so that he could study; and of working many days and nights at the dry cleaners to support her family. The taste from my mother's fingertips is key to Korean cooking. . . . Koreans call this *son mat* (손맛), which means the taste of one's hands. Korean dishes are made and mixed by hand. *Son mat* is not just a cooking technique; it is a communal experience."<sup>1</sup>

For the Rev Dr. Cho, this is the reason why all teaching is communal and why teaching



that is meant to reveal the gospel should be both transparently personal and—as often as possible—accompanied by the Lord’s Table. In the same way that bread is passed hand-to-hand, the teachings of Jesus should be passed around with each person adding their unique history, experiences and flavors.



**Don’t just pass on recipes; cook with as many people as possible.**

Lastly, if we are going to fulfill the words of Jesus to “make disciples of all nations” or “train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life,” then it’s not enough to send Bibles, write books or broadcast teachings on the internet. We have to walk with people as they learn to be followers of Jesus. Discipleship is both completely relational and profoundly practical. It’s about learning to *perform* the good news, to “practice the instructions” of Jesus, to live in a manner that demonstrates our personal trust in Jesus as both Messiah and Savior. And that teaching, that instruction, that training is not just for some select group. It’s for everyone—far and near.

## VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Psalm 34:8 says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” What is your earliest memory of “tasting” the goodness of God? Who was with you? Who helped you to know that this experience was from God?

2. What difference does it make to think of the Bible as a “performative document”? What does that demand of us as readers of the Scripture? Then, read James 1:22. How does this verse help us think about the way the gospel should be shared with others?
3. If “making disciples” is “training in a way of life” or “practicing all that (Jesus) commanded,” how does that change the way we think of evangelism? How does it change the way we think of teaching the gospel?
4. Review the “Kitchen Practices.” Which one of those, if you added it to your life and practiced it regularly, would help you as you share the good news of Jesus and make disciples?

## VII. CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord, help us to taste and see that you are God.*

*Teach us how to help others taste your goodness.*

*Instruct us in the Jesus way of life that we may also instruct others.*

*Help us to so live, and so love others that we’ll pass on a love for you and desire to teach others how to walk in this way of life.*

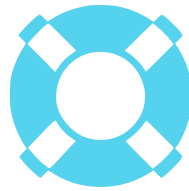
*Amen.*

**NOTES** 1. With thanks to Theresa Cho, this section is from her unpublished Doctoral project, 2018. Used with permission.

# 7

# FELLOWSHIP

Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri and José Manuel Capella-Pratts



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.  
(Psalm 51:15, LEB)*

*Señor, abre mis labios,  
y con mis labios te cantaré alabanzas.  
(Salmo 51:15, DHH)*

WHEN THE POOR ONES<sup>1</sup>  
(Hymn may be sung or read.)

PEQUEÑAS ACLARACIONES<sup>1</sup>  
(El himno puede ser cantado o leído.)

- 1 When the poor ones who have nothing share  
with strangers,  
when the thirsty water give unto us all,  
when the crippled in their weakness strengthen others,  
then we know that God still goes that road with us,  
then we know that God still goes that road with us.
- 2 When at last all those who suffer find their comfort,  
when they hope though even hope seems hopelessness,  
when we love, though hate, at times, seems all around us,  
then we know that God still goes that road with us,  
then we know that God still goes that road with us.

- 1 Cuando el pobre nada tiene y aún reparte,  
cuando alguien pasa sed y agua nos da,  
cuando el débil a su hermano fortalece,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar.
- 2 Cuando alguien sufre y logra la esperanza,  
cuando espera y no se cansa de esperar,  
cuando amamos aunque el odio nos rodee,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar.

*As we gather to study the Scripture, walk this road with us,  
O God. That we may see you in each other. Amen.*

*Al reunirnos a estudiar la Escritura, camina a  
nuestro lado, oh Dios. Que podamos verte en  
cada persona aquí reunida. Amén.*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP

### ***Fellowship as a Practice of Evangelism***

For decades, much of Christendom has viewed evangelism primarily as an exercise in verbal communication: preparing a sermon or delivering a speech where the audience is asked at the end to make a decision for Christ as Savior and Lord. With this way of understanding evangelism, the responsibility has primarily been placed on pastors or specialized preachers usually identified as “evangelists.” Perhaps some of us have reached the path of faith in this way, so it has been beneficial to many over time. However, we should remember that the task of evangelism is the business of every disciple of Jesus Christ and not a practice tasked to pastors or church leaders only. It is a collective responsibility of the Church as a special community: the body of Christ.

Essential to the formation of a community is establishing and fostering authentic relationships, and in life everything is about relationships. The Church, as the body of Christ, is called to be a community, not just for the sake of gathering, but also to be in relationship with God, with each other, and with the world, to model the values Jesus lived and taught. The “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” section in the Book of Order states what the church should strive to become:

The Church is to be a community of faith . . . The Church is to be a community of hope . . . The Church is to be a community of love . . . The Church is to be a community of witness. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Notice that faith, hope, love and witness are cultivated in the context of community.

Donald McKim reminds us that “the church represents the reign of God within its own community. It should be a fellowship that models the love, forgiveness, justice and reconciliation Jesus embodied. It should ‘maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (*Ephesians 4:3*). The church is the fellowship where we find a foretaste of God’s coming kingdom.”<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, in this lesson we offer the following perspective: The way we relate to others is a practice of evangelism, a way of communicating the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ. The New Testament uses the Greek term *koinonia* to describe these relationships. *Koinonia* is fellowship, participation, partnership or communion within the context of the community of faith.

## III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

### ***Exploring Fellowship in Scripture***

Before exploring the practice of *koinonia* as portrayed in Acts 2, let’s consider from whom the first Christians learned about true fellowship—Jesus. An example is found in Luke 19.

***(Read Luke 19:1–10)***

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and in First Century Judea, tax collectors were despised for three main reasons. First, they were part of the Roman Empire system of political and economic oppression. Second, their frequent contact with the Romans (who were foreigners) made them ritually unclean in Judean eyes. Third, tax collectors were known to get rich by cheating and overcharging, keeping the extra money for themselves. They were

so despised that the term “tax collector” came to be synonymous to the word “sinner.” A Judean male who considered himself “a decent person” would not “hang out” with a tax collector, much less enter his house or share the table. Yet that is precisely what Jesus did. Instead of ignoring Zacchaeus and passing him by, Jesus looked at him, acknowledged him and even invited himself to stay



at his house! Note that Jesus approaches Zacchaeus not with the purpose of selling him “a product” or pushing a dogma. Jesus goes to his home to be in fellowship with him. That gesture of sincere fellowship touches the heart of the one others called a “sinner,” and Jesus called a “son of Abraham.”

John Pavlovitz<sup>4</sup> explores the concept of “agenda-free community,” and compares the approach some Christians take when sharing the gospel, to that of a salesperson whose clearly defined objective is selling something. In Jesus we do not find the salesperson approach, but the **fellowship approach**: Jesus sees the person as they are, welcomes them and offers an open heart with an authentic desire for building a relationship.

*(Read Acts 2:42–47)*

While the Gospel According to Luke presents the life and work of Jesus Christ in the Gospel, its sequel—Acts of the Apostles—tells the story about the community of disciples after Jesus had ascended and their ministry under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:42–47 describes the daily life

of that discipleship community after being invested with the power of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The detailed description portrays a community where good relationships were cultivated—with God *and* with others. It was a community that practiced fellowship: learning, worshiping and praying together, helping and caring for each other, sharing meals and sharing resources. This lifestyle had a favorable impact on the people around them. In times of empire and oppression, the Church modeled and embodied a different path for the community at large. The account concludes by stating, “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Notice the phrase “the Lord added to their number.” It is not our task to “add.” Our task is to testify, to witness, in word and deed. It is God who adds. This bears honest reflection: Instead of focusing on how to add new members to the church roll, perhaps we should focus on how we are practicing fellowship in a way that reflects the character of Jesus Christ. Growth is, and has always been, in God’s hands.

## IV. ILLUSTRATION

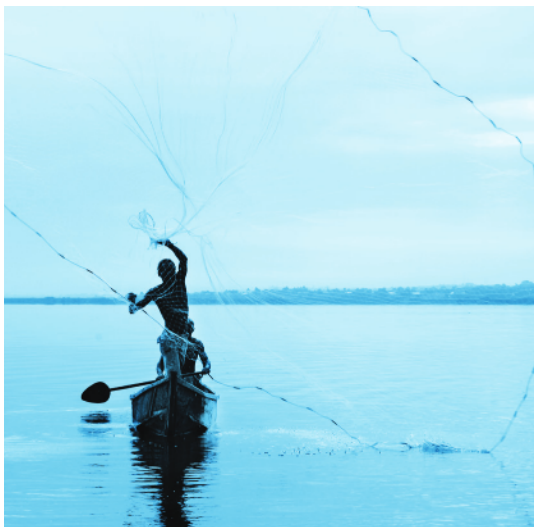
### **Familia: Stories of Koinonia**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

*(Acts 2:42)*

Jay<sup>5</sup> hadn't set foot in a sanctuary in decades. A successful businessman, Jay was a pillar of society: respected, recognized, beloved. Yet as a gay man, he felt judged and rejected by the faith community that had nurtured him in his childhood. Sadly, this was true . . . no sugarcoating there. He had made his life outside of the church community. Prejudice had kept him away from the church, but not from a loving God.

Despite this, Jay had fond memories of his childhood at church, particularly of helping his mother prepare the elements of communion. One day, Jay found himself in a sanctuary again on communion Sunday. A family member had insisted and insisted he attend. "This church is different," Jay was told. I (José Manuel) was serving that day. "¿Falta alguien por participar de la mesa?"



I walked to the pew where Jay was sitting and offered him the bread and the cup. He participated in communion for the first time in many years.

When the worship service was over, Jay joined us for lunch. By then, he was already family. Later that evening, I received a call from him. I could hardly understand his words; he was sobbing, overcome by emotion. The words I understood were "Me incluiste." "You included me." Jay became an integral part of our faith community until his passing day some years later. He passed knowing of God's profound love for him in the fellowship of a faith community that loved him, too. This sense of fellowship and communion, embracing him without judgment or condemnation, rekindled a long-lost spiritual connection with the God of love.

*. . . they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

*(Acts 2:46b-47)*

"Hola, mima, Dios te bendiga. Besitos. . ." This is the preferred greeting of our dear Alina, the matriarch of the Soto family; these words are always accompanied with a hug. Along with her husband, Luis, and their young-adult children, they make up la familia Soto. Their family, extended family and friends, of all age groups and walks of life, easily occupy two pews of the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. This is so because of the relationships they establish and cultivate with family, friends and neighbors.

For as long as we have known them, their home has been a refuge for many who may need a place to stay, a conversation, or a home-cooked meal. From family members

recently moving from Cuba, to acquaintances that become family, the Sotos have welcomed many into their home in their time of need. Luis and Alina are the epitome of what it means to be in relationship with others. They know what it means to be family and, in their presence, that's exactly what you are. Being intentional in nurturing relationships and friendships within their extended family and in their neighborhood has provided opportunities for sharing the good news—meeting and loving people as they are. The Sotos' glad and generous hearts are an offering of praise to God, who loved them first, and a blessing to the faith community they nurture and call their own.

## V. HABITS FOR FELLOWSHIP: KOINONIA

To quote the Rev. Tom Bagley in the lesson on *Prayer*, “Living the distinctive lifestyle of Jesus is not easy; it can only be accomplished in dependence upon God and in relationship with a community of others.” To be in fellowship with a community of others takes purpose, time and intention. It is working toward a community that prays, helps and cares for each other, learns and shares resources, and engages together in ways that are welcoming, accepting and nurturing. We offer three habits that can help in cultivating fellowship:

### **Recognize Imago Dei, the image of God, in all people encountered.**

Recognize all people as “image bearers of God with stories to tell and wisdom to share”<sup>6</sup> Having been made in God's image (*Genesis*

1:27), there's a bit of God in every one of us. In the story of Zaccheus, we see how Jesus approached and treated him. A few chapters before that, in a conversation with a lawyer, the crowd following Jesus, including his disciples, had been taught about the main commandment: to love God *and* neighbor. The onlookers in Zaccheus' story, grumbling and judging Jesus, much like the lawyer in chapter 10, were wondering who was “fit” to be *their* neighbor, when it is the other way around. We have the example of Jesus, who became a neighbor to others and acknowledged the dignity in all human beings. Working toward creating authentic relationships and healthy communities includes doing the real, honest work of introspection, intentionally considering implicit biases and prejudices in order to see, really see, the people we encounter, “image bearers of God.” In developing this habit, congregations or individuals may assess the need for guidance or training in areas such as cultural sensitivity and anti-racism.

### **Cultivate the art of listening and paying attention.**

In this distraction-filled world, listening and paying attention requires being present, using all senses, and considering the nuances in body language and conversations with the people we encounter. The Revs. Rob Mueller and Krin Van Tatenhove describe this as developing “The DNA of Listening.” They quote the Rev. Kay Lindahl of the Listening Center in Long Beach, California: “Learning to truly listen to one another is the beginning of new understanding and compassion, which deepens and broadens our sense of community.”<sup>7</sup> In fostering authentic relationships with God and with each other, it is important

to listen to life stories, truths, experiences, needs, hurts, joys and sorrows. In doing this, we may discover common interests, mission approaches and projects, what is working in our community and what is not, and what our communities desperately need. New ideas are bound to flourish, bringing relationships closer and propelling the mission forward. So much can happen if we pay attention to each other and to the Holy Spirit. In developing this habit, consider *how* you practice listening and paying attention. Are you slowing down, being present and listening intently? Are you distracted with your own thoughts, electronic devices or activities? Are you, and your community, taking time to listen to others and to the Holy Spirit among you?



### **Establish authentic relationships and work in concrete ways to connect with others.**

As stated before, being in fellowship with a community of others takes purpose, time and intention. Make it a priority to connect with at least one new person or family in the community: a neighbor, a co-worker or fellow student, a family member. While being intentional in connecting with others, be mindful of not being intrusive or judgmental. Respect boundaries and personalities. Following the example of Jesus, we wish to foster relationships that empower and enliven us all, build friendships that are life-giving and change people's lives for the better, and witness to God's love and grace. In developing this habit, consider the following quote by John

Pavlovitz: "What if the way we best make disciples is by showing people the fullest incarnation of Jesus that we can manage and resting in that?"<sup>8</sup>

*A word to the wise: These habits are interdependent and ongoing. For example, in the process of fostering authentic relationships, a community may discover the need to learn more about the struggles of the people among them.*

## **VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. In light of the examples of fellowship in the passages in Luke and Acts, can you identify examples of what authentic fellowship looks like in your context/community?
2. Reflect on John Pavlovitz's quote: "What if the way we best make disciples is by showing people the fullest incarnation of Jesus that we can manage and resting in that?" How can you or your faith community show others your fullest incarnation of Jesus? Share concrete ways or ideas for starting points in this direction.
3. Many people have been part of faith communities or groups that, rather than establishing relationships that are life-giving, become toxic and life-draining. In the pursuit of fellowship, fostering communities that empower, enliven and witness to God's love and grace, how can you or your faith community prevent becoming toxic and life-draining? Share examples of practices, spiritual and otherwise, that ensure safe-spaces and healthy relationships.

## VII. CLOSING PRAYER

*Our help is in the name of the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.  
(Psalm 124:8, NRSV)*

*Nuestra ayuda viene del Señor,  
creador del cielo y de la tierra.  
(Salmo 124:8, RVC)*

WHEN THE POOR ONES<sup>9</sup>  
(Hymn may be sung or read.)

PEQUEÑAS ACLARACIONES<sup>9</sup>  
(El himno puede ser cantado o leído.)

- 3 When our joy fills up our cup to overflowing,  
when our lips can speak no words other than true,  
when we know that love for simple things is better,  
then we know that God still goes that road with us,  
then we know that God still goes that road with us.
- 4 When our homes are filled with goodness in abundance,  
when we learn how to peace instead of war,  
when each stranger that we meet is called a neighbor,\*  
then we know that God still goes that road with us,  
then we know that God still goes that road with us.

- 3 Cuando crece la alegría y nos inunda,  
cuando dicen nuestros labios la verdad,  
cuando amamos el sentir de los sencillos,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar.
- 4 Cuando abunda el bien y llena los hogares,  
cuando alguien donde hay guerra pone paz,  
cuando “hermano” le llamamos al extraño,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar,  
va Dios mismo en nuestro mismo caminar.

*Let this hymn be our prayer, O God.*

*As we go through that road with you, help us to see  
your image in every person that crosses our path knowing  
that each one we meet is our “hermano,” our “hermana,”  
our sibling.*

*In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, our example of love and  
practice.*

*Amén.*

*Sea este himno nuestra oración, O Dios.*

*Mientras vamos en este caminar contigo,  
ayúdanos a ver tu imagen en cada persona que  
encontremos en el camino sabiendo que cada una  
de ellas es nuestra hermana, nuestro hermano.*

*En el nombre de nuestro Señor Jesucristo, nuestro  
ejemplo de amor y práctica.*

*Amén.*

\*A better translation could be “sibling”. You may wish to substitute the word when reading or praying.

- NOTES**
1. José Antonio Olivar & Miguel Manzano, 1970; trans George Lockwood, 1980, alt. *Glory To God* #762; Spanish version *El Himnario Presbiteriano* #378; Stanzas 1–2.
  2. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Book of Order* (2019–2021), F-1.0301.
  3. Donald K. McKim, *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers* (Louisville: WJK, 2017) 68.
  4. John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Expanded Edition with Study Guide* (Louisville: WJK, 2020), Chapter 10.
  5. The name of the person in the first story has been substituted at the request of the writers.
  6. John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Expanded Edition with Study Guide* (Louisville: WJK, 2020) 98.
  7. Krin Van Tatenhove & Rob Mueller, *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission* (Louisville: WJK) 34.
  8. John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Expanded Edition with Study Guide* (Louisville: WJK, 2020) 100.
  9. José Antonio Olivar & Miguel Manzano, 1970; trans George Lockwood, 1980, alt. *Glory To God* #762; Spanish version *El Himnario Presbiteriano* #378; Stanzas 3–4.



# 8

# GENEROSITY

Leanne Van Dyk



## I. OPENING PRAYER

*Generous God, there is nothing we have that you have not given to us.*

*All we have and all we are flow from your abundant love.*

*Give us generous hearts and open hands to give freely so that our habits, our lives and our attitudes reflect your love.*

*Through our generosity, may others come to know that your lavish love is for them and for all.*

*And then may the whole world sing in praise and joy.*

*Amen.*

## II. THE PRACTICE OF GENEROSITY

### ***Generosity: An Incubator of Virtues***

The definition of generosity is quite simple. It is giving good things to others freely and abundantly. Both parts are necessary: Generosity must be free and unforced; it also must be lavish and expansive. Even small gifts, as we learn from the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12, can be lavish!

There is a quality and a character to generosity that attracts people to it. Generous people are good to be around. Stingy people are difficult to be around. This is a reality that everyone recognizes immediately, and everyone has examples of both in their own lives. Perhaps some of us have a wonderfully generous grandmother and a cranky, miserly uncle or perhaps we have one co-worker who goes the extra mile and another who calculates grudges. The details vary, but the pattern is so familiar.

Sociologists who study generosity have identified something they call “the paradox of generosity.” It is odd but very consistent, they say, that generously giving away something you own, in fact, brings much more back to you. Generous givers end up feeling even more blessed, even more full. In brief, giving gives right back in return.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps because generosity gives so much back in return, it is also contagious. There is momentum and energy and purpose to generosity that catches on in a community. We see this in quite a commonplace way with pledge drives on NPR radio stations across the country. A donor will give a “challenge pledge” to encourage the giving of others. Parents who model generosity to their children are seeding the next generation with the wonderful habit of generosity that will bear fruit for years to come.

In addition, generosity turns out to be remarkably gregarious. When it is present, it touches everything else around it, making new friends as it goes. Generosity is the like the warming rays of the sun. It is like tea leaves that infuse a pot of boiling water. It is like the aroma of apple pie in the oven, filling the whole house. Generosity is a sort of incubator of many virtues like kindness, gratitude, hospitality, hope, trust and compassion. All those virtues are like little chicks under the warming light of generosity.

Another quality or virtue of generosity is empathy. A generous person is an empathetic person, one who listens, notices, is curious and wide open to the realities and experiences of other people. These are qualities of evangelism as well. At its heart, evangelism is a posture of empathy and openness that flows from Christian conviction. A congregation that is committed to evangelism is also a congregation that learns from and listens

to their neighbors, wherever their neighbors are located all around the world.

Generosity is often assumed to be connected primarily to money. It is surely the case that money is a prime indicator of our deepest values. Jesus himself pointed that out when he warned against the dangers of obsessive accumulation of money. He said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (*Matthew 6:21*). So, yes, generosity is about money. But it is also about time and energy and talent and relationships and commitments. A generous heart extends itself for the sake of others in a wide spectrum of attitudes.

Because God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, all human generosity and all the virtues that trail in its wake are ultimately a gift from God. This is a foundational theological claim—that all good things come from God’s generosity. This is hard to remember sometimes. After all, God typically works silently and behind the scenes. Rare are the occasions when God shows up, say, in a burning bush or a fiery pillar or an angelic message. God usually works patiently with people like us. When beautiful and moving displays of human generosity grab our attention, we can forget that this is a gift of God flowing from God’s own generous heart of love.

### III. SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE

#### *Biblical Calls and Cases of Generosity*

The Bible is filled with stories of both tightfisted and magnanimous givers. An example of the first is the couple Ananias and Sapphira, whose story is told in Acts 5, who thought they could bluff their way into the Christian community in Jerusalem.

An unlikely example of generosity is Joseph, the quiet husband of Mary who spoke no recorded words at all in the Bible and who plays a shadowy supporting role in the life of Jesus. But he displayed deep generosity in his decision to go against prevailing cultural norms and not reject Mary in her pregnancy, as Matthew 1:19 recounts. This was a startlingly generous act of courage and conviction.



The story of a young boy who gave the contents of his brown bag lunch to Jesus is another story of generosity in the Bible in Matthew 14. This story demonstrates how generosity is often linked with hope and expectation. This boy had no idea what Jesus would do with his lunch, but something in him must have risen up in wild hope and anticipation. A small gift of bread and fish produced an enormous gift to many thousands of people with baskets left over. When generous people give, they do not grasp and control. Rather, they hope, standing on tiptoe to see what just might happen.

The whole arc of Jesus' life is a continuous display of generosity. He interacted with outsiders, women, children, disreputable tax collectors, Roman military officers, people with serious diseases, people with disabilities and other marginalized people. Generously accepting them, including them, listening to their stories, teaching them and healing them, the way Jesus moved through the world is an extended example of generosity.

The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 is often presented as a story of forgiveness and acceptance—and surely it is. But

perhaps there is a deeper quality in the father that made acceptance and forgiveness possible. Maybe that deeper quality is generosity. It was a generous heart that gave this father the capacity to extend forgiveness for his younger son's rebellion and acceptance of his older son's resentments. This is an important insight into how healthy communities tick. Generous communities, including congregations, have the cushion and the capacity to forgive, to accept, to heal and to move forward.

#### IV. ILLUSTRATION

##### ***The Paradox of Generosity— Contemporary Examples***

Generosity comes in all shapes and sizes. We note with gratitude the generosity of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which pours enormous amounts of money into promoting education and combating global diseases. Generosity is also displayed in the story of Sylvia Bloom, a legal secretary in New York

City who worked for 67 years at the same law firm, saving consistently and quietly her whole life. After her death in 2018, her will stipulated a gift of \$8 million to assist educationally disadvantaged students. Her friends and former colleagues were astounded. No one knew such a gift was possible from a seemingly ordinary person. The same sort of consistent generosity is also displayed, often quietly, in people of modest means who faithfully tithe to their church and charitable organizations.

But generosity need not be measured only in money. An example of generosity of spirit is seen in the life and death of a college president, Dr. Irving Pressley McPhail. At the age of 71, at a time of life when many people retire and relax, he stepped into the role of president of a struggling historically Black college, Saint Augustine's University, in North Carolina in the summer of 2020. St. Augustine's had an important mission to empower and launch their graduates into their professional lives. But budgets were tight, student numbers were declining and COVID-19 was on the loose. Dr. McPhail wanted to give back and serve this struggling school. He told his wife, "This is a place where I can make a difference." Dr. McPhail took every pandemic precaution, but he contracted the disease. Just a few days later, and only in his third month of service to the college, he died of COVID-19. His story then started to emerge—a kind leader with a generous and expansive vision, a persistent encourager of student success, a Black leader who was determined to empower many other Black young leaders. His decision to take up such a difficult job in such a difficult time is evidence of his generosity. It is a particularly timely story in this extended chapter of pandemic that has gripped so many people, families and communities.

## V. HABITS FOR GENEROSITY

Generous people often report that the best way to develop the virtue of generosity is to give regularly, even stubbornly. The person who fills in the stewardship pledge card and then sets up an automatic giving plan in order to meet that pledge is an example. The congregation that commits to a percentage of their annual budget to support needy communities in their city is another example. The volunteer who puts in 30 years of tutoring fourth-graders at a local elementary school is yet another example. In each case, a commitment is lived out over time. In each case, the paradox of generosity is experienced: Giving gives right back in return.



### Regular giving.

Regular giving—of money, time, energies, self—is the most important habit to grow and develop generosity. A full-grown mature generosity is not episodic or reactive; it is deeply rooted in a person or community. It is baked-in and thoroughly integrated. But this kind of mature generosity takes discipline and practice. Malcolm Gladwell once famously said that mastering a skill takes 10,000 hours of practice. Mastering generosity is a lifelong goal, but it can be practiced in regular and disciplined giving.



### Communal action.

Another habit of generosity is communal action. Generosity is not a solo enterprise; it is practiced and perfected with others. Congregations are often the communities that practice generosity together. A congregation in Los Angeles practices that in a particularly vivid way. Back in the 1980s, First United Methodist Church in downtown

Los Angeles sold their historic building and began meeting in a fellowship hall in a nearby senior living community. Proceeds from the sale of the church supported the needs of affordable housing in the neighborhood and college scholarships for first-generation Hispanic students. Then, the church decided to show up more visibly. Aided by a mild climate year-round, the congregation now worships in a large tent that is set up on the parking lot next to the church building. The parking lot is the last property they own. The congregation's pastor, the Rev. Mandy Sloan McDow, says, "The church has a history of welcoming minorities, immigrants and refugees and of doing subversive social justice actions because they believed it was right. . . . This is not a church that has to be urged to do the right things."<sup>2</sup> The habit of generosity has taken deep root in this congregation.



### **Empathy and curiosity.**

Generosity depends on the ability to truly see and truly hear. This requires both empathy and curiosity. Learning the experiences of others with genuine openness is another habit of generosity. Mission trips often build this habit in the life of a congregation. Mission trips sometimes, it must be admitted, fall into the trap of "poverty tourism" and patronizing cultural power. But it need not be this way. Mission trips that are framed as a time of learning, not controlling, as a time of cultural insight, not cultural dominance, can truly inform and shape the faithful habits of a congregation. Wise pastors and elders and lay leaders shape these experiences to avoid what has sometimes perpetuated patterns of control and instead nurture patterns of learning and growing and changing. In these ways, generosity germinates and flowers.

Ron Sider has worked for decades in Washington, D.C., to address issues of injustice, global hunger and poverty. He is well-known for his book "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger." He has also written a book on generosity, "Just Generosity," which makes very specific suggestions for building individual and communal generosity.<sup>3</sup> He suggests a "Generous Christians Pledge" that includes: *daily* prayer for the poor; *weekly* volunteer time, getting to know someone in need; *monthly* study time to read and learn about the complicated realities of poverty nationally and globally; and a *yearly* retreat to deeply meditate on the question, "Is caring for the poor as important in my life as it is in the Bible?" and to re-examine giving priorities and habits.<sup>4</sup>

These are habits that can be practiced over time, alone and with others, to deepen the practices of generosity. We need to develop practices and habits because, after all, generosity is profoundly countercultural. We live in a "cancel culture," a "gotcha" culture of polarized opinion and debate. It seems that our leaders shout over each other instead of attending carefully to each other. It seems that our culture has prioritized dominating instead of serving, labeling instead of



listening, rejecting instead of receiving. These cultural patterns are toxic weeds in our common life. We see these patterns, sadly, even in our church culture and our Christian institutions. So, building the habits of generosity is a countercultural act and a means of witness to the kin-dom of God in a world bent on violence.

## VI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Make an inventory of the various identities you wear each day—professional, homemaker, parent, child, church elder, retired person, spouse, volunteer and others. Do you find practicing generosity easier or harder with each identity?
2. Money seems to exert an influence of solitary independence on us, even subconsciously. In what ways can you counteract this natural impulse and act out of community commitments and care for others?
3. Reflect on your experiences of giving. Can you see a pattern of the “paradox of

generosity” in your own life? When you give freely, do you receive even more in return?

4. Can you identify someone in your life that has a generous heart? What can you learn and imitate from this person?
5. The small boy in Matthew 14 had two loaves and five fish. What resources do you have? Think of a wide circle of resources such as time, skills, money, relationships and commitments.

## VII. CLOSING PRAYER

*Generous God, help me to find the call of love in this and every day.*

*When I am tempted to close my eyes and shut my ears to the needs of others, instead open me up to new commitments.*

*When I hesitate to serve, give me courage and patience.*

*May someone see in me today the gift of generosity and be caught up in its expansive reach. Amen.*

- NOTES**
1. This is the thesis of Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson in their book, *The Paradox of Generosity; Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
  2. Hillary Francis, “They sold First UMC and put up a tent in the parking lot,” *Christian Century*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/they-sold-first-umc-and-put-tent-parking-lot>.
  3. Ronald J. Sider, *Just Generosity: a New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1999).
  4. *Ibid.* p. 221-22.

# Authors



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B.A., M.Div., is a pastor, teacher, consultant, community activist and 21st-century abolitionist. Shanea has been a minister of Word & Sacrament for over 13 years in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They currently carry out their justice mandate as the Associate for Gender & Racial Justice for the PC(USA). In their role, Shanea is working to dismantle racism, homophobia, white supremacy and various forms of discrimination by helping to move the denomination into a more inclusive and intersectional reality. A native of Philadelphia, they received their B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh and M.Div. from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary with a concentration in urban ministry. Shanea was the founder and organizing pastor of JUDAH Fellowship, the western Pennsylvania region's only predominantly Black affirming faith community, and served for many years as a leading faith and justice voice in that region.



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**REV. AISHA  
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began her role as executive presbyter of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta in 2018. Serving 84 congregations and encouraging 26 new worshiping communities, she is honored and overjoyed to serve as an encourager to the congregations and leaders within a presbytery filled with a deep cultural diversity and a vast theological landscape.

A native of Philadelphia, Aisha spent significant time as youth director at Wayne Presbyterian Church before obtaining a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary in 2005. After serving various other churches in the Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York area, she returned to Wayne Presbyterian in 2013. While serving as the mission pastor for Wayne, she started The Common Place, a faith-based arts and education center and New Worshiping Community in Southwest Philadelphia.



**DR. TOM BAGLEY**

pastored for 18 years in McDonough, Georgia, before serving as the 2003 founding pastor of Hamilton Mill Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. In 2015, he was called as an evangelist with the PC(USA) 1001 New Worshiping Communities Movement, working with people outside of church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Now, Tom pastors a small Presbyterian congregation in Normandy, Tennessee, while also coaching and consulting in the areas of church revitalization and evangelism. Tom received his undergraduate degree at Vanderbilt University and his Doctor of Ministry degree from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Tom is married to Lynn, a licensed marriage and family therapist. They have three married children and three delightful grandchildren.



**REV. DR. RALPH C. BASUI WATKINS**

MFA, D.Min., Ph.D., is the Peachtree Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary. His work focuses on building bridges between young adults and the church in order to develop future leaders for the 21st-century church who work for justice. As a scholar, professional photographer, documentarian, pastor, sought-after speaker and workshop leader, Ralph seeks to help the churches live into the new networked world. He is known for being a leader in teaching with digital media. With over 20 years of pastoral, teaching and administrative experience, Ralph is an active teaching scholar with over 250 publications and conference presentations to his credit—and is coauthor (with Justin West) of *The Future of the African American Church* (Judson Press, 2014).



**REV. DR. TOD BOLSINGER**

M.Div., Ph.D., is the executive director of the De Pree Center Church Leadership Initiative, a senior fellow of the De Pree Center for Leadership, and associate professor of leadership formation at Fuller Theological Seminary. Tod was the founder of the Fuller Leadership Platform, an innovative approach to online formation and leadership development, and served as a vice president of Fuller Seminary for six years. He is the author of five books, including *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (IVP Books, 2015). Having served as a pastor for 27 years, he now speaks, consults and is an executive



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**ELDER VILMARIE  
CINTRÓN-OLIVIERI**

served as co-moderator (along with the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann) of the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). An educator and Presbyterian ruling elder, she has served the PC(USA) at session, presbytery, synod and General Assembly levels—she was moderator of the Presbytery of Tropical Florida in 2017. Vilmarie holds a B.A. in education (ESL) and an M.Ed. in curriculum and teaching and has taught English and English as a Second Language to teenage and adult students from all over the world. She is currently a member of the presbytery’s Leadership Council, a member of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation Board and conference administrator of a CREDO team, a program of the Board of Pensions.



**REV. JOSÉ MANUEL  
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is pastor of the First Spanish Presbyterian Church in Miami, where he lives with his wife, elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri. He is also faculty for vocation of the CREDO program of the PC(USA) Board of Pensions. Ordained in 1996, José has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the

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**DR. LEANNE VAN DYK**

is the president of Columbia Theological Seminary, where she began serving in July 2015. Prior to that, Leanne taught at Western Theological Seminary—and at San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She holds degrees from Calvin College (BA), Western Michigan University (MA), Calvin Theological Seminary (M.Div.) and Princeton Theological Seminary, where she earned her Ph.D. in systematic theology, magna cum laude. Her other professional experience includes serving as a member of the Board of Commissioners of the Association of Theological Schools; as a member of the Committee on Theological Education for the PC(USA); and on various projects, including the Re-Forming Ministry project, with the Office of Theology and Worship in the PC(USA). She also was a member of the PC(USA) Catechism Committee, which completed its work in 1998—and has published several books, including *A More Profound Alleluia: Theology and Worship in Harmony* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), for which she was also editor.

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