

**HOLY WORD, WHOLLY ENGAGED:  
RECONNECTING WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER  
IN THE CONTEXT OF WORSHIP**

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**April 2024**

**Oronoco, Minnesota**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
University of Dubuque Theological Seminary  
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry**

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**Dissertation Abstract**

The purpose of this project was to address the issue of congregational disconnectedness and how helping worshipers reconnect with one another and with God in the context of worship might bring about congregational renewal. The social distancing and extended online worship necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic left many congregations feeling disconnected – from one another, from their individual faith journeys, and from God. To explore and address this need, over the course of six months, the members and friends of the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco in Oronoco, Minnesota embarked on a journey aimed at spiritually re-engaging and re-connecting with God and with one another by exploring three new and more interactive worship elements. These elements were designed to help congregation members renew their faith as they re-engage with one another, with the mission of the congregation, with faith in the outside world, and ultimately with God. The practices were introduced one at a time with a three-month span of time separating each new practice introduction. Toward the end of that three-month period, worshipers were invited to participate in a voluntary blind survey for feedback. Additionally, three worshipers volunteered to participate in more in-depth interviews to discuss their experiences with the three new practices. Ultimately, while the majority of those who responded through both surveys and interviews expressed some initial discomfort with each of the three worship practices, the overwhelming majority also expressed experiencing both personal spiritual renewal and renewal as a community because of the interactive nature of the three worship practices.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Thesis

The social distancing and extended online worship necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic left many congregations feeling disconnected – from one another, from their individual faith journeys, and from God. To explore and address this need, over the course of six months, the members and friends of the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco in Oronoco, Minnesota embarked on a journey aimed at spiritually re-engaging and re-connecting with God and with one another by exploring some new and more interactive worship elements. These elements were designed to help congregation members renew their faith as they re-engage with one another, with the mission of the congregation, with faith in the outside world, and ultimately with God.

### Description of Need

In her seminal book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, the late Phyllis Tickle talks about what she calls “rummage sales” within the history of the church – seasons of massive structural, theological, and doctrinal change that happen every 500 years. Tickle describes the periods leading up to these rummage sales as “unfailingly symptomatic or expressive of concomitant political, economic, and social upheavals.”<sup>1</sup> I think it’s safe to say that a simple perusal of the news headlines over the past decade would reveal “political, economic, and social upheaval” on a nearly daily basis: deep and hostile political divisiveness; economic instability and rising inflation; racial injustice and the

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 21.

massive protests organized in response to those injustices; climate change and the stresses that places not only on the natural world but the economic, political, and social world as well; and the COVID-19 pandemic. It is little wonder, with all of these “concomitant political, economic, and social upheavals,” that the world of the Church feels as though its been in a tailspin.

Mainline Protestant denominations have been experiencing decline for decades. According to data from the General Social Survey, mainline Protestant denominations which made up roughly 30% of the population in the 1970s had fallen substantially to just 11% of the population by 2018.<sup>2</sup> The anxiety and tension that this decline continues to create within the life of the Church is palpable on Sunday morning, in church council meetings, and within the higher levels of various denominational structures.<sup>3</sup>

This decline was only exacerbated and accelerated by the necessary public safety mandates of the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2021 article assessing the impact of the pandemic particularly on rural Anglican churches states “from our research on church-leavers, we suspected that for some the closure of churches would break the habit of a lifetime and that once broken there would be a reluctance to return. We recalled that in our survey of church leavers 69% said that they had not intended to leave, but had simply got out of the habit

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<sup>2</sup> Ryan P. Burge, “Mainline Protestants Are Still Declining, But That’s Not Good News for Evangelicals,” *Christianity Today*, July 13, 2021, accessed October 14, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/mainline-protestant-evangelical-decline-survey-us-nones.html>.

<sup>3</sup> While I don’t have citable research or evidence to support this statement, it is one that I live each and every day as someone who works in the Church. I feel this anxiety and tension in my own congregation as the numbers in our pews dwindle on Sunday mornings and our budget continues to edge into the red with each passing Session meeting. It’s also an anxiety and tension that I observe in conversations with colleagues in ministry throughout the church world – at all levels of my own denomination (the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.) as well as the other mainline denominations.

and did not find it easy to return.”<sup>4</sup> While this particular study was made of rural Anglican churches, the same effects can be seen and felt in congregations across denominations, around the world, and in churches that span the population gamut from rural to urban.

With the weight of all that laying heavy on the shoulders of all those who are present in the life of the Church – from clergy to denominational leaders to congregational leaders to those sitting in the pews – it’s no wonder a sense of disconnectedness has permeated the spiritual atmosphere. As someone who shepherded a small, rural congregation not only through the COVID-19 pandemic but also through the coming-back-together time following the lifting of restrictions (those mandated by public health officials and those put in place by our own Session), the struggle that I heard people voice over and over again was one of disconnectedness. They didn’t feel connected to each other anymore. They didn’t feel as connected to God anymore. They knew they wanted to reconnect, but they didn’t know how to begin the process of reconnecting. In their recent book *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation*, Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand highlight this need – this longing – well: “If the church needs more of anything in the crisis it faces, it is more resonance. More resonance will bring about deeper relationships and a clearer purpose. Instead of searching for more influence, we will experience deeper connection to God and each other.”<sup>5</sup> It is the lack of that resonance – that deeper connection – that the congregation of the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco was feeling so keenly.

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie J. Francis, et al, “Increasingly Fragile? Assessing the Cumulative Impact of the Pandemic on Rural Anglican Churches,” *Rural Theology: International, Ecumenical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* 15 (2021): 73.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023), 17.

From that deep need, this worship project was born. First and foremost, I knew that my project needed to be something that was easy to integrate into the life of the congregation; it needed to be something that didn't add one more thing – one more expectation, one more obligation, one more “to-do” to people's plates. I knew that within my context, people were already stretched thin with job requirements, family needs, caregiving commitments, etc. In addition, I remained cognizant of not trying to make changes for the simple sake of change. If we were going to make any changes to worship, there had to be definable purpose and intentionality behind each of those changes. James K. A. Smith, the Canadian-American author and philosopher and professor of philosophy at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, speaks to how crucial it is for practice, habit, and discipleship to coincide: “If you are what you love and if love is a virtue, then love is a *habit*. This means that our most fundamental orientation to the world – the longing and desires that orient us toward some version of the good life – is shaped and configured by imitation and practice. This has important implications for how we approach Christian formation and discipleship.”<sup>6</sup> My congregation was aware they were in need of some new habits that would aid in both their Christian formation (reconnecting with God) and discipleship (reconnecting with one another). Finding and implementing those practices in a way that was both authentic and compelling was my challenge.

Additionally, helping people find new and different ways to explore and expand their faith within the context of worship has always been a passion of mine. The words of F. Gerrit Immink, author, and the rector, professor of Homiletics and chair of Practical

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<sup>6</sup> James K. A. Smith. *You Are What You Love: The Power of Spiritual Habit*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 19.

Theology at Protestant Theology University in the Netherlands, resonate deeply for me: “The worship service is a gathering of the church community, and the worshipers are active participants rather than passive observers. If we want to have a clear picture of the worship service, we must therefore pay attention not only to the minister in the pulpit, but also the members in the pews. What is the role of the congregation?”<sup>7</sup> How often would people in the pews on a regular Sunday morning describe themselves as “active participants” in the worship service? That final question – “*What is the role of the congregation?*” – is the question that both nagged at and inspired me to develop this project.

## Goals

With that question of the congregation’s role in my mind, I started thinking about various elements that could be incorporated into our regular worship services that would both allow for the congregation to play a more active role and would encourage that reconnection that everyone seemed to crave. “For Christian worship to remain vital, focused on God, celebrating our salvation in and through Christ, we must constantly strive to do better, to come to deeper insight, to strengthen our commitment to discipleship. Christian worship demands constant renewal.”<sup>8</sup> To put it simply, I was seeking a sense of both corporate and personal renewal for my congregation. As a congregation – maybe even as the Church on the whole – we intellectually understand and agree on the need for renewal. Yet it remains such an elusive thing in the life of the Church. In the life and time of

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<sup>7</sup> F. Gerrit Immink, *The Touch of the Sacred: The Practice, Theology, and Tradition of Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Worship with Gladness: Understanding Worship from the Heart* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 97.



the church that I currently serve and the life and time of the Church universal, personal and corporate renewal seemed a timely goal.

The ultimate goal for worship overall remained the same: to create and hold sacred space for people to experience, reflect on, and renew their relationship with God and with one another as the body of Christ. But were there ways to stretch that experiencing and renewing beyond our set-aside sixty minutes on Sunday morning into the rest of the week? Into the physical, spiritual, and emotional spaces outside the four walls of our sanctuary? After all, even those of us who work in the Church spend only a small portion of our time each week within the sanctuary and within an active state of worship. For those congregants who are filling the pews on Sunday mornings, that portion of time is even smaller.

My first thought was to incorporate more voices and more of other's experiences of God and faith in the context of worship. As someone who's been serving as the part-time solo pastor of a small rural congregation for more than eleven years, they have heard a lot of my voice. A *whole* lot. But I am far from the only one with a faith experience in that sanctuary on Sunday mornings. Each person who walks through those doors carries with them their own encounters with God, their own walks of faith, their own expressions of spirituality, and their own spiritual gifts, and yet for too long within the mainline tradition, congregational voices have been relegated to readings only: reading Scripture, reading the call-and-response elements, reading a committee report during announcements, and so on.

To put it bluntly, we have allowed and even encouraged congregation members to become mere observers of worship instead of participants. In doing so – in encouraging congregational listening without giving people a chance to give voice to their own faith

experiences in the context of worship – we deny them the ability to acknowledge their own particular walks with God in the context of community. We also separate people’s intellectual experience of worship from their emotional experience of worship. Smith decries, “You are hungry for knowledge; you thirstily drink of biblical ideas; you long to be Christ-like; yet all of that knowledge doesn’t seem to translate into a way of life. It seems we can’t think our way to holiness.”<sup>9</sup> Somewhere along the way, we in the Reformed tradition have lost track of just how fundamentally critical the experiential side of our faith can be. We demeaned personal religious experience in favor of intellectual theological learning, forgetting that one must inform the other – that both heads *and* hearts both are required to move the hands of faith to follow God’s call.

Tim Lomax is currently the Director of Mission and Ministry in the Diocese of Saint Albans in the United Kingdom and Residentiary Canon at St. Alban’s Cathedral as well as a consultant to the Church of England’s Liturgical Commission. In his book *Creating Missional Worship: Fusing Context and Tradition*, Lomax speaks to this idea of including more congregational involvement within the context of worship: “Affirming differences in ethnicity, story, experiences, personality, learning preferences, and life-goals is essential – recognizing that God works in particular ways for particular people and fueling others as they search for their particular spiritual path through life must all be essential aims of worship.”<sup>10</sup> Making space for individual’s stories simultaneously brings an authenticity to the worship and gives individuals a validation and a reassurance of the importance of their own faith experiences.

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Lomax, *Creating Missional Worship: Fusing Context and Tradition* (London: Church House Publishing, 2015), 19.

Joyce Ann Zimmerman is one of the Roman Catholic Sisters of the Precious Blood, a religious organization of women based out of Dayton, Ohio and dedicated to social and compassionate action in the name of Christ wherever they see great need. Zimmerman is also the founding director of the Institute for Liturgical Ministry as well as an adjunct professor of liturgy. In her book *Worship with Gladness: Understanding Worship from the Heart*, Zimmerman says,

To be a worshipping people does not mean that we simply get ourselves to service on Sunday; rather, worship is a way of living. Worship makes demands on us. The challenge for the future of worship renewal is to make sure these demands are more perfectly met in our daily living. Christian worship implies embracing a spirituality – that is, a way of life flowing to and from worship.<sup>11</sup>

That was the ultimate goal – to incorporate elements into our worship that enabled and encouraged a spirituality that was “a way of life flowing to and from worship.” It was my hope that these worship elements would provide that resonance that Root and Bertrand talked about both within the context of the worship service itself, but also in ways that would *continue to resonate* out in the world – in the midst of people’s everyday lives – and would continue to resonate throughout the week so they could bring those stories back to worship again and again.

As Lomax says,

Key discipleship tools such as prayer, giving, and service are built into our missional liturgies, not just in ways that resource Sunday faith, but in ways that nurture a Christian way of life throughout the week by providing spiritual and liturgical tools to be built into daily life. This approach helps us break down the sacred/secular divide. It demonstrates that the liturgy enables whole-life Christian discipleship, that what we are doing together in worship – our encounters with God, our

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<sup>11</sup> Zimmerman, 117.

fellowship, teaching and prayers – impact Monday morning just as much as Sunday morning. We see therefore that God’s studio isn’t only the place where we gather and invoke the name of the Trinity. God’s studio has no walls and is certainly not confined to times or places where we corporately engage in liturgy.<sup>12</sup>

To that end, I decided to incorporate three new worship practices into our regular Sunday services, all of which gave congregants a chance to exercise their voices and weave their own faith stories into the wider narrative of God’s story that we encounter each and every time we worship.

The first practice – “Exploring the Word Together” – involved including a question in the bulletin after the sermon and giving people the chance to either sit with that question on their own for a while or to sit and talk with others. It’s designed to be an interaction both with the Scripture and the theme for the day’s worship but also with each other’s thoughts and feelings on faith and life together. The second practice – “Claiming Our Faith Identity” – is a call-and-response reading incorporated at the end of the service in place of a pastoral charge. This was written with this particular congregation in mind in that it incorporates the congregation’s mission statement. It’s a way for us to remind ourselves and one another what it means for us to be the Church here in this particular time and place before we leave the worship service. The third practice – “Glimpses of God” – is a short testimony time at the beginning of the service. It was specifically intended to replace the call-and-response Call to Worship in the Reformed liturgy because it was clear to me that, while congregants were dutifully reading the words on the page together, it was a practice that had become rote and meaningless. Instead of reminding one another why we worship

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<sup>12</sup> Lomax, 101.

with prefab words on the page, we call each other into this space and time of sacred togetherness with the stories of God showing up in our lives.

As challenging and daunting as all of that was and is and will continue to be – both for the Church and for myself – throughout the project and into today, I continue to find encouragement in the words of the late Robert E. Webber, American theologian and former professor of theology at Wheaton College as well as Professor of Ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the founder of the Institute for Worship Studies:

God seems to be doing a new work in our time, a work of breaking down prejudices, bringing people together, and uniting us to the common history of the church. And the place where this is happening is in worship – in a worship that crosses traditions, joins them into one seamless robe, and allows the people of these various traditions to worship not as separate entities, but as one church.<sup>13</sup>

Just as God did a new thing in the Incarnation in Jesus Christ, just as God did a new thing on that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit alighted on each of the disciples, just as God did a new thing during each rummage sale period throughout church history, God is indeed doing a new thing now. This project is my attempt at catching hold of just a wisp of that new thing and trying to follow the leadings of the Holy Spirit as she blows once again through the Church.

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<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 13.

## GENERAL CONTEXT

### Fundamentals of Worship

As long as we humans have had a relationship with God, we have expressed that relationship through worship – engaging with God and one another through praise and prayer, word and sacrament. Throughout the centuries and generations, the words and actions and elements that make up our worship have shifted. Even within the same time period, the treasured and prescribed elements of worship can vary from one denomination to the next, one congregation to the next, even one service to the next. Before we start talking about changing worship, it is important to establish a “worship baseline” of sorts: What is the essence and purpose of worship? Who needs to be present for worship? What are the mechanics of worship?

No matter the context, era, or particulars of worship, the ultimate goal for *all* worship remains the same: connecting with God and connecting with one another as a community of faith. However, not surprisingly, there are lots of ways to define what it means to worship – to be and do and strive for this phenomenon called Church together. There are probably as many definitions as there are people who have tried to put pen to paper to talk about worship. Immink gives us a perfectly functional definition: “a worship service is a *religious practice*. A practice is more than an incidental act: it comprises multiple acts of people with a common interest.”<sup>14</sup> We could also go with a slightly longer, more fleshed-out definition: “worship is a public act of adoration in which God’s people are formed as a community of faith and a public act of allegiance to God’s reign as they do God’s work in the world. It is the liturgy of being gathered for Word and sacrament, and the

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<sup>14</sup> Immink, vii.

liturgy of being sent as disciples. These things are inextricably bound.”<sup>15</sup> The description that speaks most fully and authentically to my own experience both as a worshiper and as someone leading worship comes from Kara Root, pastor at Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota and my colleague, mentor, and friend:

The times I most feel my deep love for the church are when it’s transcendent, mysterious, and unknowable and when it’s messy, haphazard, and human. And my favorite moments of all are when it’s all of these at the same time. Church is a broken and messed-up collection of beautiful souls longing for the world to reflect the truth of God’s love. These people show up with each other, believing there is a reason to come, a reason to risk, a reason not to quit.<sup>16</sup>

Without mentioning the word “worship,” Root manages to gather up all of those elements that we seem to find so important for the practice of worship: God and community, beauty and the messiness of being human, God’s love and our conscious choice to come in spite of (because of?) everything in our lives. Most importantly, Root eloquently encompasses the “who” of worship – all of the persons necessary for worship: ourselves, a Christian community, and, of course, God.

Zimmerman states that “worship is not a stagnant ceremony, but a living community of men and women, children and youth who turn themselves toward God through uniting themselves with Christ in his own turning toward [God] in heaven.”<sup>17</sup> This particular definition of worship keeps God as both the heart of and the impetus for worship. Simply put, when it comes to worship, God is our “who,” our “how,” and our “why.” God is the one

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<sup>15</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Kara Root, *The Deepest Belonging: A Story About Discovering Where God Meets Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Zimmerman, 64.

who initiates all worship, from the dawn of faith through God's covenant with Abraham all the way down to the dawn of each new day when we open our eyes and choose to say "yes" to God again. Through genuine acts of worship, we maintain our relationship with God. Worship "brings us into intimacy with God,"<sup>18</sup> first by re-establishing our intentional presence with God, then through confession, immersing ourselves in God's word, and finally prayer. In the same vein, worship is also our response to God – to the ways we encounter God throughout our lives, the ways that God inspires us and guides us, protects us, comforts us, and gives us strength.

As far as the mechanics of worship are concerned, it would also behoove us to move forward with a functioning definition and understanding of "liturgy." More often than not, people understand liturgy as the structure of the worship service itself. However, as pointed out by David W. Fagerberg, liturgical theologian and professor emeritus of liturgical studies at Notre Dame University, "liturgy involves more than fussing with the smells and bells in the chapel ... Liturgy is not just feelings, and not just a condescendingly esthetic expression of doctrines which are too sophisticated for simple believers to understand. Liturgy is the Church's 'sustained summons home to God in Christ,' as Fr. [Aidan] Kavanagh defines it."<sup>19</sup> Most broadly defined, *liturgy* is the work of the Church in the context of worship. Constance Cherry has made the field of designing and constructing worship within the Church her life's work. She is a pastor, liturgical musician, and composer as well as professor emeritus of Christian Worship at Indiana Wesleyan University and a founding

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<sup>18</sup> J. Michael Walters. *Can't Wait for Sunday: Leading Your Congregation in Authentic Worship* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 38.

<sup>19</sup> David W. Fagerberg. *What Is Liturgical Theology? A Study in Methodology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 180, 181.



faculty member of the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies. Cherry describes liturgy in terms of the original Greek from which the word is derived: “‘Liturgy’ comes from the Greek work *leitourgia*, translated as ‘the work of the people.’ It refers to actions that worshipers undertake in order to do the work of worship ... Liturgy is not a ‘bad’ or ‘good’ word – it is simply a word – a biblical word that reminds us that whatever worship acts we offer to God constitute our liturgy.”<sup>20</sup> This is an important distinction to make because, in various circles of the Church world, the term “liturgy” has become something to either be revered or despised.

To that end, it helps to explore two categories of liturgy as defined by Clayton J. Schmit, former associate professor of Preaching and academic director of the Brehm Center of Worship, Theology, and Arts and the current provost of the Lutheran Theological Seminary’s School of Theology. Much of Schmit’s writing delves into the intersections of liturgy and ordinary life. Schmit delineates a difference between “formal liturgies” and “free liturgies.”<sup>21</sup> These categories feel similar to the ways many others have delineated church life/worship throughout the decades. “Formal liturgies” are more structured – more what many would call conventional, planned-out, or even “mainline.” In describing formal liturgies, Schmit says, “This takes into account that God’s Spirit is not merely a passing force but a source of inspiration as worship is planned and rehearsed, as sermons are researched and written, as music is selected and practiced, and as a congregation draws on the rich gifts of local artists.”<sup>22</sup> “Free liturgies,” on the other hand, are more open and fluid in their

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<sup>20</sup> Constance M. Cherry. *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Schmit, 137.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

plan and structure. These types of liturgies are what many would call charismatic, extemporaneous, or even “evangelical.” Schmit says, “Free church worship can also be enriched by operating within an understanding that whatever its formal structure, it is a liturgy that God seeks to inhabit.”<sup>23</sup> Over the past few decades, these categories have been rebranded in the midst of the worship wars as “traditional worship” (i.e. – formal liturgies) and “contemporary worship” (i.e. – free liturgies). Are there worship services whose structure spans both categories – marrying the fluidness of free liturgies/contemporary worship with the planning and structure of formal liturgies/traditional worship? Yes. That being said, the majority of congregations today across the country and across denominations still tend to fall in one category or another.

By far, the category with which I have the most personal experience – both as a worshiper and as a worship leader – is that of formal liturgies, and through my experience, most formal liturgies can be broken down into the four-fold worship formula: gathering in the Word, hearing the Word, responding to the Word, and sending in the Word. According to the *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “An order of worship offers a meaningful and reliable structure for the church’s encounter with the living God. Over time, an order of worship helps to shape our faith and faithfulness as the people of God, becoming a pattern for how we live as Christians in the world.”<sup>24</sup> The *Book of Common Worship* goes on to explain that each of the elements of the four-fold worship formula are “rooted in scripture, the traditions of the universal Church, and our Reformed heritage.”<sup>25</sup> It

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<sup>23</sup> Schmit, 137.

<sup>24</sup> Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

is at the intersection of these three perspectives – Scripture, Christian tradition, and Reformed theology – that generations of pastors and worship leaders have been trained in the practice of crafting worship services.

In her book *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint for Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services*, Cherry compares building a worship service to a house. The foundation of the house is the purpose and essence of worship – the “why”: “In the end, the priority, presence, priesthood, and passion of the resurrected Jesus among gathered believers is what makes worship truly Christian.”<sup>26</sup> On this foundation are built “load-bearing walls to create four large ‘rooms’”:<sup>27</sup> the gathering, the Word, the Table, and the sending. Cherry presents these four general parts of worship as movements, then links them to movements in the overall story of Jesus’ life and ministry, particularly regarding his life with his disciples as described at the end of Luke’s gospel:<sup>28</sup>

- Movement 1 – Gathering: Christ approaches his followers (Luke 24:13-24)
- Movement 2 – The Word: Christ engages [this disciples] in the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27)
- Movement 3 – The Table: Christ’s identity is known in the context of table fellowship (Luke 24:28-32)
- Movement 4 – Sending: Christ inspires [the disciples] to go and tell the story (Luke 24:33-35)

With this understanding of the overarching movements/sections of worship, we can turn our attention to what particular worship elements fall into each particular portions.

The gathering section of worship includes all those elements that help worshipers prepare themselves to reconnect with God and with one another in Christian community: opening sentences or a call to worship, opening hymns, a gathering prayer, confession and

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<sup>26</sup> Cherry, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Cherry, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Cherry, 47.

pardon (including a call to confession, prayer of confession, and assurance of pardon), and the passing of the peace. The hearing section of worship includes hearing the Word of God read and proclaimed: a prayer for the hearing of the word (the Prayer for Illumination), the Scripture reading, the sermon, and any response following the sermon (e.g. – a musical response such as choral music or another hymn). An affirmation of faith could also be included in this section of the service. The responding section of worship includes all the ways in which we respond to God: prayers of the people, the Lord’s Prayer, more hymns or choral music, and the offering and prayer of dedication. Most notably, this is the portion of worship in which the Sacraments are situated as our participation in both baptism and the Lord’s Supper are our response to God’s grace. Finally, the sending section of worship includes any closing music as well as the charge and benediction.

There are certainly variations on this four-fold worship formula. Another, similar model is the seven-fold sequence of biblical liturgy: call, praise, confession, forgiveness, hearing God’s word, responding to God’s word, and blessing.<sup>29</sup> The particular elements and order detailed in the worship books of other denominations vary as well. Within the structure and planning of formal liturgies, we tend to follow the general pattern of gathering, hearing, responding, and being sent out in God’s Word. As we follow that pattern, though, we should also be constantly evaluating and considering the choices we make based on our context. “The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* notes that ‘liturgy is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These not only may but ought to be changed with the passage of time if they have suffered from the

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<sup>29</sup> Robbie F. Castleman. *Story-Shaped Worship: Following Patterns from the Bible and History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 91.

intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become unsuited to it.”<sup>30</sup> The particular document that White is citing here – the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, or Sacrosanctum Concilium* – is a prime example of this particular notion of adjusting worship elements to suit individual contexts. This document, written by Pope Paul VI and published by the Vatican on December 4, 1963, was one of the documents that emanated from the Second Vatican Council which delivered sweeping reforms to the way Catholic Mass was celebrated around the globe, including allowing “the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or other parts of the liturgy” to be administered in the “mother tongue.”<sup>31</sup> It also states that “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy,” calling this fully conscious and active participation “the aim to be considered before all else.”<sup>32</sup> Yes, there are essential liturgical elements that must be a part of worship – Scripture, prayer, blessing – but across many different Christian traditions, there is also plenty of space left for interpretation, revision, and transformation.

### **Need for Change Within the Church**

Still, the world around us is changing. As the church, we find ourselves swept up in one of Phyllis Tickle’s rummage sales – a time of deep change within the culture and within the Church. Within the world of the Church, we are trying to figure out how to keep the

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<sup>30</sup> James F. White. *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 178.

<sup>31</sup> Second Vatican Council, “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium, 4 December 1963.” Retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

rhythms and values that we hold dear both genuine to our Christian heritage and compatible to a society that increasingly “spiritual but not religious,” a phenomenon that has watched people leave organized religion by the multitudes over the last few decades.<sup>33</sup> Many of those who have left organized religion in favor of “spirituality” did so because of a rigidity and systematic repetition that is often exemplified in worship: “We do these things every Sunday because that’s what we’re supposed to do, not because they hold any meaning for us anymore.”<sup>34</sup> Zimmerman speaks to this need for change from the other side of things – from within the world of the Church and worship itself:

Worship calls us to slow down, quiet down, and set our priorities straight. Unless we consciously choose to do this, worship will wither away, not only in our own lives but essentially in society as a whole. Change is always costly. We must give up something in order to gain something we believe is better. And good worship always challenges us to change, to be transformed. Worship leaves us different, or it is not doing what it is supposed to do.<sup>35</sup>

Essentially, change should always be a part of our worship experience. Because we cannot help but be changed by worship, we come to each worship experience a different person, and, therefore, the worship itself will always be shifting, not fixed. As James White, chair of Liturgical Studies at Drew University and former president of the North American Academy of Liturgy, points out, “Change itself is one of the constants, obviously more rapid in some

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<sup>33</sup> Caroline Kitchener, “What It Means To Be Spiritual But Not Religious: One in five Americans reject organized religion, but maintain some kind of faith,” *The Atlantic*, January 11, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2018/01/what-it-means-to-be-spiritual-but-not-religious/550337/>.

<sup>34</sup> Again, this anecdote is based on many conversations I’ve had with friends and family since I started telling people I was going to be a pastor twenty years ago. Nearly every article, blog post, book, and scholarly paper delving into the “nones and dones” – those who have grown up without exposure to any kind of organized religion and those who have left organized religion, respectively – relays every variation on this conversation as well. This particular phrasing, however, comes directly out of my own informal interactions.

<sup>35</sup> Zimmerman, 15.

eras than in others, but never ceasing altogether. ... So it is safe to predict that Christian worship will continue to change, even while retaining some ‘immutable elements.’”<sup>36</sup> Yet for decades, we have plugged the same worship elements into the same spaces in the bulletin while expecting – and even hoping for – different results.

Sam Hamstra, Jr., professor of Church History and Practical Theology at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, speaks to this lack of holistic realness within our traditional worship services:

We struggle designing liturgies that involve the entire person: mind, body and heart. Most liturgies emphasize one part of the worshiper’s personality, while neglecting the other two. I suggest that worship regulated by scripture will include the regular use of the emotive, volitional and cognitive components of our personhood. It will engage our hearts, minds and wills. In doing so, it will nudge people out of their comfort zones, not allowing them to worship with but one part of their being.<sup>37</sup>

It is this “whole self” worship that we seem to have lost sight of, especially within mainline denominations and within those who adhere strictly to formal liturgies.

So what if we zoomed out from the ascribed precise list of ascribed worship elements? What if we broadened our understanding of what’s necessary for worship beyond particular elements and concentrated instead on the overall experience? On senses instead of specifics? Don Saliers, the United Methodist pre-eminent liturgical scholar and worship theologian and professor emeritus of Theology and Worship at Candler School of Theology, explores this idea in his book *Worship Come to Its Senses*.<sup>38</sup> Saliers speaks of the

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<sup>36</sup> White, 178-179.

<sup>37</sup> Sam Hamstra, Jr. *Principled Worship: Biblical Guidelines for Emerging Liturgies* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Don E. Saliers. *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1996.

Church “coming to its senses” regarding worship – finding ways back to the underlying meaning *behind* the liturgical routines (dare we say ruts?) we’ve perpetuated for so long:

Coming to our senses requires both the deepening of thought and the awakening of conscience. It requires deeper feeling and sustained discernment of our actual practices and attitudes ... As one who cares for the gospel and for the living witness and quality of the way we worship God, I find myself asking about what we habitually do when we gather. I wonder where such qualities as awe and wonderment, truthfulness and authenticity, and delight and hope are found. I ask myself why these qualities are so often missing or diminished in our worshiping assemblies.<sup>39</sup>

In pursuit of this liturgical “coming to our senses,” Saliers spends each chapter delving deeper into one of those senses: the sense of awe, the sense of delight, the sense of truth, and the sense of hope. With each of these senses, Saliers drives home a few essential elements of worship; not “elements” in terms liturgy pieces (call to worship, invitation to confession, assurance of pardon, etc.), but “elements” in more organic terms – elements in terms of the heart of worship.

Saliers talks about how worship must be *authentic*, a genuine expression of the life of the community in which the worship is being enacted as well as the lives of the worshipers. “Unless we also overcome our reluctance to share our faith experiences honestly – in lament, confession, and testimony – our Sunday gatherings will remain routine.”<sup>40</sup> He also speaks of the importance of *presence* – how crucial it is for the worshipers to be fully present in the words and movements of worship in order to experience God’s presence. When worshipers are fully present, there is a level of connectionality that they are able to achieve within the worshiping community, with God,

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<sup>39</sup> Saliers, 12, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Saliers, 64.



and with the world and their lives outside the purview of the worship service. That *connectionality* is the final essential element that Saliers highlights: “Where may we meet this wonder and awe of God? Both in daily life and in liturgy. Or, perhaps we can meet God in the liturgy because of what is given in daily life; and we can recognize what is given in daily life because of what we continually rehearse and receive in the liturgy.”<sup>41</sup> So authenticity, active presence, and connectionality are essential elements for the practice of worship – elements that should be present in every worship service, imprinted on and expressed through the various liturgy pieces of each service.

In *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber proposes a three-fold critique of worship. He maintains that worship can and often does suffer from one or more of three crises: a crisis of content, a crisis of structure, and/or a crisis of style.<sup>42</sup> A crisis of content has to do with the scope and breadth of the message of the worship service: “even though our worship is conscious of remembrance, it is a truncated content. It does not span all of history and reach into the believer’s anticipation of not only his or her salvation but of the salvation of the whole world.”<sup>43</sup> When we focus worship primarily on “my personal relationship” with God or Jesus as “my personal Savior,” we neglect to include the rich and essential history of our faith – the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say. We focus only on the smallest sliver of God’s Grand Story of Salvation, and in doing so, all of the background and framework that has led up to our place is the story gets relegated to “the past,” despite the fact that it is that past which has brought us to this place, both individually and as a community.

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<sup>41</sup> Saliers, 32.

<sup>42</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 90-91.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

A crisis of structure has to do with worship models that have strayed too far from the pattern of worship laid out by God in Scripture: “the basic structure of Word and Eucharist held in any church ... is always pregnant with God’s story. The story awaits its birth by the pastor and the congregation to bring the content of our worship in line with the biblical *order* of worship. This simple move will facilitate the recovery of remembrance and anticipation.”<sup>44</sup> This crisis harkens back to the “immutable elements divinely inspired,” as they were described in the *Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy* – the elements that must be a part of worship: prayer and Scripture, Sacrament and blessing. If a crisis of content is about the story of worship, a crisis of structure is about the movements of worship.

Finally, a crisis of style is directly related to the other two crises and has everything to do with context: “the style of doing Word and Table is a matter of making the content and structure of worship *indigenous* to the local setting.”<sup>45</sup> This crisis is all about making sure the way the content and structure are handled is appropriate for the setting in which the worship service is being held – not just the physical setting (a sanctuary vs. the fire ring at camp, for example) but also the congregational setting. For example, trying to sing a bunch of contemporary worship songs during a service at the local nursing home would be a crisis of style. David Peterson, Australian author, professor at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia, and ordained minister in the Anglican Church of Australia speaks to this:

One of the issues in the contemporary scene is a hungering for more self-expression and personal fulfillment in church services. People want to be stirred and challenged, or comforted and consoled, at an individual level. They want church services to be a source of engagement for them in their everyday discipleship. Although this may to some extent reflect the preoccupation of an age with self-development and self-

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 90-91.

<sup>45</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 91.

realization, it is a reminder that genuine worship will have both a private and a public dimension.<sup>46</sup>

Worship, as an expression of faith in community, cannot be all about the experience of the individual. Yet, communities of faith are made up of individuals who are experiencing all manner of joys and struggles, challenges and questions in the midst of their everyday lives. All of these are things they bring with them into the worship service just as they bring their coffee mugs and wallets, purses and cell phones, so a worship service that focuses only on the community as a whole and ignores the individual – either intentionally or unintentionally – also neglects a critical dimension of worship.

Lomax also stresses this harmony of content and context: “Context and tradition, in my view, work best in partnership. Bringing the worship resources of the church into the sphere of everyday life – needs, struggles, joys, stresses, and culture – is essential for a church that in so many ways has become entrenched in its traditions on the margins of society.”<sup>47</sup> Truly, this is where the Church needs to make the biggest change. For decades, many congregations across the country and across denominations have stuck to the same worship patterns without taking their changing context into account. It’s like hiking along a mountain path and focusing only on your feet, refusing to look up at the beauty and richness of creation around you. Congregational demographics change. Neighborhoods in which congregations are located change. Current events can change the landscape of worship from one week to the next. And the people that are coming to church – and the

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<sup>46</sup> David Peterson. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992),16.

<sup>47</sup> Lomax, 4.

people that *aren't* coming to church – see and experience those changes and wonder why the church can't seem to keep up.

All of this was at the forefront of my mind as I was considering this worship project. I wanted to introduce some new liturgical practices that would invite people to participate more authentically and presently in the worship itself in ways that connected them to one another, to God, and to the world and their lives beyond our stained-glass windows. Lomax asserts:

In worship all should have the opportunity to be active team players and not simply passive spectators. In this way we will dispel the consumer myth that worship is provided 'for me' by a few people. Transforming the audience/concert culture of church to a hands-on, participative worship environment may help us provide a warm and genuine welcome to worship in which all become valued and involved.<sup>48</sup>

Considering this idea of participative worship, in conjunction with Schmit's two categories of liturgies in mind, my project finds a middle ground between the two. I have kept many of the elements of the formal liturgy that my congregation knows and cherishes, and yet within that structure, I've incorporated elements that are particularly designed to encourage people to listen for and respond to the free movement of the Holy Spirit within our midst.

In essence, I've opened up more spaces within our weekly liturgy for the voice and stories of the congregation. Immink states: "In its worship the church becomes visible to the external world. The community of faith assembles in a public space for public service. Moreover, in worship the personal, social, and societal elements are integrated in a collective public act. In this sense the Sunday worship service provides a comprehensive

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<sup>48</sup> Lomax, 97.

view of faith.”<sup>49</sup> I feel it’s this “comprehensive view of faith” that is lacking in worship services when we don’t leave space for the voices and stories of others. A worshipping community is more than just the pastor, and yet, too often, it is only the pastor’s voice that we hear on Sunday mornings. In many churches, there is also a liturgist who reads portions of the service – portions written or, at the very least, selected by, the pastor, once again emphasizing the pastor’s voice and experience. Even when that pastor is fully present and authentic in their own expression of faith through the sermon and the liturgy, the connectionality piece is missing.

### **The Effects of COVID-19 on Congregational Connectedness**

Within the context of my congregation, much of that missing connectionality can be traced back to the COVID-19 pandemic. Minnesota Emergency Executive Order 20-20, filed on March 25, 2020, directed all Minnesotans to stay at home.<sup>50</sup> While this directive included attendance at religious gatherings, “officials, workers, and leaders in houses of worship and other places of religious expression or fellowship” were exempt as were all those “workers necessary to plan, record, and distribute online or broadcast content to community members.”<sup>51</sup> The prohibition from gatherings of more than ten people from unrelated households was clarified in Emergency Executive Order 20-56 on May 13, 2020.<sup>52</sup> The

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<sup>49</sup> Immink, viii.

<sup>50</sup> State of Minnesota, Executive Department. March 25, 2020. *Emergency Executive Order 20-20: Directing Minnesotans to Stay at Home*, by Tim Walz, Governor of Minnesota. St. Paul. Retrieved from [https://mn.gov/governor/assets/3a.%20EO%2020-20%20FINAL%20SIGNED%20Filed\\_tcm1055-425020.pdf](https://mn.gov/governor/assets/3a.%20EO%2020-20%20FINAL%20SIGNED%20Filed_tcm1055-425020.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 6(v).

<sup>52</sup> State of Minnesota, Executive Department. May 13, 2020. *Emergency Executive Order 20-56: Safely Reopening Minnesota’s Economy and Ensuring Safe Non-Work Activities during the COVID-19 Peacetime Emergency*, by Tim Walz, Governor of Minnesota. St. Paul. Retrieved from <https://www.leg.mn.gov/archive/execorders/20-56.pdf>.

requirements were updated a few months later allowing for the express purpose of worship and weddings, stating “places of worship, funeral homes, and other venues that offer gathering spaces for weddings, funerals, or planned services such as worship, rituals, prayer meetings, or scripture studies, may host such weddings, funerals, or service with over 10 people” as long as they adhered to CDC guidelines including a minimum of six feet social distancing between households, not exceeding 25% building capacity if meeting indoors, maximum not exceeding 250 people, and developing and implementing a COVID-19 Preparedness Plan in accordance with MDH guidelines.<sup>53</sup> In January 2021, the guidelines pertaining to faith services were once again changed to require all gatherings to remain under 50% of building capacity, maintain six feet of social distance at all times, and wear masks at all times.<sup>54</sup>

In the face of all of the fear, uncertainty, and chaos brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Session of the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco chose to move to online-only worship in March 2020. We met via Zoom for a few months without being able to make any official decisions because, like many other churches and institutions, our by-laws did not contain any provisions for electronic meeting/voting. In October 2020, we called a congregational meeting in the parking lot for the express purpose of passing a change in our by-laws that would allow for electronic voting. Congregation members stayed in their vehicles and spaced themselves with two empty spaces between each parked vehicle. They

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<sup>53</sup> State of Minnesota, Executive Department. May 23, 2020. *Emergency Executive Order 20-62: Amending Executive Order 20-56 to Allow Worship, Weddings, and Funerals to Proceed as Safely as Possible during the COVID-19 Peacetime Emergency*, by Tim Walz, Governor of Minnesota. St. Paul. Retrieved from [https://mn.gov/governor/assets/EO%2020-62%20Final\\_tcm1055-433586.pdf](https://mn.gov/governor/assets/EO%2020-62%20Final_tcm1055-433586.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> State of Minnesota, Executive Department. January 6, 2021. *Emergency Executive Order 21-01: Protecting Recent Progress and Cautiously Resuming Certain Activities*, by Tim Walz, Governor of Minnesota. St. Paul. Retrieved from [https://mn.gov/governor/assets/Executive%20Order%2021-01%20Signed%20and%20Filed\\_tcm1055-462272.pdf](https://mn.gov/governor/assets/Executive%20Order%2021-01%20Signed%20and%20Filed_tcm1055-462272.pdf).

raised their hands out their windows to indicate their votes. Following this change in our by-laws, the Session continued meeting virtually until May 2021, at which time we resumed meeting in person spaced out at separate tables in the fellowship room while wearing masks. Following the MDH guidelines, the Session chose to resume in-person worship in June 2021. Every other pew in the sanctuary was marked as off-limits, and households were required to maintain six feet distance from one another. Masks were required at all times. Hymns were played by our organist, but singing did not resume until October 2021. We kept the Passing of the Peace as part of the service, but until well into 2022, worshipers were required to remain in place and simply wave or show other signs of peace to one another from a distance. Fellowship time following worship (coffee and food) did not resume until May 2022.

Let me take a moment to fill out this congregation's story a little more. This is a congregation that is full of compassion, genuine care, and hearty welcome for one another as well as anyone else that walks through the door. We have families who have been worshipping here for generations as well as people who just walked in the door for the first time three weeks ago (but are still choosing to come back). That being said, the COVID-19 pandemic took a significant toll on us individually and as a congregation. Being located so close to Rochester, Minnesota and the Mayo Clinic, we have a high number of healthcare workers in our congregation, and the twenty-four plus months of the pandemic were incredibly difficult on them physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Even for those who aren't healthcare workers, the isolation and disconnectedness were deeply painful. I continue to hear it in conversation with congregation members. I see it on their faces. I hear it in their prayer requests. The feeling of personal depletion is very real and very prevalent.

In addition, for a congregation in which hospitality, welcome, and connectedness are an essential part of their identity, the isolation and disconnectedness of the pandemic has been very hard. Within the context of worship, a perfect example of just how difficult this continues to be is one of this congregation's most beloved elements that celebrates and fosters both faith-building and community-building: the Passing of the Peace. Pre-COVID, this was a congregation in which everyone greeted everyone during this time with a handshake or a hug and a warm smile. During the passing of the peace, the air was full of holy noise: "Good mornings," "Peace be with yous," laughter, questions about how people's families or jobs or weeks have been going, and so on. Standing back and observing this time, it used to look to me like what I imagine an Acts 2 community to look like. The socially-distant, COVID-version of Passing the Peace was a far and painful cry from "the usual way." Even months after we re-opened the door on this beloved practice, not everyone felt comfortable participating. So we had some people moving around, shaking hands, and embracing while others stayed put, waved, and smiled. It's a perfect example of just how disconnected we have been for so long and still, to some extent, remain, even though we've been back in the same space together for more than a year.

In the last year, more studies and statistics have been published pertaining to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on churches, worship attendance, and religious life. A recent Pew research study, which drew on five separate surveys administered between July 2020 and November 2022, found that "the share of all U.S. adults who say they typically attend religious services at least once a month is down modestly but measurably (by three percentage points, from 33% to 30%) [since 2019], and one-in-five Americans say they



now attend in person less often than they did before the pandemic.”<sup>55</sup> This same study has produced some interesting trends, especially when we consider them in terms of authenticity, presence, and connectionality as emphasized by Sailors. First, and not surprisingly, the Pew research study found that in-person worship attendance at worship services was lower at the beginning of their surveys (July 2020) than the end (November 2022) and that, correspondingly, virtual attendance at worship services was higher at the beginning of their surveys than the end.<sup>56</sup> It also indicates that the trend of moving from virtual back to in-person worship attendance seems to have leveled off between the final two surveys (March 2022 and November 2022): “Overall, 28% of U.S. adults now say they attended religious services in person in the last month, practically unchanged from the last time we asked this question in March 2022 (27%) and only slightly higher than in September 2021 (26%).”<sup>57</sup> By and large, church attendance, which, as previously discussed, was already declining before the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a screeching halt. At this point, we seem to be far removed enough from the thick of the pandemic to be able to start measuring that decline in concrete numbers.

Similar statistics have been released by Gallup in the last six months. According to their recent studies, “in the four years before the pandemic, 2016 through 2019, an average of 34% of U.S. adults said they had attended church, synagogue, mosque, or temple in the past seven days. From 2020 to the present, the average has been 30%, including a 31%

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<sup>55</sup> Justin Nortey and Michael Rotolo, “How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services,” Pew Research Center, March 28, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/>.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

reading in a May 1-24 survey.”<sup>58</sup> Gallup also adds that looking at the numbers alone doesn’t give the full picture. The recent decline could certainly be a by-product of the pandemic, but it could also fall within the parameters of the general decline that the church has been experiencing for decades. A recent article in *Christianity Today* reveals just how challenging and unsettling all of this has been in the day-to-day practice of doing and being church together. Journalist Hannah McClellan interviewed Paul Seay, a United Methodist Church pastor serving two Methodist churches in Abingdon, Virginia.

According to a new study on the impact of COVID-19 on the American church from Arbor Research and ChurchSalary, a sister publication of *Christianity Today*, more than one in three churches saw attendance decline between 2020 and 2022. And while many, like Seay’s congregations, have seen growth since the darkest days, they still seem to be missing people. “It was not uncommon in discussions with pastors,” the researchers found, “to hear stories of ‘a third’ or ‘half’ or ‘20%’ of a congregation not coming back once the doors reopened.” Charles Wesley now has 20 people on a good Sunday, and Abingdon UMC has grown to around 200. But Seay still notices the people who aren’t in the pews anymore. “The pandemic,” he told CT, “really zapped the congregation.”<sup>59</sup>

*“The pandemic really zapped the congregation.”* As someone who pastored a congregation through the pandemic and has been trying to figure out what church looks like “on the other side,” this captures it pretty well. The pandemic really zapped the congregation.

That being said, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic go far beyond the numbers alone. COVID-19 brought death and grief in ways that most of us have never experienced it before. COVID-19 brought an unprecedented extended period of isolation that wore heavily

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<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones. “U.S. Church Attendance Still Lower Than Pre-Pandemic,” Gallup, June 26, 2023. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/507692/church-attendance-lower-pre-pandemic.aspx>.

<sup>59</sup> Hannah McClellan. “Pastors Wonder About Church Members Who Never Came Back Post-Pandemic,” *Christianity Today*, September 26, 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/september/covid-study-church-attendance-change-pews-people.html>.

on the hearts and souls of many – church-goers and non-church-goers, pastors, and laypeople – regardless of denomination, race, age, gender, and all the other ways we try to separate ourselves from one another. COVID-19 brought the regular rhythms of worship and liturgy and the church calendar to an eerily silent halt. In describing the consolation and inspiration that can be found in the act of worship, Zimmerman says,

Let's face it: our everyday lives tend to be pretty messy. Fatigue, demands on our time, personality conflicts, distractions, ambitions, fears, illness, poverty, work, drugs, violence, war, displacement – all this and more can easily dissuade us from surrendering ourselves to God's transforming love. Worship, in contrast, is "home." Its familiar celebration patterns and consistent invitation into God's ways are like salve that helps us surrender.<sup>60</sup>

And yet, when the world shutdown in early 2020 and we didn't resume "life as usual" just a few weeks later as many of us were hoping we would; when people started dying not by the hundreds or even the thousands but by the hundreds of thousands and the millions; when we became wholly overwhelmed by trying to do everything at home – parenting, working, schooling our children, caring for aging parents, worshipping, etc.; when the whole world fell victim to the COVID-19 pandemic, even this "salve that helps us surrender" was also made unavailable, tainted by the fear of contracting the virus or unknowingly sharing it with others.

In an article for the *International Journal of Public Theology*, Australian doctoral student Michael Earl described this halt with haunting eloquence: "The coronavirus crisis has seen churches emptied, singing muffled, and gatherings severely restricted. It has generally had a 'muting' effect on the whole of the church's 'normal' life, a life bound up in

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<sup>60</sup> Zimmerman, 131.

*gathering, proclamation, praise, and song.* This ‘quietening’ has been imposed by a foe which pays no heed to such ecclesial patterns.”<sup>61</sup> Earl names just how disrupted Church felt in the midst of the pandemic; not the numbers part of church – the worship attendance and offering counts on Sunday morning – but the intrinsic rhythm of church life: the gathering and togetherness, the discipleship and fellowship. I know many congregations, my own included, who tried to create that fellowship through a variety of virtual means throughout the years of the COVID-19 pandemic with varying degrees of success. Yet even more than a year after returning to what we would call “normal” – lifting the last of our restrictions and returning to the familiar and well-loved practices of Passing the Peace and fellowship time after worship – it often still feels like we’re limping along, like we haven’t been able to return to our normal, natural stride in our life together.

All throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it felt like so many conversations – with friends, with family members, with parishioners, with colleagues, sometimes even with (socially-distanced and masked) strangers at the store – included some iteration of the phrase “when things *finally* get back to normal.” Experts are discovering more and more that this extended period of isolation continues to have lasting negative effects on people’s ability to make connections. Adults are finding it harder and more anxiety-producing to form relationships post-COVID, a struggle that impacts mental, emotional, and even physical health.<sup>62</sup> This is not a new finding that researchers only began studying amidst the upheaval of COVID-19. In their 2019 book *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*,

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Earl. “How Can I Keep from Singing? Being the Church amid the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 15 (2021), 20.

<sup>62</sup> Sarah Davis and Jessica Lester. “59% of U.S. Adults Find It Harder to Form Relationships Since COVID-19, Survey Reveals – Here’s How That Can Harm Your Health” *Forbes*, July 12, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/social-anxiety-since-covid-survey/>.

sisters Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski, a sex educator and inaugural director of wellness education at Smith College and an assistant professor and music coordinator at Western New England University respectively, delve into the topic of toxic stress and how it affects our bodies, minds, and spirits. In their chapter on connection as a way to counter burnout, they point out, “Even as adults, connection nourishes us in a literal, physiological way, regulating our heart rates and respiration rates, influencing the emotional activation in our brains, shifting our immune response to injuries and wounds, changing our exposure to stressors, and modulating our stress response. We literally sicken and die without connection.”<sup>63</sup> When our whole world felt upside-down, we felt a deep, deep yearning for the hum-drum normalcy of our everyday lives, and this yearning felt particularly prevalent in the Church. The most important element that so many of us were desperately missing during the COVID-19 pandemic: *connection*.

In an article written for *Word & World* about the African American Christian experience of COVID-19, Beverly Wallace speaks to both holding and experiencing the grief and other gut-wrenching emotions brought on by the pandemic while also finding a way through the wilderness of that struggle to the newness on the other side. Wallace is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Until recently, she was the associate professor of Congregational and Community Care at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota before accepting a position as the Women in Ministry Coordinator for the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA. In her 2021 article entitled “The Tragic Vision of Church in the Time of the Pandemic: Everything Is Going to Be Alright,” Wallace says,

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<sup>63</sup> Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski. *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2019), 134.

An unsurprising emotional response to COVID-19 is grief, the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the loss. God's people have experienced many losses during this unique time. They need a new and perhaps creative way to live and to make meaning of their experiences. The same can be said about the church, and this may be an opportunity for reshaping the church.<sup>64</sup>

Quoting Pope Francis, Earl also speaks to the possibilities for life of the Church that could lie on the other side of the COVID-19 crisis, saying this pandemic “invites humankind to ‘dream big,’ ‘to re-think our priorities,’ and serve ‘the common good’ with ‘an over-flowing mercy.’ It is ‘our Noah moment,’ by which he means the crisis presents us with an opportunity for regeneration, a re-set.”<sup>65</sup> The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the Church to quickly reinvent everything about worship for congregation members that run the gamut from completely technologically savvy to completely technologically averse. Now that we're on the other side of this global pandemic, we have the chance to pause, to breathe, to re-evaluate, and to reimagine many aspects of how we do and be Church together, including worship.

If, as many have suggested, this continued decline in both worship attendance and church engagement is indeed indicative of the trajectory of the Church before COVID-19, we may in fact be able to find a blessing in the midst of the COVID-19 upheaval in the life of the Church and the lives of individual congregations: *change*. This certainly won't be an easy blessing for many to recognize. Peterson astutely points out, “It may be very difficult in some churches to reassess the role and function of the congregational meeting in God's

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<sup>64</sup> Beverly Wallace, “The Tragic Vision of Church in the Time of the Pandemic: Everything Is Going to Be Alright,” *Word & World* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 126.

<sup>65</sup> Earl, 17, quoting Pope Francis. *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 2020.

purpose and to take stock of what we are doing, Sunday by Sunday. Ecclesiastical traditions have a strangely powerful grip on many of us and some are fearful of the slightest change.”<sup>66</sup> Cliché as it may be, the old church anecdote rings true: The last seven words of the church are, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Yet everything about the COVID-19 pandemic was a way we’ve never done things before. Even congregations that were already set up to worship in one virtual format or another weren’t used to worshipping exclusively online. But for so many of us, there simply was no other choice. Both state and federal mandates as well as our moral obligation to protect our friends and neighbors to the best of our ability forced us into a variety of ways we had never done things before.

Finding the balance between making changes and not disrupting the “normal” to which we were all trying desperately to return to was challenging. Trying to navigate between whatever this new thing that God is doing might be and not overstepping people’s burnout has been a monumental challenge as a clergy person. But I kept returning to what the COVID-19 pandemic took away from us: connection. How could I return that deep sense of connection to our worship? Walter Brueggemann, ordained United Church of Christ pastor, prolific twentieth- and twenty-first-century theologian, and professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, in his book *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety*, offers some insight, inspiration, and challenge:

In our moment of fear and insecurity, we may be tempted to hold on to what was once safe and secure. Prophetic tradition knows, to the contrary, that the future does not reside in old, treasured realities. It belongs, rather, to bold faithful thought that leads to bold faithful action. This has always been the prophetic task, and it is now, in this freighted moment, our

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<sup>66</sup> Peterson, 293.

prophetic task. The new thing God is making possible is a world of generous, neighborly compassion.<sup>67</sup>

That generous, neighborly compassion was what we would strive for in our worship – a generous, authentic sharing of our lives and our faith with God and with one another in ways that would hold sacred space for all the different aspects of everyone’s lives and, in that sharing, would help grow us together in neighborly compassion. Earl maintains, “Human disasters – of all stripes – call forth a *theological* response from the church, holding together word and deed.”<sup>68</sup> For me – as a pastor, as a member of this faith community, and as a follower of Jesus Christ – this was where the rubber meets the road. This was the call that I felt in the midst of the COVID-19 congregational aftermath: to hold together the Word of God and the deeds of people’s lives in the context of worship in hopes that that holding-together would bring both reconnection and renewal to our world-weary souls.

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<sup>67</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020), 58.

<sup>68</sup> Earl, 10.



## FOUNDATIONS FOR “HOLY WORD, WHOLLY ENGAGED”

Now that we have a more thorough understanding of the context into which this worship project was launched, we need to turn our attention to the foundations upon which this project was built: Scriptural foundations, theological foundations, and historical foundations. In the introduction to his book on missional worship, Lomax quotes Rowan Williams, former member of the House of Lords in the United Kingdom and the 104<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, who described mission as “finding out what God is doing and joining in.”<sup>69</sup> Lomax continues: “If this is true of mission then it’s surely true of worship. What greater way to honour God, give [God] glory and tell of [God’s] praise than by spotting what [God’s] doing and joining in? In this way worship is about getting caught up in the dance, movement or even conversation of the Trinity who reach out with love in and for the world.”<sup>70</sup> If that is what this entire project is about – “getting caught up in the dance, movement or even conversation of the Trinity” – then these foundations which undergird the project are the dance floor.

### Scriptural Foundations

As the whole of Scripture – First Testament<sup>71</sup> and New Testament – is the Grand Story of God’s relationship with the children that God created and loved, it is rich with texts

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<sup>69</sup> Lomax, ix.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> In various Church circles today, the term “First Testament” is a way to refer to the Old Testament. The concern is that some who use the term “Old Testament” do so with the attitude that “old” means this testament is outdated, obsolete, and not as important as the New Testament. Choosing to instead use the term “First Testament” upholds the authority and Scriptural value of the content found in that first portion of the Christian Scriptures. It recognizes that God spoke first through the history, prophecies, and worship of the people of Israel.

pertaining to worship, especially when we include Saliers' essential elements as part of the conversation: authenticity, active presence, and connectionality. Peterson points out,

The theme of worship is far more central and significant in Scripture than many Christians imagine. It is intimately linked with all the major emphases of biblical theology such as creation, sin, covenant, redemption, the people of God and the future hope. Far from being a peripheral subject, it has to do with the fundamental question of how we can be in a right relationship with God and please [God] in all that we do. One way or another, most of the books from Genesis to Revelation are concerned with this issue.<sup>72</sup>

Throughout Scripture, the stories of, calls for, and archetypes of worship are all acts intended to connect the people with the God who created and loves them, and with each of the descriptions of worship in Scripture – the positive examples as well as the “don't do it this way” examples – God makes it clear that what God seeks in the midst of this worship more than anything is authenticity and active presence on the part of God's people.

It is also clear throughout the whole of Scripture that worship is something *initiated by God*. It is the people's appropriate and loving response to the God who has already reached out to them. Peterson says, “Acceptable worship under both covenants is a matter of responding to God's initiative in salvation and revelation, and doing so in the way that [God] requires. In particular, we need to take seriously the extraordinary biblical perspective that acceptable worship is something *made possible for us by God*.”<sup>73</sup> The pattern repeats itself time and time again from Genesis to Revelation: God reaches out to the people, the people respond, the people fall away, terrible things befall them, the people

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<sup>72</sup> Peterson, 17-18.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 19.

turn back to God, and God reaches out to the people once more. Zimmerman speaks to this as well:

In all of this talk about prayer and worship, in both the Old and the New Testaments, what is clear is that God from the beginning has moved us humans to take a posture of reverence and awe before the divine majesty. From the beginning God has chosen to be present to us, inviting us to encounter the divine Majesty in our worship and prayer. From the beginning God draws us out of ourselves toward a beauty, immensity, and inclusiveness that can take our breath away. Breathless, we are filled with God's Spirit-Breath, who enables us to worship with full hearts.<sup>74</sup>

Here, Zimmerman both affirms the assertion that all worship is initiated by God as well as weaves those essential elements of worship in with Scripture: authenticity, active presence, and connectionality.

This act of God reaching out begins right at the beginning with Genesis 1 and creation. God creates the whole world one period at a time, each period dedicated to a particular task: light and dark (Day 1); sky (Day 2); separating water and dry land and causing plants to grow on the dry land (Day 3); sun, moon, and stars (Day 4); all creatures (Day 5); and finally humanity, to whom God gives stewardship over all the rest of creation as well as the inestimable gift of being created in God's own image (Day 6).<sup>75</sup> It is the both the authority and affinity with God granted to humanity on Day 6 that sets people apart from everything else in God's creation. The rest of creation was made to display the intricate and powerful beauty and majesty of God. Humanity was created to be in relationship with that Creator. Daniel Block, First Testament scholar and professor emeritus of Old Testament at Wheaton College, points out, "The possibility of true worship by human

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<sup>74</sup> Zimmerman, 82.

<sup>75</sup> Genesis 1.

beings is rooted in the relationship that God established at creation. Genesis 1:1-2:4a shows that the arrival of human beings marked the climax of God's creative actions."<sup>76</sup> From the very beginning, God set humanity apart as separate – unique – and the main element of that separateness was based on our intended relationship with God. And how do we express, engage with, and revel in that relationship? Through worship.

This relationship – and the worship it both inspires and requires – forms the basis for story after story with the First Testament patriarchs throughout the book of Genesis: Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael,<sup>77</sup> Jacob and his twelve sons. Peterson describes these stories: "Words of covenant promise and demand lie at the heart of God's encounters with the [First Testament] patriarchs. Even before God engaged with them in this way, the Bible indicates that those who called upon [God] and sought to serve [God] did so within the context of [God's] continuing communication with them (e.g. Noah in Gn. 6-9)."<sup>78</sup> All of these stories are stories of a relationship in progress – a relationship that is far from perfect on the side of humanity but one in which God continues to engage over and over again. They are stories of the ways God shows up in the lives of God's people, guiding them, teaching them, loving them, forgiving them, and saving them. And they are stories in which we find God's people worshiping God "on the fly" – in the midst of their everyday lives and

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<sup>76</sup> Daniel I. Block. *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 56.

<sup>77</sup> God clearly establishes a relationship with both of Abraham's sons in Genesis. We follow the story of God's relationship with Isaac throughout Scripture. Yet when Sarah banishes Hagar and Ishmael from their camp after the birth of Isaac (Gen 21:8-10), God is with Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness saving them from certain death. God even sends a messenger to Hagar to reassure her that God is with her and her son (Gen 21:17-18). Though we stop hearing about God's relationship with Ishmael in Genesis, we are told "God remained with the boy; he grew up, lived in the desert, and became an expert archer. He lived in the Paran desert, and his mother found him an Egyptian wife" (Gen 21:20-21, CEB). We're also given a list of Ishmael's descendants and a brief account of his last days (Gen 25:12-18).

<sup>78</sup> Peterson, 25.

their incredible journeys: Isaac and Abraham in the wilderness at Mount Moriah (Gen 22:1-19); the shrine that Isaac erects at Beer-sheba to thank God for water (Gen 26:32-33); Jacob's worship and promise to God that bookend his journey away from and back to his family (Jacob's dream at Bethel – Gen 28:16-22 and Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel – Gen 32:22-32); and so on. Each of these encounters ring with authenticity, active presence, and connectionality between God and whichever particular patriarch happens to be worshiping in the moment because they are one-on-one interactions between God and that patriarch. You cannot connect one-on-one with another without being actively present, and Scripture tells us time and again that these acts were authentic, genuine worship on the part of their human participants (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.).

The intimate nature of this relationship and the worship which it inspires achieves a whole new level in the book of Exodus. Peterson points out, "The book of Exodus is especially important ... because it establishes a clear connection between Israel's pattern of approach to God and [God's] redemptive purposes for [God's] people."<sup>79</sup> Although there are examples of the various patriarchs in Genesis worshiping with their households (spouses, children, and grandchildren as well as servants and all their descendants), worship as a community is not established until the book of Exodus. It's a story that begins with another one-on-one encounter between God and Moses (Ex 3 – 4) – an encounter that is abounding in authenticity, active presence, and connectionality on the part of Moses as he lays before God all his concerns for the people of Israel as well as his concerns for his shortcomings as the leader God is calling him to be.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 27.

Once God (through Moses) has finally convinced Pharaoh to release the people of Israel from slavery and the people have made their way into the wilderness, we begin to see the establishment of corporate worship in both the positive and the negative. We find a multitude of examples of God both encouraging the people in the ways *to* worship and admonishing the people for their unacceptable worship. A turning point in this relationship can be found in God's words to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:5-6: "So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation. These are the words you should say to the Israelites."<sup>80</sup> In referencing this passage and its importance in the Scriptural treatment of worship, Peterson states, "Such terminology suggests that the engagement with God at Sinai was to inaugurate a total life pattern of service or worship for the nation. Their salvation had been in fulfilment of the covenant made with the patriarchs and now they were being told how to keep that covenant and live out the relationship it implied."<sup>81</sup> This drives home that point that relationship – the establishment of it, the maintenance of it, the honoring of it – is the Scriptural heart of worship: relationship with God, and in the context of faith community, relationship with one another based on that relationship with God.

The crucial nature of this relationship is emphasized further just one chapter later in Exodus when God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Peterson speaks to this as well:

Exodus 20 reinforces the idea that Israel's relationship with God was not to be at the level of the mysterious and irrational. They were to enjoy a personal and moral fellowship with the one who gave them "words" or commandments as an integral part of the whole experience of [God's] coming to them. These

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<sup>80</sup> Ex 19:5-6 (CEB).

<sup>81</sup> Peterson, 28.

state the fundamental principles of living in a relationship with the God who had graciously brought them “out of the land of slavery” and consecrated them to [Godself].<sup>82</sup>

This weaving together of relationship and promise, fellowship and consecration speak to just how inextricable word, action, and worship are to one another. We come together as a community to bring our authentic worship to God in hopes of restoring ourselves to right relationship with God again because we know and understand and acknowledge that it is only through God’s love and grace that we are made whole. Throughout much of the rest of the Pentateuch as well as the history books of the First Testament, we encounter lengthy descriptions and regulations for engaging in worship that is pleasing to God (e.g. the Holiness Code in Lev 17-26) as well as many stories of ways in which the actions of the people did not align with those regulations (e.g. Josh 24:14-26).

In the First Testament, we can also turn to the books of the prophets for insights into how and why we should worship in ways that practice authenticity, active presence, and connectionality. The prophets delivered God’s word to the people in times when their lives – and particularly their worship – were not aligning with what God had asked of them. In reference to the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke to the people left behind in Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile, Lomax maintains, “Through Jeremiah God challenges [God’s] people to grasp a radical new understanding of faith and living for God. ... Jeremiah insists that those in exile can and must find God out there in Babylon, just as sure as they claim they can find God at home in the Temple of Jerusalem.”<sup>83</sup> Lomax also continues by connecting that experience of seeking-worship with us today: “For us,

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<sup>82</sup> Peterson, 29.

<sup>83</sup> Lomax, 102.

gathering as the church is crucially important not least to equip us to live to the praise of God's glory in every bit of life. But God is not found exclusively in the church – [God] is out there. When we find [God] out there our role is to spot what [God] is doing and join in.”<sup>84</sup> Both the admonitions and encouragements of the prophets – from Isaiah to Malachi – put a deep and irrefutable emphasis on how crucial it is for worshipers to be authentic, actively present, and connected to God and to one another. The failings for which the prophets call the people out are times when their worship – their engaged and ongoing relationship with God – is disingenuous, passive, and detached.

Block points this out specifically regarding the writing of the prophet Malachi and the way he:

highlights the link between fear and acceptable worship by addressing a series of problems in the postexilic community, all rooted in the absence of the fear of YHWH. ... Remarkably, Malachi's prescription for this malaise is to return to the Torah of Moses and YHWH's revelation at Horeb (4:4). Through hearing the Torah “in the presence of YHWH,” the awesome effect of God's original self-revelation will be repeated (Deut. 14:23). Thus, reading the Torah underlies hearing, which underlies learning, which underlies fearing YHWH, which underlies obedience, which underlies life.<sup>85</sup>

Block makes the argument that the root of it all – right worship, right relationship with God and with one another – is the reading of Torah. For the vast majority of ancient Hebrew people to whom Malachi was speaking, this meant hearing the Torah read in the context of worship, so it was through that act of reconnecting in worship that the people would find fullness of life again.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Block, 10.



Sandwiched in between the history of the people of Israel and the books of the major and minor prophets is probably the greatest Scriptural testimony to worship that is authentic, actively present, and connectional: the psalms – the worship songs and prayers of the ancient people of Israel. Each psalm, be it individual or communal, speaks powerfully to the writer’s particular expression of worship in that moment. Each psalm, be it a psalm of praise, thanksgiving, lament, or even imprecation, is a wide-open intersection of the life of the psalmist and/or their community and God – a collision of worship life and life outside worship in spoken, and later written, word. Peterson emphasizes this point: “While some psalms tell of specific acts of God, others praise [God] more generally for what [God] is like or what [God] consistently does in nature or in human history. The praise of God belonged to the whole life of God’s people, just as it belonged to the whole life of the individual.”<sup>86</sup> Psalm 51 offers words of lament and repentance for personal sins and failings, imploring God to accept the psalmist’s worship once again: “Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise. You don’t want sacrifices. If I gave an entirely burned offering, you wouldn’t be pleased. A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God. You won’t despise a heart, God, that is broken and crushed.”<sup>87</sup> Psalm 100 is a psalm of communal praise and thanksgiving for God’s goodness and love. However, Block specifically lifts up Psalm 95 as “an impassioned plea to Israel, the community of faith, for true and authentic worship.”<sup>88</sup> Block goes on to add detail to this claim:

[Psalm 95] can be divided into three parts, each contributing directly to the development of this theme [of true and authentic worship for the community]:

I. The call to true and authentic worship (vv. 1-5)

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<sup>86</sup> Peterson, 38.

<sup>87</sup> Ps 51:15-17 (CEB).

<sup>88</sup> Block, 44.

- II. The nature of true and authentic worship (vv. 6-7b)
- III. The evidence of true and authentic worship (vv. 7c-11)<sup>89</sup>

It feels like one could flip through the book of Psalms at random and choose any particular psalm as a workable example because the psalms were intended to be worship born out of people's genuine experiences and were intended to be used as conduits to reconnect the people with God once again – individual people as well as the community as a whole.

The New Testament is also rich with examples of, calls for, and guidance on worship that is authentic, actively present, and connectional. The life and teachings of Jesus are, of course, the most prominent and prime example of this. As Lomax points out, “Jesus spoke to the crowds, yes, but he also asked many challenging and searching questions, held discussions, told parables, used everyday objects as visual aids, asked for feedback, drew in the sand and pointed to trees – all to make a point and to get his message across.”<sup>90</sup> Jesus' entire life and ministry was worship – worship that was authentic, both to his message and to the lives of the people with whom Jesus was engaging; worship that was actively present with people no matter who they were or where they were in their journey; worship with the sole focus of connecting people to God and to one another as children of God.

In John 4, as we read about Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well, we read about an interaction that is wholly authentic. In this passage, Scripture itself tells us of the tensions between Jews and Samaritans<sup>91</sup>, yet we find Jesus speaking into this woman's life, and, after the encounter with Jesus at the well, we find the woman gathering

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 44-45.

<sup>90</sup> Lomax, 82.

<sup>91</sup> Jn 4:9b: “Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other,” and Jn 4:19-20: “The woman said, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem’” (CEB).

her entire village together to immerse themselves in the words and presence of Jesus. In effect, they are there to worship, if not Jesus himself at that point, then *with* Jesus.

In Luke 8, we read about Jesus' unexpected encounter with the hemorrhagic woman – a woman who, Scripture tell us, has been bleeding for twelve years: “She had spent her entire livelihood on doctors, but no one could heal her.”<sup>92</sup> Yet as Jesus passes through the crowd near this woman, she reaches out and merely brushes the fringe of Jesus' prayer shawl, and in that single, fleeting touch, she is healed. Instead of simply letting the moment pass, Jesus stops everything and demands to know who touched him. The woman comes forward, confessing it was she who touched Jesus, and Jesus says to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”<sup>93</sup> In this passage, Jesus is actively present with the woman in the midst of her life – this moment in her life in which her faith has burst forth out in the streets. And in her worship, she is actively present with Jesus. She isn't merely waiting for the Messiah to come find her. She goes. She reaches out. She touches. She receives healing. It is a profound moment of active presence in a life of ministry.

In Matthew 18, we read about Jesus teaching the disciples about forgiveness and about how to treat others. Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”<sup>94</sup> In response, Jesus informs Peter that he is to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times, then illustrates this profusion of forgiveness with the parable of the unforgiving servant. When he finishes this parable, Jesus urges the disciples, “My heavenly Father will also do

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<sup>92</sup> Lk 8:43 (CEB).

<sup>93</sup> Lk 8:48 (CEB).

<sup>94</sup> Mt 18:21 (CEB).

the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart."<sup>95</sup> In this discussion on a topic as challenging and uncomfortable as forgiveness, Jesus is encouraging connectionality among his followers – those surrounding him and the moment and all who would come after. God has made it clear time and time again throughout all of Scripture that true worship must come from a place of honesty with God, with oneself, and with the community gathered for worship, and in this discourse with the disciples, Jesus is encouraging the development of that connectionality for life and worship together.

This idea of life and worship and life *as* worship is further developed in much of Paul's writings. Peterson calls attention to this: "When Christians become preoccupied with the notion of offering God acceptable worship in a congregational context and thus with the minutiae of church services, they need to be reminded that Paul's focus was on the service of everyday life."<sup>96</sup> One of the clearest examples of Paul calling for authenticity, active presence, and connectionality in worship and in Christian life together can be found in the passage that gets read and/or recited nearly every time we celebrate communion: Paul's discussion of the community meal/the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. While extolling one of the oldest and most holy ways to worship – celebrating the Lord's Supper together – Paul makes it clear that only authentic worship is acceptable: "Each individual should test himself or herself, and eat from the bread and drink from the cup in that way. Those who eat and drink without correctly understanding the body are eating and drinking their own judgment."<sup>97</sup> The whole passage is also aimed at encouraging both active presence and connectionality within the body for worship. Paul is calling out those in the

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<sup>95</sup> Mt 18:35 (CEB).

<sup>96</sup> Peterson, 187.

<sup>97</sup> 1 Cor 11:28-29 (CEB).

church who are causing divisions and leaving some people out of the worship around “the Lord’s meal.”<sup>98</sup> Paul wraps up this section with a simple, but profound, plea: “For these reasons, my brothers and sisters, when you get together to eat, wait for each other.”<sup>99</sup> This is a plea to remain present and connected with one another in this act of worship and in their lives together as siblings in Christ.

Schmit highlights another instance in Paul’s writing that emphasizes the integration of life into worship and worship into life. He notes, “One of the key motifs of missional church theology is that all of life is worship. It comes from Paul’s description of life in faith in Romans 12, where he appeals to believers to present their entire lives as ‘spiritual worship.’”<sup>100</sup> In this passage, Paul begins with that appeal that emphasizes the full integration of life and worship into one, then goes on to ways that the Christians in Rome can and should use their spiritual gifts in ways that are authentic: “If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching,”<sup>101</sup> and so on. Following this encouragement to authenticity, Paul calls on the Roman Christians to remain connected to one another and to God through their faith, even in the face of trials and trouble.<sup>102</sup> All of the actions and expressions of faith that Paul lauds throughout this section – “Hate evil, and hold onto what is good. Love each other as members of your family ... Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home ... If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with people”<sup>103</sup> – are ways that people can be actively present in

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<sup>98</sup> 1 Cor 11:20 (CEB).

<sup>99</sup> 1 Cor 11:33 (CEB).

<sup>100</sup> Schmit, 48.

<sup>101</sup> Rom 12:6b-7 (CEB).

<sup>102</sup> Rom 12:9-21 (CEB).

<sup>103</sup> Rom 12: 9b-10a, 13, 18 (CEB).

the practice of their faith – actively present in the ways their lives express worship and their worship reflects their lives.

However, it's not just Jesus and Paul that provide this testament to the life of worship within the pages of the New Testament. Peterson maintains, "Hebrews presents the most complete and fully integrated theology of worship in the New Testament."<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the entire book of Hebrews weaves together theological concepts such as the divine priesthood of Jesus Christ and eschatology with substantial but gentle directives on how to worship together as the Christian community. The author of Hebrews calls the community out for not being as actively present in their faith formation and their worship as they should have been: "You have been lazy and you haven't been listening. Although you should have been teachers by now, you need someone to teach you an introduction to the basics about God's message."<sup>105</sup> In this plea to rectify this laziness and passivity, the author encourages the people to a more engaged and more authentic expression of their life of faith and their worship: "We desperately want each of you to show the same effort to make your hope sure until the end. This is so you won't be lazy but follow the examples of the ones who inherit the promises through faith and patience."<sup>106</sup> All throughout the book, the author weaves together instruction about proper worship practices with prescriptions about authentic and faithful practice, presence that is active and engaged, and remaining connected to the community and to God through that life of worship and prayer.

Zimmerman eloquently wraps up this discussion of where and how we find worship within the pages of Scripture:

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<sup>104</sup> Peterson, 228.

<sup>105</sup> Heb 5:11-12a (CEB).

<sup>106</sup> Heb 6:11-12 (CEB).

God's divinely inspired word as recorded in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures has been an integral part of worship throughout the long history of the Judeo-Christian tradition. God's word has guided us in constructing our private and communal prayer and our rhythm of festivals and seasons ... God's word is the ground for Christian worship. There it is proclaimed, broken open, and prayed.<sup>107</sup>

Truly, the whole of Scripture speaks in one way or another to the ways in which we can and should worship God through our actions both within the confines of a defined worship time and space and outside those confines in our daily lives because that worshiping and that living *are* God's Grand Story of Faith.

### **Theological foundations**

The term "theology" can often be an intimidating one for many people. It's one of those "high and lofty" terms – something engaged in only by weighty and esoteric thinkers in ivory towers, not something done by the average person in the pew on Sunday morning. However, this seems to be an impression that is turning around ever so slowly. If we function with Earl's definition of theology – "Theology is how we reflect on who we are, whose we are, what a 'good life' entails. Theology is how we discern our responsibility as human agents within the purposes of God"<sup>108</sup> – then it becomes a much more approachable and engaging concept. In his book *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber fleshes this definition out further:

The point of presenting the theology of the ancient church is to show that *worship does this theology*. It sings, tells, and enacts God's story, not *my* story. The primary focus of worship then and now is not me, the worshiper, but God, who redeems the world ... God, through worship, works on me through [God's]

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<sup>107</sup> Zimmerman, 53.

<sup>108</sup> Earl, 10.

story to elicit praise on my lips and obedience in my living.  
When this happens, worship takes place.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, Webber's expanded definition opens our eyes to the fact that, whenever we gather to worship – to lift our praise and prayer to God, to think about and wrestle with God's word, to immerse ourselves in the connectionality of Christian community – we are, in fact, *doing* theology. Worship, then, can be viewed as theology embodied.

In his discussion of theology and worship, Immink draws particular attention to the idea of worship being the place where theology and everyday life overlap. He states,

The worship service has a pneumatological-anthropological structure which centers on the connection with actual life in the here and now. The Holy Spirit prepares the place where Christ may dwell in the life of people, in their social and relational networks. And thus, everyday life becomes part of the picture. Worshippers live with health and illness, with joyful experiences and threats of disaster, with love and violence, with life and death. The worship service offers the possibility of putting all these aspects of human life in the spotlight. They are addressed in our praise and in our humbling before God, in our complaints and in our victories – in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>110</sup>

When the whole of our life experiences – the good and the bad, the sure and the uncertain, the already-has-been and the not-yet – come into the worship space with us and we engage our entire selves in the worship of God, we subject all that we have been, all that we are, and all that we might be to the ministrations of the Holy Spirit. In and through the workings of the Holy Spirit, God and the Good News of Jesus Christ are at work in our words and our actions, which, in its very essence, *is* theology.

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<sup>109</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 97, 98.

<sup>110</sup> Immink, 59.



Immink breaks this idea down even further within the movements and liturgy of worship:

The performance of the church is a human activity, but it is executed in the awareness that grace and love do, ultimately, come from God. And, thereby, *in our worship we are touched by the sacred*. This means that worshippers are impacted by what God does during the service. It happens in this way: God is believed upon [God's] Word; worshippers experience comfort and encouragement; and faith, hope, and love come alive. As a result, the service has an *evocative* power. The human imagination is activated, and the mystery of God is revealed. God's holiness is actualized. The Holy Spirit inspires and activates the human self. There is, indeed, a *touch of the sacred*.<sup>111</sup>

Again, we can clearly recognize the imprints of authenticity, active presence, and connectionality. The whole experience as Immink describes it requires the worshiper's active presence. His claim that worship must be an act "executed in the awareness of grace and love" makes worship an act that cannot truly be achieved passively. One must engage with the whole of worship – the words and actions but also the intentions and stirrings, both individual and communal – in order for it to be true worship. The act of activating imagination is one that requires authenticity, and the whole experience is one that re-establishes again and again that connection between the worshipers and the God who called them there.

In his book *Worship As Theology: A Foretaste of Glory Divine*, Don Saliers digs deeper into the assertion that theology in and of itself is and must be a connective act:

At the same time we think about how we are to proclaim and to speak of God, we must remain open to speaking about the church and the whole cosmos, as it were, *with God*. While the divine self-disclosure is given to the church, Christian theology is the rule-formulating reflective activity that provides norms

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<sup>111</sup> Immink, 57-58.

and criteria for any faithful speech about God ... Theology unfolds the grammar of language about God in order to be truthful and intelligible about the church, humanity, and the whole created world – “heaven and earth.”<sup>112</sup>

If we go along with Saliers’ line of thought, theology is not just a single act in which we can engage individually – in a place, both physically and mentally, of isolation – but an act that requires a conversation both amongst ourselves and with God *about* God and God’s acts in and through humanity. And what is worship, but a conversation both among ourselves and with God about God’s acts in and through humanity?

To this working definition of worship and theology, Lomax adds another layer: context, specifically the context of a particular worshiping community. The first of these reasons, according to Lomax, has to do with Christ’s incarnation: “The incarnation is a particular way of making the divine visible ... The body of Christ will continue to make God visible when the life of Christian communities, including their worshipping life, is expressed through the cultures they inhabit.”<sup>113</sup> Each worshiping community is a reflection of the body on Christ within their particular setting – culturally, ethnically, linguistically, economically, educationally, etc. The prayers of a congregation in upstate New York, for example, will surely sound vastly different than the prayers of another congregation in downtown Austin, Texas. The work of God done by a congregation in inner city Los Angeles will look vastly different than the work of a God done by a congregation nestled deep in Appalachia. Still, God remains at work in *all* places in particular and powerful ways – ways that are suited to each and every circumstance in which God’s people find themselves.

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<sup>112</sup> Don Saliers. *Worship As Theology: A Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 72.

<sup>113</sup> Lomax, 14.

Lomax's second reason to consider context alongside theology has to do with the sacramental reality: "Because of the Holy Spirit's activity, at any time and in any place and through any person, the world and its inhabitants may become transparent, revealing their creator as lovingly present. As life's ordinary things are so charged with God's presence, then human experience, culture, and physical environment may be regarded as having the potential to be sacramental and reveal God."<sup>114</sup> The second reason is strongly related to Lomax's first reason. While his first reason – Christ's incarnation – has to do with how God is expressed and embodied in and through communities, this second reason narrows the scope down even further to the way God is expressed and embodied in and through the lives of individuals that make up the whole body of Christ. Andy Crouch addresses this idea in the foreword to Tish Harrison Warren's profound book *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*. In describing exactly why this book is so profound, Crouch asserts, "Tish dismantles that most stubborn of Christian heresies: the idea that there is any part of our lives that is secular, untouched by and disconnected from the real sacred work of worship and prayer ... It is not just that the secular is shot through with the sacred. Worship itself is made up of ordinary stuff."<sup>115</sup> When the whole of each of our individual lives is made up of different circumstances and rituals, struggles and triumphs, treasures and potholes, we're each going to find different things sacred. We're going to recognize God in different ways all around us, and we're going to bring all those different ways and experiences with us into worship. And God is in all of it.

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<sup>114</sup> Lomax, 14.

<sup>115</sup> Andy Crouch, "Foreword" in Tish Harrison Warren. *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 9, 10.

The third reason Lomax gives for considering context with theology is God's revelation: "Worship involves both bringing the real world into church and encountering God in the real world. If worship fails to connect with the context of those present then God's revelation in and through the worship will not make sense for that culture."<sup>116</sup> In this, Lomax is leaving space for God to work and speak in different ways to different groups of people and in different circumstances. It's also his way of emphasizing that worship must flow with the context in which that worship is being engaged. This point, above all others, demands authenticity in the worship, not just on the part of those coming to worship but especially on the part of those planning and leading the worship.

Lomax's final reason for ensuring that theology and context go hand-in-hand has to do with the church's catholicity: "Only when every group and individual is embraced in their particularity will Christian communities be truly church. So, the welcome of God expressed and responded to in worship includes a welcome of and a response to the cultures we inhabit."<sup>117</sup> Time and again throughout Scripture, especially throughout the ministry of Jesus Christ, worship is extended to those "on the outside" – sinners, foreigners, women, those who are ill and disabled, those whom society has relegated to the margins. Each culture has its "outsiders" who struggle to find a welcome within the confines of society, let alone within the confines of any worship space. Yet Lomax's point is clear: until *all* members of a context have a place – a place of welcome, not just of tolerance and relegation – within worship, that worship is incomplete. That worship is inauthentic.

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<sup>116</sup> Lomax, 15.

<sup>117</sup> Lomax, 16.

To undergird this point, Lomax lifts up the work of Stephen Bevans and his anthropological model of contextual theology: “The anthropological model calls for worship that inspires creativity and encourages worshipers to participate as producers. This is founded on the aim of enabling everyone to be involved, rather than the use of branded worship provided by the few for the many.”<sup>118</sup> To follow the theological thread of worship through this thought, if we are all created in the image of God, then each and every person has something God-breathed to contribute to the worship service.

One prominent idea flowing from the nature of the Trinity is the concept of personal space – the space in which the three persons act on behalf of and for each other in their differences. In this way, they endorse each other’s particularity and give particularity – they affirm one another in who they are. When this thinking is applied to our worship, it is demonstrated through creating space to be who we are – other and particular, unique and distinct.<sup>119</sup>

Worship that holds sacred space for the voices and experiences, the prayers and praises, the ponderings and doubts, and any other contributions of each and every individual is a worship that is truly awash in the presence of the Triune God.

## **Historical foundations**

Regarding the historical foundations of worship, we find both the presence of culturally-contextual worship and its opposite – worship that is formulaic and standardized with a prevailing culture in mind. In his *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, James White asserts:

Christianity spread to all the cultures of western Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa. Local ways of expressing

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>119</sup> Lomax, 18.

oneself, customs of celebrating events (particularly rites of passage), fondly remembering local heroes of the faith (martyrs and saints), local agricultural seasons, and familiar local traditions, all give regional color to Christian worship as it developed. While documenting an essential unity, we must also acknowledge these local distinctions as an important ingredient in the history of Christian worship.<sup>120</sup>

Alongside that recognition, I think it's critical in this day and age to also acknowledge that many, many times throughout history, Christian worship as formulated for white Europeans was forced upon other diverse cultures around the world in ways that were detrimental and even destructive to the indigenous practices and beliefs of those cultures, even to the point of violence and abuse.<sup>121</sup> The overarching history of Christianity and of expanding Christian worship throughout the world is a complex and labored one.

The history of Christian worship itself stretches all the way back to the early church in Acts. Following the bestowing of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost, Acts tells us:

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> White, 44.

<sup>121</sup> There have been a wide array of articles, books, blogs, podcasts, etc. that have come out about this topic, especially within the last five to ten years: Indian Boarding Schools in both the United States and Canada; the United States' *Doctrine of Discovery*; the African slave trade and the actions of slave owners; the conquistadors who burned, raped, and pillaged their way through Central and South America; South African apartheid, etc.

<sup>122</sup> Acts 2:42-47 (CEB).

Following this description, we can say that for the early church, their life together and their worship truly flowed together as one, embodying authenticity, active presence, and connectionality. And it's a model that we see both emulated and extolled throughout the rest of the New Testament.

As Christianity continued to grow and spread throughout the next few centuries, the Church experienced times of both peace and persecution. In *Ancient-Future Worship*, Webber describes this time:

The earliest noncanonical description of worship appears in Justin Martyr's work *The First Apology*. Christians had been accused and actually persecuted because of a rumor that when they met in worship they sacrificed an infant and drank its blood and ate its flesh. The *Apology* was written to the emperor to explain what Christians believe and how they worship and live. It was written in AD 150 and stands today as one of the most important documents of the early church because of the insight it provides on early Christian faith and practice.<sup>123</sup>

Webber also details, in his book *Worship Old and New*, a service of worship from nearly 100 years after the one described by Justin in *The First Apology*. In this later worship, Webber notes "no essential change in the structure of Word or sacrament, in the Christ-centered nature of worship, or in the enactment"<sup>124</sup> Already, a clear order of worship had fallen into place.

White also notes this formalizing of worship: "By the mid-fourth century, Sarapion, bishop of Thmuis in Egypt, was using a whole *euchologion* or collection of prayers which somehow has survived. We see a definite shift from a high degree of pastoral discretion in ordering worship and articulating prayer to formal fixity in invariable formulas and

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<sup>123</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship*, 92.

<sup>124</sup> Robert E. Webber. *Worship Old and New*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 96.

structures.”<sup>125</sup> Some of this fixity came into play through the various ecumenical councils that peppered the second- through sixth-centuries – councils that solidified acceptable church doctrine and, in doing so, invariably influenced and even solidified various worship practices as well. Some of the fixity also came into play as the Christian church continued to grow and the hierarchy was established: local clergy, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and all the way up to the pope.

Despite this apparent fixity in the liturgy, there are still historical examples of space being made within worship for authentic cultural context and connectionality. Continuing with his history of worship, White cites a letter sent by Pope Gregory I to Augustine of Canterbury in 596 C.E. In this letter, Pope Gregory directs Augustine in setting and formalizing worship practices:

“It seems to me that you should carefully select for the English Church, which is still new to the faith and developing as a distinct community, whatever can best please Almighty God, whether you discover it in the Roman Church, or among the Gauls, or anywhere else. For customs are not to be revered for their place of origin; rather those places are to be respected for the good customs they produce. From each individual church, therefore, choose whatever is holy, whatever is awe-inspiring, whatever is right; then arrange what you have collected as if in a little bouquet according to the English disposition and thus establish them as custom.”<sup>126</sup>

I would argue that it shows great insight on Pope Gregory I’s part to encourage Augustine to establish meaningful worship for the churches of England based on local practices as opposed to prescribed formulas.

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<sup>125</sup> White, 43.

<sup>126</sup> White, 44.



Throughout the Middle Ages, worship became a much more fixed and, consequently, a much more mystical experience. One main element of this shift had to do with language. As Webber points out in *Worship Old and New*, “Although the church spread into remote areas, far from Rome, it retained Latin as the language of the Mass. This surrounded the Mass and the clergy with an aura of mystery since most of the people did not understand what was happening.”<sup>127</sup> It seems as though the contextual-worship pendulum, which swung in the direction of the culture in which the worship was situated with Pope Gregory I’s letter to Augustine in England, had swung back in the direction of prescribed worship for all. As Webber also notes, the continued development and building up of church hierarchy contributed to this as well: “Furthermore, the church distanced itself from the people even more as it increasingly viewed itself as a hierarchical institution rather than a body. The church dispensed salvation. The liturgy, especially the Eucharist, became the means of receiving this salvation.”<sup>128</sup> The higher up on the pedestal the church hierarchy placed themselves, the further away from the people they grew, and the further away from the people they grew, the less authentic, actively present, and connectional the worship became.

Enter the Protestant Reformation, a theological and liturgical reaction to not only the corruption that was rampant in the church hierarchy by the 1500s but also this extreme distancing of the words and actions of worship from those for whom the worship was provided. Zimmerman points out, “Liturgy became exclusively and narrowly understood as the performance of rituals. This is one part of the climate during the Reformation that the

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<sup>127</sup> Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 103.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

early Reformers sought to redress.”<sup>129</sup> Each of the different Reformers – from Martin Luther to William Tyndale, from Ulrich Zwingli to John Calvin to John Knox – found things within the established liturgy and worship practices with which they disagreed. One issue that divided them all was the theological understanding of what and how worshipers experienced the presence of God in Jesus Christ in the Lord’s Supper. However, they all agreed that worship should be moved from the language of Rome – Latin – to the language of the people and that, in the context of the worship service itself, the word of God was to be central.<sup>130</sup>

The free church movement, born out of the Reformation, brought about many of the different branches of Protestantism that we recognize today. The “antiliturgical” movement, which originated with the Puritans and influenced the early Baptists, Congregationalists, and Quakers, “rejected the use of written prayers, insisting that prayer should be from the heart, directed by the Spirit of God.”<sup>131</sup> The pedagogical movement, which also originated with the Puritans and influenced Presbyterians and Congregationalists,

developed a commentary approach to the reading of Scripture that opposed what they called “dumb reading.” The reader, usually the ministry or one trained in the Scripture, always made comments on the meaning and interpretation of the text as it was being read. After the “commentary reading,” people from the congregation were encouraged to make prophetic statements or ask questions. The reading was followed by a sermon, which ran for two or three hours with a pause in the middle to allow the people to stretch.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Zimmerman, 20.

<sup>130</sup> Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 111.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

Evangelistic worship also grew out of the free worship movement, a form of worship that included Pietism, Moravianism, Methodist, the Wesleyan Church, and the Revivalism and Second Awakening that swept through America at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>133</sup> These evangelistic worship traditions were marked by an emphasis on personal experience. From these traditions grew many of the charismatic Christian traditions and denominations we recognize today: Pentecostalism, Evangelical Free, and the Church of the Nazarene.<sup>134</sup> It seems that as worship has progressed throughout the centuries, everyone is convinced they have the “right” idea – the right formula, the right prayers, the right emphasis, the right understanding of the sacraments, and so on. And yet each time the church veers in one direction or another and new forms of worship spring up, they often share a desire for one thing: worship that is authentic and engaging that connects them to God and one another.

With these foundations supporting my understanding and my ponderings about worship and reconnection and renewal, I began to contemplate changes I could make to our worship service that would remain faithful to my Scriptural, theological, and historical understandings of what worship is while also providing meaningful change. I found conviction in the words of David Peterson: “Worship theology expresses the dimensions of a life orientation or total relationship with the true and living God ... Contemporary Christians obscure the breadth and depth of the Bible’s teaching on this subject when they persist in using the word ‘worship’ in the usual, limited fashion, applying it mainly to what goes on in Sunday services.”<sup>135</sup> It was exactly this obscuring – this limiting – that I wanted to

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>134</sup> Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 122.

<sup>135</sup> Peterson, 18.

circumvent. But how, in the midst of worship and interacting with God's holy Word, could we become wholly engaged as individuals and as a congregation again?

## **“HOLY WORD, WHOLLY ENGAGED” – THE PRACTICES**

In preparation for this project and these worship changes, I spent a lot of time praying and thinking about ways that I could incorporate practices that would help people truly engage with God and one another again, because when you’re truly engaging with someone – when you’re listening to and interacting with one another – you cannot help but connect with them, even if only for a limited amount of time. The same principle applies to engaging with the Word of God. If you’re simply reading your way through the Bible, you’ll engage with God on one level, but if you’re pausing between readings and thinking about them, wrestling with them, wondering about them, and contemplating how those readings might form and inform your own life, you’re engaging with God in a wholly different way. As Castleman points out, “In order to worship ‘in Spirit and truth,’ we must follow the Spirit into the Word of God that tells us the truth about why we do what we do the way we do it. This liturgy, this rhythm, this repetition of a holy habit shapes us as God’s people for the whole of life.”<sup>136</sup> Because I had heard from multiple congregation members that they felt both disconnected from God and from one another – that they had either fallen away from previous habits or that they felt a need to establish new holy habits in order to reconnect – I wanted to incorporate both forms of connection into worship.

In terms of seeking out that connection, Schmit points out, “There are three directions of communication in worship. God speaks to God’s people. People speak to God. People speak to people. The leader’s role is to know which direction of speech is operating at given points in worship and to allow that communication to succeed.”<sup>137</sup> We had plenty of

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<sup>136</sup> Castleman, 92.

<sup>137</sup> Schmit, 118.

places throughout worship for God to talk to God's people and plenty of places for the people to talk to God, but we were missing that third direction that Schmit highlights: people speaking to people. And yet long before the stories and sacred words of our faith were written down, they were shared person-to-person. In the Incarnation, God literally adorned that Word with flesh and bone, blood and breath in Jesus Christ. As Peterson states,

Thus, the New Testament teaches that God's dwelling on earth is no special building or sanctuary within a building: it is the people of God themselves. We are the temple of the Lord ... The people of God continue to be the Spirit-filled community when they disperse and go about their daily affairs, but their identity as the "temple of the Lord" finds particular expression when they gather together in Jesus' name, to experience his presence and power in their midst.<sup>138</sup>

God is with us in the sanctuary, yes. But God is also with us in our cars on our daily commutes, at the dinner table, as we shop for our groceries, and when we brush our teeth at night. When we gather together in Jesus' name, we remind each other of the awesome nature of that presence, but we also bring all the flashes of God and nudgings of the Holy Spirit from our daily affairs into that gathered time because all of it is holy.

This brings us back to Saliers' essential elements of worship: authenticity, active presence, and connectionality. I wanted to bring more of these elements into our worship by incorporating more of everyone's stories and faith experiences into the liturgy itself. For so long – certainly during the COVID-19 pandemic but even before it – there seemed to be a disconnect between people's "regular lives" and their hour in church on Sunday morning. There was what happened inside the sanctuary walls and what happened outside them,

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<sup>138</sup> Peterson, 201, 202.

and (almost) never the twain shall meet. To truly incorporate that authenticity, active presence, and connectionality into our worship, I wanted to introduce practices that would draw people's "out there" life experiences into the time and space dedicated to worship, therefore reminding people that God is a part of all of their lives, not just their 10:00-11:00-Sunday-morning lives, practices that would give us the chance to speak to one another's lives of the presence and love and movement of God in one another's lives. Kara Root points out, "It is here that we minister to each other. Giving and receiving love and care, we live out the image of God. God puts us in communion with God and each other, to rediscover our true belonging, the *hesed* that is at the core of it all – to return to the love and belongingness we most deeply long for and that we recognize in our deepest self when we experience it."<sup>139</sup> As a faith community, we needed that time and that chance to minister to one another not just with the caffeine- and sugar-fueled chaos of fellowship time but within the sacred space of worship.

This integrating of people's lives into the time and space of worship also adds validity and theological weight to their own testimonies. Too often throughout my years of ministry, I have heard from people that they don't know how to talk to other people about their faith. I like to remind them that many of the "big wigs" that God called throughout the Bible felt the same way: Moses, Elijah, even Peter and Paul. But just as God worked through those stories, God works through each and every one of our stories, too. And who better to tell that story than ... you? As Zimmerman proclaims:

Yes, we faith-filled people are all truly theologians. We desire to talk about God. We hunger to understand God better and grow in our relationship with God. Various kinds of encounters with God (for example, at worship, while on a leisurely stroll, when

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<sup>139</sup> Root, 229.

in need) tend to well up in us, and the deeper the encounter, the deeper is the need to share the experience with others. That sharing is an important kind of theology. As we learn to speak about God, we come to know God better, desire God more, live God's will more faithfully.<sup>140</sup>

Indeed, isn't that another way to define the ultimate purpose of worship: "to know God better, desire God more, and live God's will more fully"?

Finally, what about this idea of renewal? In their book *Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregation*, Daniel P. Smith, a minister and district superintendent in the United Methodist Church and a ministry coach/consultant, and Mary K. Sellon, also a United Methodist minister and ministry coach, give a powerful definition of congregational renewal: "When we talk about congregational renewal, we mean a renewal of people's ability to notice and experience God in their midst, a renewal of the congregation's desire to partner with God in achieving God's aims for the world."<sup>141</sup> Too often, we think of congregational renewal in terms of numbers. Yet much of the more recent research and literature concerning congregational renewal speaks not of statistical renewal but spiritual renewal, the general consensus being that congregations who experience a deepening of their spiritual lives also end up experiencing renewal.

N. Graham Standish, a Presbyterian pastor and the Executive Director of the Samaritan Counseling, Guidance, Consulting, ties this overarching idea of congregational spiritual renewal to worship in his book *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power*: "Becoming a blessed church is not a matter of avoiding functionality. It is a matter of recognizing when we have slipped into functionality

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<sup>140</sup> Zimmerman, 1.

<sup>141</sup> Daniel P. Smith and Mary K. Sellon. *Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregation* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 7.



and then making choices to recapture a sense of spiritual vitality ... We look at our worship and ask, 'Has our worship become routine, or does it have a sense of spiritual vibrancy at its core?'"<sup>142</sup> If there is spiritual vibrancy in our worship as opposed to pure functionality, the hope is that that vibrancy will bring about renewal in the individuals gathered as the congregation and that, as that spiritual renewal grows within those individuals, it will grow within the congregation as a whole as well.

With those goals in mind, and with the objective of incorporating more authenticity, active presence, and connectionality into our worship services with other people's voices and stories, I designed three new worship practices: Exploring the Word Together – a short time of guided contemplation and discussion following the sermon; Claiming Our Faith Identity – a call-and-response reading that helped us both speak and hear our identity and our calling as the Church together; and Glimpses of God – a short testimony time at the beginning of the service to share where we've seen and experienced God lately. Immink states, "Few worshippers are totally involved from beginning to end. Worship is a cumulative event. By weekly attendance, people accumulate experiences, building up a faith disposition and acquiring new insights along the way."<sup>143</sup> This line of thinking brings up two important aspects of my project. First, if we view worship as a cumulative event that accumulates people's experiences from one week to the next, then it makes sense to involve other voices – different voices – each and every week, hence the Exploring the Word Together and Glimpses of God practices.

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<sup>142</sup> N. Graham Standish. *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Landham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2016), 36, 37.

<sup>143</sup> Immink, 60.

Immink's line of thinking also helped shape the placement of these new worship practices throughout the service. The Glimpses of God time is at the beginning of the service, Exploring the Word Together is in the middle, and Claiming Our Faith Identity is at the end. That way, people encountered these practices in different times and different phases of their attention and their engagement throughout the whole service instead of focusing all the attention on just one particular movement.

### **Practice 1: "Exploring the Word Together"**

With Exploring the Word Together, I wanted to give people a chance to really dig deeper into their faith when the day's Scripture reading and the sermon were fresh in their ears and on their minds. Even that short interlude of worship between the end of the sermon and the end of the service was usually enough to shift people from "spiritual" mode to "chatty" mode after worship. Lots of conversation would buzz during the fellowship time after worship, but it almost never included a continuation of whatever the day's worship theme was. Exploring the Word Together is meant to give people that opening – that directed, dedicated time to really think about and talk about their faith. As someone who thoroughly dislikes when I'm at a workshop or a conference and I'm forced to "turn and share with the people next to you," I wanted to be sure the Exploring the Word Together question was a time people could choose to engage individually *or* in groups. Smith describes discipleship as "more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing,"<sup>144</sup> and it is exactly that hungering and thirsting – that seeking and questioning and processing – that the Exploring the Word Together practice addresses. Lomax puts this

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<sup>144</sup> Smith, 2.

another way: “Engaging with and not simply hearing scripture is important to worship that resources discipleship. Enabling worshippers to road-test, ask questions of and reflect imaginatively on scripture is key.”<sup>145</sup> Think about it. When was the last time you felt like any aspect of a worship service even *encouraged* you to “road-test, ask questions of and reflect imaginatively on scripture,” let alone held space for such discipleship-building exercises within the worship service itself? And yet that is the whole goal of the Exploring the Word Together practice.

Additionally, as pastors, we always *hope* that what we’ve said on Sunday morning somehow stays with our parishioners and filters through the rest of their week. The Exploring the Word Together practice is also designed to serve as that filter – to pose a question that people can continue to wrestle with and ponder over and even discuss with others throughout the week. Zimmerman calls out this need:

Connecting worship and life and mission means that our celebrations – especially our gathering for the Sunday service – can no longer simply be “events” that we go to and leave as we please and that have little to do with our everyday living ... For too many people, worship is the only time of the week that they consciously turn their attention to God. Connecting worship, life, and mission means that we begin to see every moment of every day as turned to God, that God is truly the center of our lives, that God’s will is our will, that Jesus’ mission is our mission.<sup>146</sup>

My hope and my goal was for the question to weave its way into people’s conversations and lives, bringing their spiritual selves – their “Sunday morning selves” – and the rest of their lives together.

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<sup>145</sup> Lomax, 81.

<sup>146</sup> Zimmerman, 145.

In his discussion of the purpose of Scripture and the sermon in worship in his book *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*, Robert Webber states, “Scripture and sermon are historical recitations of how the God who acted in history acts now in our lives. People need to experience the immediacy of the Word of God. They need to know that the God who acted in history can be active now, touching their lives, healing their hurts, and giving them a vision for the future.”<sup>147</sup> The Exploring the Word Together question and contemplation/discussion time is aimed at bringing some of that immediacy into the worship service – giving people a chance to think about and/or discuss those ways that God is active now, “touching their lives, healing their hurts, and giving them a vision for the future.”

Lomax is exceptionally clear – even blunt – about the importance of interaction in worship: “We convince ourselves that our worship events build community, but do they really? Just because we stand or sit in rows, sing or speak together in the same place at the same time, does that build community? ... After all, genuine community requires authentic relationships which in turn require interaction, conversation, and eye contact.”<sup>148</sup> This speaks directly to authenticity, active presence, and connectionality in worship. There is a degree of authenticity that can only be achieved when people are given the chance to reflect on and engage with the Scripture and sermon theme for the day in “real time” – in the context of worship and in the space and time of worship. In that act of engagement, people are more actively present in worship than when they are simply sitting and listening to whatever is being read, said, or sung. Even for those who choose to sit and think about the

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<sup>147</sup> Robert E. Webber. *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 45.

<sup>148</sup> Lomax, 84.

Exploring the Word Together question on their own instead of engaging in discussion with those around them, that contemplation is a form of active presence. And Zimmerman speaks to the connectionality aspect of this practice: “‘Active’ participation challenges us to get involved, to be engaged, to *do* liturgy, to *work*. And this is true even if we do not feel like it, if we think we cannot sing, if we believe we have nothing really to contribute to the whole worship experience. Members of the Body of Christ affect each other, and this is very good.”<sup>149</sup> Even just the act of being together in the midst of this practice of Exploring the Word Together creates connectionality, both among congregation members and between individuals and God. Active participation requires engagement, and engagement results in connection.

## **Practice 2: “Claiming Our Faith Identity”**

The inspiration for the “Claiming Our Faith Identity” practice came from my friend and mentor in ministry, Rev. Paul Bauch of Peach United Church of Christ in Rochester, Minnesota. Paul and I have done a few pulpit swaps over the past eleven years, and when I’m on vacation, I tend to like to spend a Sunday morning worshipping with the Peace congregation. At the end of their worship service, they engage in a responsive reading that also ends with the words: “This service has ended. / Now our service can begin.” Borrowing that last line (with permission), I wrote a responsive reading that we could use at the end of our service that was designed to get people excited about taking their faith out into the world, to remind them of whom we are and why we choose to do this crazy faith thing together, and reconnect them with the congregation’s mission statement: *The Presbyterian*

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<sup>149</sup> Zimmerman, 107.

*Church of Oronoco is a community of believers whose mission is to SHARE God's Word, SHOW God's Love, SERVE God's World, and STRIVE for God's Peace.* I've always thought it was a mission statement that really spoke to who this congregation is at its very core but also one that we weren't utilizing enough, and this felt like a great place to incorporate it.

I also wanted to incorporate the congregation's mission statement because mission is such a crucial part of who this congregation is. Their motto is "We are a small church with a big mission." It's the "tagline" that everyone remembers. It's the way I've heard congregation members introduce us to visitors. It's even up on the wall in the fellowship room in the form of a large custom vinyl wall decal. This is a congregation that takes a special mission offering each month to support a missionary family through the Presbyterian Mission Agency. This is a congregation that holds multiple fundraisers every year and uses the money from all but one of those fundraisers for mission out in the community and the world. And yet as crucial as mission is to their identity, it wasn't really a part of worship. Schmit speaks to the importance of integrating mission and worship, especially in the context of the sending section:

The sending forth of gathered worshipers is the pivotal moment when worship turn from adoration to action ... The congregation has been prepared (or centered, to use the missional language) for the ardent work of Christian discipleship that takes place between one Sunday and another ... They are sent forth in the enactment of God's mission in the local community and the world (*worship as action*) ... In the sending, worship redirects its focus from the liturgy of the assembly to become the living liturgy of discipleship.<sup>150</sup>

It is this idea of "the living liturgy of discipleship" that was the goal of this Claiming Our Faith Identity Practice – this idea of claiming out loud *together* that we are the Church and,

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<sup>150</sup> Schmit, 155.

for us, this is what it means to do and be the Church together. It includes language that defines who we are as the church – “God’s beloved children today, tomorrow, and always.” It also includes declarations about how and why we worship as well as the ways that God binds us together in worship as community. Finally, it ends with a charge to and for one another: “One: And now as the church, God calls us out / ALL: To do and be God’s extravagant love in the world. / One: This service has ended. / ALL: Now our service can begin.”

As I was writing this responsive reading, I wanted to ensure that the words, which we would be repeating every Sunday, were words that spoke to an open and inclusive theology of worship and Christian community as well as the strong relational aspect that makes the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco the congregation that it is. Zimmerman gets at the heart of this intersection:

We are expressing here something far deeper than being sent from worship and doing good in our daily living. We are asserting that our Christian identity is so “at hand” for us that our essential mission is to live with the utter integrity of people whose being and doing, creedal expression and moral behavior, gospel values and kenotic self-giving choices meld into one act of worshipful living. Living this way – as Christ – is to *be* the mission. We announce by who we are and what we do – our words and actions – the Good News of salvation.<sup>151</sup>

This was exactly the goal of this particular practice – to provide words that combine my voice and the congregation’s voices in a way that declared who we are and whose we are before we walk out the door, especially in terms of our mission as Christians and as the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco.

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<sup>151</sup> Zimmerman, 148.

The other two worship practices that are part of this project – the Exploring the Word Together and the Glimpses of God – are practices intended to bring people’s “outside lives” into the sanctuary – to bring their everyday and their Sunday together in one sacred space. While that integration is a substantial part of the overarching goal of bringing those two spheres of people’s lives together, it’s not the only part. Bringing the outside in has to be balanced by bringing the inside out – taking the hope and love of God, the Good News of the gospel in which we’ve immersed ourselves on Sunday morning *out* into the rest of the world. As Castleman says, “The end result of a service of worship, like the ending of a sermon, is focused on answering one question: So what? The question is meant to focus the congregation on how to respond to the God who has called them to worship. This concern brings the worshiper full circle.”<sup>152</sup> That “full circle” moment was what I was aiming to provide just before people headed out the door.

Lomax wraps up the purpose and theology behind this practice well:

‘Sending’ goes on and on – missional liturgy has no end. After all, the ‘sending’ isn’t simply the conclusion of the service, a moment in time when we acknowledge that we now leave the confines of the church. It is all that follows – conversations, projects, school work, appointments, disagreements, tensions, joys and sorrows – and how our faith enables us to engage with all these. It is also the constant search for God out there. But, crucially, sending is also about the relationships we forge and how our own faith inspires us to nurture the faith of others. We don’t simply grow as disciples in the holy space where we gather – we grow everywhere and anywhere, and missional worship sends us and equips us.<sup>153</sup>

In this summary, we find a testament to all of the essential elements of worship that Saliers talks about. We find the authenticity that is so crucial for genuine, faith-filled worship in the

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<sup>152</sup> Castleman, 116.

<sup>153</sup> Lomax, 102.



idea that worship includes *all* parts of our lives – the things that happen in the sanctuary and, as Lomax says, “all that follows.” We find the active presence in that idea that our continued growing as disciples is a constant action – something that “goes on and on,” something that happens in all the parts of our worship and all the parts of our lives. And we find the connectionality woven throughout. We find it in the way God connects us to each other through worship in discipleship and in those “relationships we forge.” We find it in Lomax’s assertion that the faith into which we continue to grow also inspires others to grow in their faith, thus connecting us not only to those in the worship space but also those we encounter “everywhere and anywhere.”

### **Practice 3: “Glimpses of God”**

The “Glimpses of God” practice was designed to be the other side of that testimony coin during worship. If the Exploring the Word Together question has people thinking and talking more about God and their faith outside the walls of the church building and the confines of 10:00 a.m. Sunday morning, then the Glimpses of God practice is intended to be the place where they can share the fruits of that spiritual labor. Glimpses of God is basically a weekly testimony time. For years, I’ve noticed that no matter what words I wrote or chose for the traditional responsively read call to worship – no matter how exquisite the language or how many exclamation points I included – it was inevitably read with little emotion and even less engagement. To put it bluntly, as a congregation, we were simply going through the motions because we’d always done it that way before. People saw bolded words in the bulletin, and they read them out loud because that’s what you’re supposed to do. And yet the call to worship is supposed to be a time of joy and gratefulness and even excitement as

we remind each other why we are gathering to worship. Or, as Zimmerman so bucolically puts it, “Liturgy is not a spectator sport! We cannot be couch potatoes during liturgy. Every person who gathers to worship is to be actively involved in celebrating; the whole body celebrates.”<sup>154</sup> The call to worship as we had been practicing it had become a spectator sport *at best*. People were barely engaged. Physically, they may not have been sitting, but their souls were in couch potato mode. For that reason, this was the first practice that I knew needed to change.

The *Book of Common Worship* defines the call to worship as a time that “expresses God’s invitation to gather as Christ’s body in this place. A greeting in the name of Jesus Christ or the triune God establishes the context for worship as an encounter with the Holy One who calls all things into being.”<sup>155</sup> Webber describes it another way: “the Entrance ‘makes us ready to hear the Word of the Lord.’ For this reason, it should last long enough to accomplish its task but be short enough that we are not exhausted when we arrive at the hearing of the Word ... The point is that an Entrance should bring us joyfully into the presence of God and ready us to hear [God] speak.”<sup>156</sup> With that in mind, I thought, “What better way to invite each other into this worship gathering than with the stories of the God-sightings in our actual lives?”

In her description of the purpose of the gathering section of worship, Cherry says, “The spirit of the gathering is typically one of praise, joy, and celebration for who God is and what God has done. We rejoice because God is a God of complete love and mercy who seeks

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<sup>154</sup> Zimmerman, 103.

<sup>155</sup> *Book of Common Worship*, 4.

<sup>156</sup> Webber, *Blended Worship*, 44.

fellowship with all people made in God's image."<sup>157</sup> In this same section in which Cherry discusses the theological and practical implications of gathering, she also includes a list of some two dozen potential liturgical practices that *could* be a part of gathering including "testimonies of praise and God's faithfulness (prepared or spontaneous witness to God's goodness by members of the congregation)."<sup>158</sup> So while it's true that testimony hasn't been a traditional part of mainline protestant worship practices for some time, it is by no means forbidden or unprecedented. Standish frames this in terms of his overarching idea of a "blessed church": "Becoming a blessed church means becoming awake, aware, and alive to Christ's presence in our midst, giving us guidance, life, and love ... In a blessed church the focus moves from maintaining right practices or beliefs to leading people to a communion with God. What matters most is allowing the life of Christ to flow through the church."<sup>159</sup> That is what this Glimpses of God practice is intended to be – a conduit through which the love and work of God in Christ Jesus can move through people's life experiences into the worship of the church.

In truth, this was the practice that I was most worried about, which is why it was the third and final practice that I introduced. There is definitely something vulnerable and broken-open about sharing your own boots-on-the-ground experiences of God in front of a bunch of other people, but there's also something incredibly powerful and moving about it.

Peterson speaks to the power of this:

[Christians] meet together to benefit from the relationships and ministries we can share with one another. Yet, in drawing on the resources which Christ himself provides through other believers for the growth and development of his body, we are

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<sup>157</sup> Cherry, 56.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>159</sup> Standish, 85, 86.

being strengthened in our relationship with him. The important concept of interacting with one another is not to be divorced from the notion that we come together to engage with God.<sup>160</sup>

This is where my history with this congregation was the most crucial. I had to trust that at least some of them would be willing to get up and share a personal story about their faith each and every Sunday. They had to trust both me and one another enough to do that sharing. And I did. And they did.

This time of open sharing that has become a part of our worship service over the past year provides a deeply meaningful place for authenticity, active presence, and connectionality. Schmit frames this idea of connection and gathering beautifully:

Each activity that takes place inside the Lord's Day assembly is interwoven with the life outside the church doors. Gathering assumes that we have not been together before we begin. We are outside, in the world, coming together into churches and other places of worship as a concentrated local configuration of the body of Christ. Gathering draws us spatially from the world in which we engage in Christian action. But it does not disconnect us from the world. It connects the world to worship through us.<sup>161</sup>

Truly, there is nothing more authentic than the stories of people's lives when shared in their own words and their own voices. Those who are doing the sharing are certainly bringing in the element of active participation, but so are those who are listening. Being the one "up front," I have the opportunity to watch the congregation as individuals share their Glimpses of God stories, and even for people who never go up and share, they're engaged. They're listening. They're reacting. I can see on their faces that the stories being shared are connecting with elements in their own lives as they smile or tear up or lean over and

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<sup>160</sup> Peterson, 208-209.

<sup>161</sup> Schmit, 44.

whisper something to their neighbors. And certainly, in this Glimpses of God practice, we find connectionality. People are connecting genuine stories of faith with God, both in the ways God is moving in the lives and hearts of those doing the sharing but also the ways those stories are connecting the listeners with God as well. And people are connecting with one another through the openness and genuineness of those stories.

## PROJECT

### The Purpose

In embarking on this worship practices project, the first thing I had to consider was my context – my congregation. Thankfully, this is a congregation with which I have a long and blessed relationship. When this project began, I'd been serving the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco for almost ten years. We have been through a lot of ups and downs together, and over those ten years, there was a lot of trust built up on both sides. As Schmit points out, "Attempts at renewal in Christian church are a commendable practice ... yet renewal must be done with an awareness of each congregations core identity lest changes in worship and congregational life have unintended negative consequences."<sup>162</sup> After a decade getting to know this congregation, I felt like I had a thorough enough understanding of their core identity, and they had a thorough enough understanding of my core identity as a pastor. "Messing with worship" (my own description, not my congregation's) is one of my favorite things to do in ministry. I've always loved experimenting with different worship practices in hopes of guiding people to a new understanding, a new perspective, a new way to engage with God and their faith. Traditionally, I've done this during various seasons of the church year, mostly Advent, Lent, and over the summer. Many times, those past worship experiments proved fruitful. During COVID, as we all worshiped from home for fifteen months, they proved essential! And sometimes, those past worship experiments flopped. When they did, my congregation was very good at letting me know that what we had tried together didn't really work, but they looked forward to whatever came next.

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<sup>162</sup> Schmit, 128.

As previously discussed, the necessary separation and disconnectedness of the COVID-19 pandemic hit our congregation hard. In truth, though, even before COVID, this was a congregation in need of renewal. Much of the current literature on congregational renewal makes it clear that corporate renewal must start with individual renewal – in reconnecting with and rededicating ourselves to God as individuals and as a community of faith.

With the blessing of this trust behind me, I began thinking about ways we could engage more *together* during worship. Throughout Lent 2022, as we read our way through the gospel of John (a very testimony-heavy gospel), our worship experiment was focusing on our own testimonies, our own faith stories – how to prepare ourselves for them, how to write them, how to get more comfortable sharing them. Admittedly, this was a worship experiment that was only marginally successful. I think the practices I designed were too involved, so the results were lackluster. Still, I felt strongly about the purpose behind that whole project: trying to help people feel more comfortable sharing about their faith.

Immink points out, “Participants in a worship service join a social community, so they must relate to each other ... They must learn how to be a part of a group of people they did not select themselves. It may even be that they (sometimes secretly) strongly dislike some of these people. They must overcome their disinterest and dislike. They cannot simply ignore and reject their fellow worshippers.”<sup>163</sup> This is particularly true in the context of a small congregation, and it certainly adds a layer of complexity when encouraging people to share stories with one another, especially in an open public setting like worship.

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<sup>163</sup> Immink, 7, 8.

## **The Participants**

“We are a small church with a big mission.” This is the vision statement and core identity of the congregation that I serve – the participants in this project: the members and friends (those who are not members but regularly attend worship and participate in other congregational activities) of the Presbyterian Church of Oronoco in Oronoco, Minnesota. We are a small congregation in a rural setting – a town of just over 1000 people – but within ten minutes of a major city, the city of Rochester, Minnesota (population: 117,000). There are just under fifty members on the rolls with about twenty to thirty people (both members and friends) active in the worship and work of the church throughout the year. Ages range anywhere between five-years-old and eighty-six-years-old with the majority falling in the sixty-five to eighty year-old bracket, and all are Caucasian.

As previously mentioned, experimenting with worship is something that I’ve been doing with this congregation for more than a decade. Many of those experiments have had to do with making worship more interactive and experiential – setting up various kinds of stations so people could get up and move around the sanctuary, creating collaborative art pieces or worship installations together, sharing various aspects of our lives or our faith journeys aloud with one another. At most, these experiential worship experiments have lasted the length of a liturgical season – usually either Lent or Advent – though most have been for a single particular service. That being said, with this decade of experience as a base, I believed that the congregation would be willing to engage with these new worship practices.



## The Practices

Practically speaking, the Exploring the Word Together practice involved writing a reflection question related to the Scripture reading and sermon theme for the day and engaging with that question for at least three minutes directly after the sermon each Sunday. The short description included in the bulletin each Sunday reads: *This is a time for us to process our faith and our hearing of God's word together – a time to be the word of God for one another. It's also a time to build community with one another – a time to share elements of our faith and our understanding of that faith with each other. Feel free to participate in conversation with those around you or sit and ponder this question on your own.* I kept a simple stopwatch in the pulpit with me so I could easily keep track of the three minutes whether I was in the pulpit or down engaging with the congregation during that time. The questions were always written as open-ended questions or as a question pair (first question: yes or no, second question: explain), and also written in ways that either encouraged people to think/talk about ways faith intersected with the world around them (e.g. – “What does it mean to hold mourning and joy in tension?”) or think/talk about their own experience with faith (e.g. – “Who is Jesus to you?”).

In practice, Claiming Our Faith Identity is probably the easiest of the worship practices because responsive readings are such a familiar thing in the church setting. The descriptive section in the bulletin for this practice reads: *This is a chance for us to remind one another of both who we are and whose we are before we head back out in the world. The hope is that, as we grow more and more familiar with the words and the claim and call that they place on our hearts, we'll be able to recall them throughout the week in those moments when we need to tap into our faith. The words and phrases are also aimed at helping us*

*connect with our congregation's own mission statement: "We are a community of believers whose mission is to share God's Word, show God's Love, serve God's World, and strive for God's Peace." It is preceded by the benediction, and once it is concluded, our musician begins her postlude.*

The practical application for the Glimpses of God practice was relatively simple. After the centering prayer time with which we start each worship service, I invite everyone back together with the stories of our lives. The description in the bulletin for this practice says: *With the authentic stories of our lives and our days, we call each other into this time of worship together by sharing the glimpses of God that have captured our attention throughout the last week or two. If you have a way that you've noticed God – God's work, God's love, God's leading, God's presence – we invite you to come up and share it. Your story doesn't have to be eloquent. It doesn't have to be long. Your experience of God is yours to share in whatever way is most comfortable for you. We hold space for your story, and we listen with our ears and our hearts.* I invite people to come up and share, and when it organically feels like that time is concluded, we give thanks for one another's witness and continue with worship.

Once I'd designed the three worship practices, I determined the order in which I would introduce them as well as the requisite timeline. I wanted to give the congregation enough time with each practice to really get settled into it before introducing the next one, and since I was planning on working this project through a full school year – beginning in September and going through May – that allocated three months for each worship practice. It was also important to me to continue the previously introduced practices as new ones were introduced, essentially layering all three practices together by the end. This felt more intentional than simply trying a new practice for three months before replacing it with

another. If the ultimate goal was to introduce genuine change into the way we worship, it needed to feel more like parts of a cohesive whole coming together than a game of worship musical chairs.

This cohesion was also the determining factor behind the order in which I introduced the worship practices. I knew I wanted to start with the Exploring the Word Together practice. Exploring the Word Together felt like it had the most freedom to it on a personal-engagement level. From the beginning, I told people they could either sit and consider the question on their own, turn and discuss it with the people around them, or get up and move to another part of the sanctuary to discuss with someone not sitting near them. It felt like a good balance between nudging people outside their comfort zones while holding a safe space for those who didn't want to go there. So I introduced the Exploring the Word Together practice in September 2022. The next new practice was set to be introduced in December 2022, and for many reasons, I knew that needed to be the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice. First, I knew I would be challenging people's comfort zones with the Exploring the Word Together practice, so introducing a safer, more comfortable practice like Claiming Our Faith Identity felt like a good choice. I also knew that the Glimpses of God practice would be the most challenging, so I wanted to save that one for last. And being December, I knew we'd also be in the throes of yet another holiday season, so adding a practice that felt simpler and less spiritually demanding seemed like a good idea. Finally, in March 2023, I introduced the Glimpses of God practice. I saved it for last because I knew it was the one that would challenge people the most, and it was the one that I was the most worried about.

## **The Procedure**

I began by introducing each individual worship practice in both written and verbal formats. Verbally, I made announcements about each practice in the two to three weeks leading up to starting that new practice. I also made sure to explain each practice in detail for the first two to three weeks after we had incorporated that practice into our worship service to ensure that everyone was familiar with the “how” of the practice as well as the “why” behind it. In terms of written explanation, I included a short explanation in the bulletin each Sunday (detailed in “The Practices” section) as well as a longer explanation in the monthly newsletter that corresponded with the month each new practice was being introduced – September 2022 for Exploring the Word Together, December 2022 for Claiming Our Faith Identity, and March 2023 for Glimpses of God (Appendix B). I also made sure to let everyone in the congregation know they were welcome to come discuss the practices with me in my office if they had any questions or concerns. Throughout the project, no one felt the need to engage in this particular way.

In terms of evaluating each new worship practice, I created three separate surveys (Appendix C) – one for each practice – that asked questions about participants’ experience with the practice, whether or not it helped them feel more connected to God and to one another, and whether or not engaging in the practice left them feeling spiritually renewed. For a two to three week period at the end of the third month of each practice, I included a copy of the survey in each bulletin along with a copy of the Informed Consent Form. Each form and survey were numbered correspondingly together for the sole purpose of ensuring that I obtained a signed Informed Consent Form for each survey that I received. In order to receive the most honest and open feedback from the participants, this was a blind survey. I

did not keep track of which survey number corresponded with which member. I set out collection boxes in our fellowship room – one for the surveys and a separate box for the Informed Consent Forms. In accordance with the requirements of the university's Institutional Review Board, I also read a statement each time I included the surveys in the bulletin which explained the purpose of the surveys, my procedure for gathering information, and which stated that participation was completely voluntary. Following worship each Sunday, I would empty the survey and Informed Consent Form boxes, check to make sure any completed surveys had a corresponding Informed Consent Form, then store both documents in separate folders in a locked drawer in my desk.

I also asked for congregational volunteers to participate in a more in-depth interview pertaining to their experiences with these new worship practices and was able to schedule three such interviews. Each interviewee was given both the interview questions (Appendix D) and an Informed Consent Form ahead of time, and each interview lasted thirty to forty-five minutes. The interviews were conducted on October 10, October 12, and November 8, 2023. Prior to the interviews, I assigned each participant a random letter-number code (e.g. – H4). The master list of corresponding names and codes was kept only in a Google doc that I shared with my doctoral advisor, Dr. Susan Forshey. Each interview was recorded using a voice recording app on my phone. Following each interview, I transcribed it and saved each transcription as another Google doc. In both the body of the transcription and the file name, the interview participants were identified only with their assigned codes.

## RESULTS

Of the thirty-five surveys that I distributed for each practice, I received eight completed surveys for the Exploring the Word Together practice, seven completed surveys for the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice, and seven completed surveys for the Glimpses of God practice. Using an average worship attendance of thirty-five, this is a 20-23% rate of participation. Using the general age range of the congregation, survey respondents were anywhere between the age of twenty-three to eighty-two. Regarding the interview participants, two were female age sixty to sixty-nine, and one interviewee was male age eighty to eighty-nine. Using the same average worship attendance (thirty-five), this is an 8.5% rate of participation.

### Exploring the Word Together

Each survey began with a word bank that included nineteen words and one fill-in-the-blank option: *comforting, frustrating, uncomfortable, routine, exciting, engaging, casual, uncertain, reassuring, life-giving, confusing, struggle, rote, connecting, spiritual, hopeful, inspiring, powerful, and purposeful*. Participants were asked to select eight words that they felt described the Exploring the Word Together practice:

- Comforting: 5/8
- Engaging: 8/8
- Reassuring: 3/8
- Connecting: 8/8
- Spiritual: 4/8
- Hopeful: 6/8
- Inspiring: 4/8
- Purposeful: 5/8
- Exciting: 2/8
- Casual: 5/8
- Uncertain: 5/8

- Struggle: 3/8
- Uncomfortable: 3/8
- Routine: 1/8
- Life-giving: 1/8
- Powerful: 1/8

The second question asked about how well participants felt the Exploring the Word Together practice was explained in various formats and interactions, rated on a scale of one to five with one being “not at all” and five being “explained fully”:

- The monthly newsletter:
  - 3s: 2
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 4
  - N/A: 1
- The bulletin:
  - 2s: 1
  - 3s: 1
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 4
  - N/A: 1
- Vocally by the pastor during worship:
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 7
- In conversation with the pastor outside worship:
  - 3s: 1
  - 5s: 1
  - N/A: 5

The third question was aimed at discerning how often the Exploring the Word Together question and the ensuing discussion filtered into the rest of the participants’ weeks. Participants were asked to rate different ways to finish the sentence “Throughout the week, I found myself thinking about ...” with one being “never” and five being “often”:

- The “Exploring the Word Together” question
  - 3s: 5
  - 4s: 2
  - 5s: 1
- My own response(s) that I shared with others during the “Exploring the Word Together” time

- 3s: 4
- 4s: 3
- 5s: 1
- Other people’s response(s) that they shared during the “Exploring the Word Together” time
  - 3s: 5
  - 4s: 2
  - 5s: 1

This question also included a section that asked if participants wanted to explain or expand on any of the answers for this question. Just over half of the respondents (five) left this portion blank. Other responses included:

- Because I discuss these with my spouse, we discuss/communicate these ideas throughout the week in some capacity.
- Sometimes I feel that my comments on the topic are helpful having others add their thoughts. Sometimes I may add too much.
- I have a terrible time remembering to do things – out of site, out of mind. I need to take time (now that I am retired I hope this improves).

The fourth question asked participants to rate their reactions to a number of statements aimed at discerning how people felt about the Exploring the Word Together practice, whether it had helped them experience any sort of reconnection, and whether they thought we should continue the practice. The options they were given for each statement were “strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree”:

- I felt comfortable participating in the “Exploring the Word Together” worship practice:
  - Disagree: 2
  - Agree: 4
  - Strongly agree: 2
- I grew more comfortable with the “Exploring the Word Together” practice over time.
  - Agree: 1
  - Strongly agree: 7
- Through the “Exploring the Word Together” practice, I’ve grown more connected to the congregation.
  - Neutral: 2
  - Agree: 3



- Strongly agree: 3
- Through the “Exploring the Word Together” practice, I’ve grown more connected to God.
  - Neutral: 1
  - Agree: 5
  - Strongly agree: 2
- I’ve experienced spiritual renewal through the “Exploring the Word Together” practice.
  - Agree: 5
  - Strongly agree: 3
- We should continue including the “Exploring the Word Together” practice in worship.
  - Agree: 3
  - Strongly agree: 5

The final three questions were open-ended questions. Question 5 asked: “If the practice of ‘Exploring the Word Together’ helps you feel more connected to God, please explain.” One participant left this question blank:

- I appreciate how the concept grounds us into a thoughtful discussion and how that facilitates connecting us to God within the Scripture context and our lives context.
- My husband and I love it!!! We talk about the question/prompt when we are in church or outside church. Even if we witness the potential answer/example of the prompt. It’s fun!!! Keeps ya thinkin’
- Just the practice of verbalizing thoughts without any judgment makes the faith in practice more comforting.
- Voicing my thoughts is much more impactful than just thinking them, so they stay with me longer and I feel more connected to God.
- It helps me relate to the sermon and the message the minister is sharing.
- It makes me come outside my comfort zone. I explain and express true feelings with others.
- It forced me to think more deeply about God and the activities/topics discussed. It helps me relate the words to everyday life.

Question 6 asked: “If the practice of ‘Exploring the Word Together’ helps you feel more connected to the congregation, please explain.” All participants answered this question:

- With the Exploring the Word Together topics/discussion points being unrestrained/free from too many parameters, it allows free discussion within the

congregation. This discussion often includes personal beliefs on God's word, along with personal insights and experience.

- It's fun to hear what others think. Helps me get to know everyone and how/what they think.
- Sharing and connecting to those nearby has given me solace.
- Somewhat, but it is limited by everyone always sitting in the same pew!
- Struggling to make a conversation leads to relaxed conversation over time, deeper connections.
- It gives me a chance to realize what others feel and know how they feel as Christians.
- "↑" (ditto the above question, pertaining to response from Ques. 5: "It makes me come outside my comfort zone. I explain and express true feelings with others.")
- I have found that once I open up others are more likely to share. We find that we have the same/similar thoughts and that when we openly discuss, then it allows us to connect as humans – highlights the things, the similarities. So the differences seem unimportant.

Question 7 simply asked for any other feedback. Three respondents left this

question blank:

- Keep it comin'!!!
- Although uncomfortable at first, each time is getting easier and more rewarding.
- I like the idea of moving about to share with different members.
- Like this, we need to discuss God and Jesus as they relate to our lives. We need to understand God/Jesus as not just Sunday.
- It has really helped (at least that is how I feel) with my relationship with my sister-in-law and mother-in-law.

### **Claiming Our Faith Identity**

It is important to note that a few of the respondents for this second survey answered the questions with the first practice – Exploring the Word Together – in mind instead of the practice for which this survey was intended – Claiming Our Faith Identity. This occurred despite me doing my best to make it clear from the pulpit and through the newsletter piece that this was a different survey for a different practice. However, because this was a blind survey, I could not return the flawed surveys to the respondents to ask them to fill out a new survey pertaining to this particular practice.

Each survey began with a word bank that included nineteen words and one fill-in-the-blank option: *comforting, frustrating, uncomfortable, routine, exciting, engaging, casual, uncertain, reassuring, life-giving, confusing, struggle, rote, connecting, spiritual, hopeful, inspiring, powerful, and purposeful*. Participants were asked to select eight words that they felt described the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice:

- Comforting: 4/7
- Engaging: 4/7
- Reassuring: 5/7
- Connecting: 6/7
- Spiritual: 6/7
- Hopeful: 6/7
- Inspiring: 4/7
- Purposeful: 7/7
- Exciting: 1/7
- Confusing: 1/7
- Uncertain: 1/7
- Rote: 1/7
- Routine: 1/7
- Life-giving: 1/7
- Powerful: 4/7

The second question asked about how well participants felt the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice was explained in various formats and interactions, rated on a scale of one to five with one being “not at all” and five being “explained fully.” For this whole question (all sections), one respondent selected “N/A” for all responses and wrote in the margins “I was remiss in paying attention to this.”:

- The monthly newsletter:
  - 3s: 1
  - 5s: 4
  - N/A: 2
- The bulletin:
  - 3s: 1
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 4
  - N/A: 1

- Vocally by the pastor during worship:
  - 5s: 6
  - N/A: 1
- In conversation with the pastor outside worship:
  - 5s: 3
  - N/A: 4

The third question was aimed at discerning how often the different elements and responses of the Claiming Our Faith Identity reading filtered into the rest of the participants' weeks. Participants were asked to rate different ways to finish the sentence "Throughout the week, I found myself thinking about ..." with one being "never" and five being "often":

- The congregation's mission statement: *We are a community of believers whose mission is to share God's Word, show God's Love, serve God's World, and strive for God's Peace.*
  - 2s: 2
  - 3s: 3
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 1
- What it means to be the Church together
  - 2s: 1
  - 3s: 3
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 2
- What it means to serve God in the church and the world
  - 3s: 3
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 5

This question also included a section that asked if participants wanted to explain or expand on any of the answers for this question. Just over half of the respondents (four) left this portion blank. Other responses included:

- I know that I can do this. However, I also know I need help.
- (referring to "What it means to be the Church together") – As a church, we are able to share joys and pain. We ask for prayers. It brings us closer. (referring to "What it means to serve God in the church and the world") – When we leave church, starting with fellowship, we serve God.

- I think about how I can be of service to God quite often. It's something I try my best to live by, and I enjoy doing things for others to show God's love thru me. So, when we say, "to SHOW God's love" at the end of the service, it is an awesome reminder to keep me doing what God wants me to do.

The fourth question asked participants to rate their reactions to a number of statements aimed at discerning how people felt about the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice, whether it had helped them experience any sort of reconnection, and whether they thought we should continue the practice. The options they were given for each statement were "strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree":

- I felt comfortable participating in the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" worship practice:
  - Agree: 3
  - Strongly agree: 4
- I grew more comfortable with the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice over time.
  - Neutral: 1
  - Agree: 2
  - Strongly agree: 4
- Through the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice, I've grown more connected to the congregation.
  - Neutral: 3
  - Agree: 2
  - Strongly agree: 2
- Through the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice, I've grown more connected to God.
  - Agree: 3
  - Strongly agree: 4
- I've experienced spiritual renewal through the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice.
  - Neutral: 1
  - Agree: 3
  - Strongly agree: 3
- We should continue including the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice in worship.
  - Agree: 2
  - Strongly agree: 5

The final three questions were open-ended questions. Question 5 asked: "If the practice of 'Claiming Our Faith Identity' helps you feel more connected to God, please

explain.” One participant left this question blank. *Note: It is in this section (these last three open-ended questions) that I feel it’s most evident that some of the respondents had the previous practice – Exploring the Word Together – in mind instead of the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice:*

- It makes me think, feel, relate, and exchange. This makes me feel more connected to God.
- It gives communal and individual actions to God’s word.
- To remind us that God is always present for us. We can turn to God no matter what the situation is.
- I have thought of the theme more during the week, and try to follow the theme.
- By saying things/mantras out loud it helps bring our thoughts into the world. Having this mantra is a weekly reminder as to who our church is and how we live our lives for God.
- They are good reminder statements (as a community) that also speak to my own identity and wholeness.

Question 6 asked: “If the practice of ‘Claiming Our Faith Identity’ helps you feel more connected to the congregation, please explain.” One participant left this question blank:

- I see how others view topics of faith. I gain insight and ideas that I hadn’t considered.
- “↑” (ditto the above question, pertaining to response from Ques. 5: “It gives communal and individual actions to God’s word.”)
- By sharing our concerns, we support one another. We all have the common desire to learn more about God.
- We have always been a caring congregation, so sharing seems to help each other feel more as a group.
- It’s nice to know that everyone around me in church has the same mission in life, and it helps me feel more comfortable around them since I know they won’t judge me or anything bad. We are all here for a reason, and it’s the same reason for everyone: TO LOVE!!!
- We say it together and it is worded as both individual and community charges.

Question 7 simply asked for any other feedback. Three respondents left this question blank:

- I’m so used to a statement like this as service came to a close that its basically rote. However, doing this survey is bringing it to my attention, perhaps snapping me out of rote ...?

- We're engaged! :)
- It makes me value my relationship with God by allowing me to search for more. To think God for all that He has given us.
- Some of the topics are difficult to share. Over time members are more open. We need to include different members at times.

## **Glimpses of God**

Each survey began with a word bank that included nineteen words and one fill-in-the-blank option: *comforting, frustrating, uncomfortable, routine, exciting, engaging, casual, uncertain, reassuring, life-giving, confusing, struggle, rote, connecting, spiritual, hopeful, inspiring, powerful, and purposeful*. Participants were asked to select eight words that they felt described the Glimpses of God practice:

- Comforting: 3/7
- Engaging: 6/7
- Reassuring: 2/7
- Connecting: 2/7
- Spiritual: 5/7
- Hopeful: 5/7
- Inspiring: 6/7
- Purposeful: 4/7
- Exciting: 2/7
- Confusing: 1/7
- Uncertain: 2/7
- Routine: 1/7
- Struggle: 3/7
- Uncomfortable: 2/7
- Life-giving: 2/7
- Powerful: 3/7
- Confusing: 1/7
- Frustrating: 1/7

The second question asked about how well participants felt the Glimpses of God practice was explained in various formats and interactions, rated on a scale of one to five with one being “not at all” and five being “explained fully”:

- The monthly newsletter:
  - 4s: 2
  - 5s: 4
  - N/A: 1
- The bulletin:
  - 4s: 1
  - 5s: 5
  - N/A: 1
- Vocally by the pastor during worship:
  - 3s: 1
  - 5s: 6
- In conversation with the pastor outside worship:
  - 5s: 4
  - N/A: 3

The third question was aimed at discerning how often the testimonies shared during the Glimpses of God time filtered into the rest of the participants' weeks. Participants were asked to rate different ways to finish the sentence "Throughout the week, I found myself thinking about ..." with one being "never" and five being "often":

- Other people's testimonies that they shared last week
  - 2s: 1
  - 3s: 4
  - 5s: 2
- My own testimony that I shared last week
  - 1s: 1
  - 3s: 2
  - 4s: 2
  - 5s: 1
  - (no response): 1
- Ways that God might be working through me that I could share next week
  - 2s: 1
  - 3s: 3
  - 5s: 3
- Ways that God might be working through me (not necessarily something I feel like sharing)
  - 2s: 1
  - 3s: 1
  - 4s: 3
  - 5s: 2



This question also included a section that asked if participants wanted to explain or expand on any of the answers for this question. All but one of the respondents left this portion blank. The final response read:

- Some ways come to you but may not always remember each instance.

The fourth question asked participants to rate their reactions to a number of statements aimed at discerning how people felt about the Glimpses of God practice, whether it had helped them experience any sort of reconnection, and whether they thought we should continue the practice. The options they were given for each statement were “strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree”:

- I felt comfortable participating in the “Glimpses of God” worship practice:
  - Neutral: 1
  - Agree: 4
  - Strongly agree: 2
- I grew more comfortable with the “Glimpses of God” practice over time.
  - Agree: 3
  - Strongly agree: 4
- Through the “Glimpses of God” practice, I’ve grown more connected to the congregation.
  - Neutral: 2
  - Agree: 3
  - Strongly agree: 2
- Through the “Glimpses of God” practice, I’ve grown more connected to God.
  - Neutral: 2
  - Agree: 3
  - Strongly agree: 2
- I’ve experienced spiritual renewal through the “Glimpses of God” practice.
  - Neutral: 1
  - Agree: 5
  - Strongly agree: 1
- We should continue including the “Glimpses of God” practice in worship.
  - Neutral: 1
  - Agree: 2
  - Strongly agree: 4

The final three questions were open-ended questions. Question 5 asked: “If the practice of ‘Glimpses of God’ helps you feel more connected to God, please explain.” One participant left all three questions in this section blank.

- God deserves recognition, and I think by everyone sharing how God works through their lives, it shows hope and the amazing word and work of God.
- We don’t just listen, we partake and communicate our feelings together.
- “The paths were lined with flowers” got me thinking about how seeds can be dormant, in a “dead” area ... until they get enough rain.
- Ways that God is working through other people; thinking of things to share myself provides me with more examples of God in my life
- Sharing reinforces the powerful nature of those experiences.
- I think about it during the week and wondering if my comments make sense.

Question 6 asked: “If the practice of ‘Glimpses of God’ helps you feel more connected to the congregation, please explain”:

- It’s wonderful to hear everyone’s stories, and it helps everyone feel connected.
- I feel trust, freedom to speak and share. No fear of judgment or concern about my interpretation (?? *handwriting is slightly illegible*) of sermon.
- It’s nice to know more about people – it’s easier to have conversation and find common ground.
- Facilitates learning more deeply about the people that share and their faith journey.
- Sharing and hearing the experiences of others gives me a more solid feeling of community.
- It is good what others find in feeling God in their life.

Question 7 simply asked for any other feedback. Three additional respondents (four total) left this question blank:

- Please continue to make it a part of worship. It’s one of my favorite parts.
- Liked us being put in charge of our feelings and discussing.
- Pastors can share, too

## **General Observations**

I think the two clearest observations that can be made after looking at all this feedback are that, while most of these practices – Exploring the Word Together and

Glimpses of God, to be sure – started off as uncomfortable for most people, they grew to find reconnection and spiritual renewal in all of the practices as well. I think this comes out clearest in the word bank question at the beginning of each practice survey as well as the open-ended responses at the end of each survey. For all three practices, the responses to the word bank question included words that indicated discomfort: *uncertain, struggle, uncomfortable, routine, confusing, rote, and frustrating*. Across all of the surveys, the most common discomfort word chosen was “uncertain.” That being said, the majority of the words chosen across all three surveys were overwhelmingly positive, indicating an overall positive congregational response to these practices.

This observation is echoed in the open-ended question responses as well as in the interviews. In describing the Exploring the Word Together practice, one survey respondent wrote, “Struggling to make conversation leads to relaxed conversation over time, deeper connections.” Regarding the same practice, another wrote, “Although uncomfortable at first, each time is getting easier and more rewarding.” Yet another survey respondent highlighted that some of that discomfort comes from the uncertainty around who will “break the ice” in a conversation: “I have found that once I open up others are more likely to share.”

All three interview participants also spoke to this initial discomfort with the Exploring the Word Practice. One stated simply, “At first, it made me very uncomfortable, very uncomfortable.” When I asked if it was the question part of the practice, the moving around part of the practice, or all of it, she clarified, “I’ve started moving on occasion when [husband] is there because he dominated it, and it’s not necessarily ... his response tends to leap to a secular discussion, and there isn’t anything wrong with that. But sometimes I want more.” Another interview participant also spoke at length about the discomfort particularly

regarding seating and those who attend worship with a family member. This particular interview participant attends worship with her elderly mother for whom she is a caretaker, and she expressed how she didn't feel as comfortable getting up and moving with her mother still sitting in "their pew." At the same time, she expressed some anxiety over how to break into other small group conversations that sprang up around her during the Exploring the Word Together time. The final interview participant was also quite frank about his discomfort with this practice: "It scared the crap out of me when you first started it. Just because I'm a typical Minnesotan. I'm not very verbose when it comes to speaking about your beliefs and your faith."

However, as the discussion progressed with all three interview participants regarding that discomfort, two of them felt overwhelmingly that what had started off as an uncomfortable practice has since grown into one that is very meaningful. When I pointed out to the "typical Minnesotan" interview participant that his expressed discomfort in speaking about faith in general was a big part of the reason we were engaging with this practice, he responded by saying, "And I think that's the best ... See, well, exactly. I've gotten to that point where I look forward to it now." Another interview participant spoke positively about how the practice has helped her to open up. Both of these participants also voiced how the Exploring the Word Together practice has stuck with them throughout the week. One said, "It really has brought a different perspective, other people's perspectives, and more often than not, they're similar. Or something I just hadn't expanded on ... I mean, you get other people's thoughts about - well, the question always gives you something to think about and ... I'm always learning something, I guess. Most of the time. Because people have some very deep insights." In response to how this practice has helped reconnect her to the

congregation, the other interview participant described how the Exploring the Word Together practice is “something that kind of stick with me on occasion – what someone said about it – and that will rattle around for me.”

Results were similar for the Glimpses of God practice. Going by the numbers on the worship surveys, this was the practice that elicited the most varied responses. No one had any negative reactions to it, but I would say that the responses also weren't as enthusiastic as they were for the other two practices. While it was my hope with this particular practice that it would encourage the meshing of the outside world and the worship time – bringing more of people's everyday lives into our sacred space and opening their eyes to more of the sacred spaces in the midst of their everyday lives – the responses in that section of the survey seemed hesitant. Most survey respondents said that they rarely or only occasionally thought about the various responses during this worship time, whether it was their own testimony that they *had* shared, a testimony shared by another person, or something that they were considering sharing in the week(s) to come. That being said, a few survey respondents expressed that this practice encouraged them to keep their eyes and hearts open for God moving throughout their week. One said, “God deserves recognition, and I think by everyone sharing how God works through their lives, it shows hope and the amazing word and work of God.” In response to the open-ended question about how this practice helped them feel more connected to God, one respondent wrote, “Ways that God is working through other people; thinking of things to share myself provides me with more examples of God in my life.” A third respondent said simply, “It is good what others find in feeling God in their life.”

This sentiment was expressed in the interviews as well. One interview participant said, “I think the Glimpses of God just kind of opened us up to what we miss.” Another affirmed this: “The Glimpses of God – it’s always interesting and makes you feel – think about your relationship with God as you live your life.”

What has become clear about this Glimpses of God practice is that it has encouraged a sense of reconnection for many within the congregation. One survey respondent said, “It’s wonderful to hear everyone’s stories, and it helps everyone feel connected.” Another wrote, “Sharing and hearing the experience of others gives me a more solid feeling of community.” This was echoed in the interviews as well. One interview participant who admitted to struggling some with this practice also said about it, “The Glimpsing – I mean, that lets us know what other people have seen. And felt. So you know ... it’s just nice hearing from other people.” Another interview participant spoke about how this was helping her and her spouse open up to the idea of community more within the congregation. She pointed out how her husband and another congregant sometimes grow weary of a particular member who always gets up and shares something during the Glimpses of God time. This member’s sharing tends to be a little long and often involves one or more of the member’s pets. The interview participant told me, “Finally, on the way home from church on Sunday, I said – because I had thought about it – ‘What you’re saying is that [sharing member] has to be like us. That the only way to be acceptable in church is the way everybody else is. And I’m not okay with that.’”

Finally, the responses to the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice were positive on the whole. As it is a call-and-response reading – something most (if not all) mainline Protestant congregations are familiar with in some form or another – this was the practice I

was least worried about as far as integration into “regular worship” was concerned. And that initial reaction on my part proved pretty accurate. Both survey and interview participants had positive things to say about this practice. One survey respondent described the statements of the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice as “good reminder statements (as a community) that also speak to my own identity and wholeness.” Another declared, “It’s nice to know that everyone around me in the church has the same mission in life, and it helps me feel more comfortable around them since I know they won’t judge me or anything bad.” In addressing how this practice specifically helped in reconnecting with the community, another survey respondent affirmed, “We say it together and it is worded as both individual and community charges.”

This positive reception was echoed in the interviews as well. One participant spoke about how the statements in the Claiming Our Faith Identity practice remained a part of his week: “The Claiming Your Faith Identity ... just kind of sets the tone for how you want to look forward to the week.” The one hesitation about this practice that surfaced during two of the interviews was the concern that the word may become too habitual at some point. Both interview participants expressed a worry about the practice becoming “rote” (word used by both interview participants independently), and both gave suggestions for ways to shake this practice up – to keep it fresh without either re-writing it or eliminating it completely.

All of the surveys included a question about whether or not we should keep each particular worship practice as part of the service following the experiment period, and none of the responses for any of the three surveys were negative. There was one “neutral” response to this question in the Glimpses of God surveys, but every other survey

participating chose either “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement: “We should continue to include the [particular] practice in worship” for all three practices. While all of the other questions on the survey and in the interviews gave me insight into how people were feeling about each particular worship practice, this specific question seems to me to be the greatest indicator of overall success with these practices.



## CONCLUSION

I don't think anyone in any congregation right now would argue if you walked in and said, "The Church is in need of renewal." Through their research and in their work, Smith and Sellon make it abundantly clear that "in the end, congregational health is a function of how people in the congregation relate to one another, to God, and to their community."<sup>164</sup> And probably the most common, most centered time and place for the congregation to relate to one another, to God, and to their community is in and through worship. Therefore, if the church is in need of renewal, worship must also be in need of renewal.

In speaking specifically of worship renewal, Zimmerman says,

Any serious renewal of worship means that we consider what we understand worship to be, measure the spiritual growth as individuals and congregations that our worship together has brought about from year to year, and evaluate whether we are truly surrendering during worship to God's gracious presence and opening ourselves to the transformation that God wishes to bring about in us. We cannot take these issues for granted.<sup>165</sup>

Indeed, we cannot take these issues for granted, and that is exactly why I chose to embark on this particular project aimed at individual and congregational renewal through the renewal of worship.

The three worship practices of this project were specifically designed to renew worship in a way that brought more congregational voices and experiences into the worship in a way that was authentic, actively present, and connectional. In *Blended Worship*, Webber speaks powerfully to the need for a worship and, indeed, a faith that reflects these essential elements:

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<sup>164</sup> Smith and Sellon, 5.

<sup>165</sup> Zimmerman, 97.

I believe we Christians must seize the moment and meet this challenge [of secularism and New Age movements] head on. But we cannot confront this age with a truncated and reductionist faith and worship. I don't believe we can engage our contemporaries with a message that is either primarily intellectual or emotional. I am convinced, however, that we can meet the demands of our day with an active faith, a faith that restores the biblical and historical tradition in a contemporary style, that is inviting and participatory, and that brings meaning and healing to life.<sup>166</sup>

It was exactly this that I tried to do with the three new worship practices with which my congregation engaged: Exploring the Word Together, Claiming Our Faith Identity, and Glimpses of God. They are practices that are active and participatory. They are practices that are grounded in biblical, theological, and historical foundations. Have they been “silver bullet” practices that have brought people flocking to our little white church on the hill and brought numbers to our rolls and our budget? No. But *numbers* was never the goal. The goal was spiritual renewal of the individual members and the congregation as a whole through reconnection to one another and to God, and I believe that, while the practices are not perfect and our renewal journey as a congregation is not complete, these practices have at least given us an encouraging new start on that journey. Zimmerman declares hopefully, “Worship cannot be contained within walls, but bursts out in two ways: in making a difference in the daily living of the worshipers, and in compelling worshipers to speak (by word and deed) the Good News.”<sup>167</sup> Or, as one of my interview participants put it, “It’s important to think about [all the new practices], not only the 10 minutes after church but the rest of the week as well ... Sometimes it brings tears to my eyes because there’s a lot of deep stuff that goes on between the folks around you.” Thanks be to God.

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<sup>166</sup> Webber, *Blended Worship*, 18.

<sup>167</sup> Zimmerman, 116.

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## Appendix A

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#### EXPERIENCE

Solo Pastor

Presbyterian Church of Oronoco, Oronoco, MN – 2012-present

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Pulpit Supply

The Presbyterian Church of Le Sueur, Le Sueur, MN – 2010-2012

Pastoral Assistant (non-ordained)

Zion United Church of Christ, Le Sueur, MN – 2010-2011

#### EDUCATION

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA

*Doctor of Ministry Candidate, 2020-current*

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA

Master of Divinity, 2007-2010

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI

Bachelor of Arts – Religious Studies, 2002-2006

**Appendix B**  
***Newsletter Pieces Introducing the New Worship Practices***

**Exploring the Word Together** – *from September 2022 newsletter*

I think it's clear that things within the realm of Church (universal – all denominations all over the world) are changing. This change has been coming for decades, but all of the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic certainly accelerated (or at least shined an undeniable, revealing light on) those changes. In an attempt to embrace what those changes can bring and explore where God may be leading us as the Church, we're going to make some changes to worship over the coming year. In particular, we're going to try three new things spaced out over the course of a year, one every few months.

Starting in September, we'll be including a short "Exploring the Word Together" time after the sermon. There will be a question related to the Scripture reading and the sermon in the bulletin each week. After the sermon, we'll spend some time discussing that question together or, if you'd prefer to process it on your own, sitting and pondering for a few minutes. This won't be that different from the way we've been sharing National Parks stories throughout the summer except that you'll be encouraged to discuss in small groups within the congregation instead of feeling like you have to speak in front of everyone.

The goal with adding this element to worship is to include a time in the service when we get to dig deeper into our faith together and to be the word of God for one another. Every Sunday before the Scripture reading and the sermon, I pray, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer." This comes from Psalm 19:14, and while they come from *my* mouth



every Sunday, they're just as applicable to all the words coming from *all* of our mouths – to the meditations from *all* of our hearts. I'm also hoping this will be a time for us to build community with one another, sharing our stories and our understandings of our faith with each other not secondary to worship but as a part of worship.

As British journalist Katherine Whitehorn said, "The wind of change, whatever it is, blows most freely through an open mind." And so, onward we go ...

### **Claiming Our Faith Identity** – *from December 2022 newsletter*

Back in September, we talked about how it's clear that things within the realm of Church (universal – all denominations all over the world) are changing. They have changed. They are changing. And they will continue to change. To be sure, the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic certainly accelerated (or at least shined an undeniable, revealing light on) those changes. In an attempt to embrace what those changes can bring and explore where God may be leading us as the Church, we're going to continue to make some changes to worship over the next few months.

Since September, we've been engaging in some discussion time after the sermon based on the Scripture and the topic for the day – our "Exploring the Word Together" time. In December, we're going to include another new element: "Claiming our Faith Identity." This will be a call-and-response type of reading at the end of the service and will take the place of the charge. Instead of me reminding you of what to think or hope for or hold on to in the week to come, we're going to remind one another of both who we are and whose we are before we head back out in the world. This call-and-response will be the same every

Sunday. The hope is that, as we grow more and more familiar with the words and the claim and call that they place on our hearts, we'll be able to recall them throughout the week in those moments when we need to tap into our faith. The words and phrases are also aimed at helping us connect with our congregation's own mission statement on a deeper and more active level: "We are a community of believers whose mission is to share God's Word, show God's Love, serve God's World, and strive for God's Peace."

The book of Hebrews says, "Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us ... Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable" (Hebrews 10:22, 23). It is my hope that as we claim our faith identity together at the end of each service, we will indeed be drawn nearer to each other and nearer to God with the certainty that our faith gives, and that, as we go out into the world, we will go out with a familiar confession on our lips and the promise of God in our hearts.

### **Glimpses of God** – *from March 2023 newsletter*

Since Sept. 2022, we've made some changes to our worship experience. In September, we added the "Exploring the Word Together" time after that sermon – that time in which we get to contemplate or discuss a question that pertains to our Scripture for the day, to share our journeys and experiences of faith with one another as a way to both build community and expand and deepen our faith. In December, we added the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice – the call-and-response reading at the end of the service that uses

the words of our congregation's mission statement to both remind us who we are as children of God and inspire us to go out into the world to be God's hands and feet and love.

Starting in March 2023, we'll be adding our last new worship practice – "Glimpses of God." This practice will take the place of the "Call to Worship" at the beginning of the service. Traditionally, the Call to Worship is a time to invite one another to gather for worship – a time to remind ourselves and each other that God is active among us both in our worship and in the world around us, a time to be stirred to praise and to pray together by the mighty and magnificent work and personhood of God. Starting in March, instead of doing that with a scripted call-and-response reading, we'll be engaging in an open time for some short testimonies. The idea is that 1-3 people will feel moved to come up to the front and share where you've seen God in the last few weeks. Your "Glimpses of God" stories don't have to be long. They don't have to be eloquent. They just need to be your honest experience of God outside our walls. As we hear one another's stories and share our own stories, the hope is that those glimpses will remind us why we come to worship. Essentially, we'll be calling each other into worship with the authentic experiences of our lives because when we hear people talk about where and when and how they've seen God moving and working, how can we help but lift up our voices and our lives to God in worship and prayer?

**Appendix C**  
**Surveys**

**Exploring the Word Together**

1. Using the word bank below, choose **8 words** to describe “Exploring the Word Together”:

comforting	engaging	confusing	hopeful
frustrating	casual	struggle	inspiring
uncomfortable	uncertain	rote	powerful
routine	reassuring	connecting	purposeful
exciting	life-giving	spiritual	_____

2. How do you feel the reasoning and Biblical foundation for this “Exploring the Word Together” practice was explained in ...

	<b>Not at all</b>				<b>Explained fully</b>	
The monthly newsletter	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	N/A
The bulletin	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	N/A
Vocally by the pastor during worship	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	N/A
In conversation with the pastor outside worship	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	N/A

3. Throughout the week, I found myself thinking about ...

	<b>Never</b>		<b>Sometimes</b>		<b>Often</b>
The “Exploring the Word Together” question	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
My own response(s) that I shared with	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

others during the “Exploring the Word Together” time					
	<b>Never</b>		<b>Sometimes</b>		<b>Often</b>
Other people’s response(s) that they shared during the “Exploring the Word Together” time	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Would you like to further explain or expand on any of the answers above?

4. Rate your reaction to the following statements:

- I felt comfortable participating in the “Exploring the Word Together” worship practice.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- I grew more comfortable with the “Exploring the Word Together” practice over time.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- Through the “Exploring the Word Together” practice, I’ve grown more connected to the congregation.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- Through the “Exploring the Word Together” practice, I’ve grown more connected to God.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- I've experienced spiritual renewal through the "Exploring the Word Together" practice.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- We should continue including the "Exploring the Word Together" practice in worship.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

5. If the practice of "Exploring the Word Together" helps you feel more connected to God, please explain.

6. If the practice of "Exploring the Word Together" helps you feel more connected to the congregation, please explain.

Other feedback about the practice of "Exploring the Word Together"?

**Claiming Our Faith Identity**

7. Using the word bank below, choose **8 words** to describe “Claiming Our Faith Identity”:

comforting	engaging	confusing	hopeful
frustrating	casual	struggle	inspiring
uncomfortable	uncertain	rote	powerful
routine	reassuring	connecting	purposeful
exciting	life-giving	spiritual	_____

8. How do you feel the reasoning and Biblical foundation for this “Claiming Our Faith Identity” practice was explained in ...

	Not at all				Explained fully	
The monthly newsletter	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
The bulletin	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Vocally by the pastor during worship	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
In conversation with the pastor outside worship	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

9. Throughout the week, I found myself thinking about ...

	Never		Sometimes		Often
The congregation’s mission statement: <i>We are a community of believers whose mission is to share God’s Word, show God’s Love, serve God’s World, and</i>	1	2	3	4	5

<i>strive for God's Peace.</i>					
	<b>Never</b>		<b>Sometimes</b>		<b>Often</b>
What it means to be the Church together	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
What it means to serve God in the church and the world	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Would you like to further explain or expand on any of the answers above?

10. Rate your reaction to the following statements:

- I felt comfortable participating in the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" worship practice.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- I grew more comfortable with the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice over time.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- Through the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice, I've grown more connected to the congregation.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- Through the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice, I've grown more connected to God.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**



- I've experienced spiritual renewal through the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- We should continue including the "Claiming Our Faith Identity" practice in worship.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

11. If the practice of "Claiming Our Faith Identity" helps you feel more connected to God, please explain.

12. If the practice of "Claiming Our Faith Identity" helps you feel more connected to the congregation, please explain.

Other feedback about the practice of "Claiming Our Faith Identity"?

**Glimpses of God**

13. Using the word bank below, choose **8 words** to describe “Glimpses of God”:

comforting	engaging	confusing	hopeful
frustrating	casual	struggle	inspiring
uncomfortable	uncertain	rote	powerful
routine	reassuring	connecting	purposeful
exciting	life-giving	spiritual	_____

14. How do you feel the reasoning and Biblical foundation for this “Glimpses of God” practice was explained in ...

	Not at all				Explained fully	
The monthly newsletter	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
The bulletin	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Vocally by the pastor during worship	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
In conversation with the pastor outside worship	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

15. Throughout the week, I found myself thinking about ...

	Never		Sometimes		Often
Other people’s testimonies that they shared last week	1	2	3	4	5
My own testimony that I shared last week	1	2	3	4	5

	<b>Never</b>		<b>Sometimes</b>		<b>Often</b>
Ways that God might be working through me that I could share next week	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Ways that God might be working through me (not necessarily something I feel like sharing)	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Would you like to further explain or expand on any of the answers above?

16. Rate your reaction to the following statements:

- I felt comfortable participating in the “Glimpses of God” worship practice.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- I grew more comfortable with the “Glimpses of God” practice over time.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- Through the “Glimpses of God” practice, I’ve grown more connected to the congregation.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- Through the “Glimpses of God” practice, I’ve grown more connected to God.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- I’ve experienced spiritual renewal through the “Glimpses of God” practice.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

- We should continue including the “Glimpses of God” practice in worship.

**Strongly disagree**      **Disagree**      **Neutral**      **Agree**      **Strongly Agree**

17. If the practice of “Glimpses of God” helps you feel more connected to God, please explain.

18. If the practice of “Glimpses of God” helps you feel more connected to the congregation, please explain.

19. Other feedback about the practice of “Glimpses of God”?

**Appendix D**  
***Interview Questions***

1. How's your spirit today?
2. What are your impressions regarding the various worship practices?
  - *Exploring the Word Together*
  - *Claiming Our Faith Identity*
  - *Glimpses of God*
3. Do you have any examples of how the various worship practices have helped you feel more connected to God?
4. Do you have any examples of how the various worship practices have helped you feel more connected to the congregation as a faith community?
5. What do you appreciate about the various worship practices? What about them is/was a struggle?
6. Do you have any other feedback about the various worship practices?

**APPENDIX E**  
***Worship Practice Examples***

**Exploring the Word Together:**

- Text: Romans 6:1-11 → Exploring the Word Together question: How can we honor this new life we have together in Christ?
- Text: Luke 10:25-37 → Exploring the Word Together question: How can we come alongside those in need of mercy?
- Text: Amos 5:18-24 → Exploring the Word Together question: What distracts us from working for God's justice?

**Claiming Our Faith Identity:**

One: We are the Church –

**ALL: God's beloved children today, tomorrow, and always.**

One: Here, in this worship, through prayer, word, and fellowship,

**ALL: God has embraced us yet again, and our spirits have been made new.**

One: Suffused with God's grace,

**ALL: We claim new strength, new purpose, and new hope in our call.**

One: With spirits reaffirmed and renewed,

**ALL: We are called to SHARE God's Word. We are called to SHOW God's Love. We are called to SERVE God's World. We are called to STRIVE for God's Peace.**

One: We are the Church

**ALL: Because God binds us together in sacred companionship and blessed connectedness.**

One: And now, as the Church, God calls us out

**ALL: To do and be God's extravagant love in the world.**

One: This service has ended.

**ALL: Now our service can begin.**