

Final Report: 2017 Living, Dying, Rising Conference Interviews

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1001 New Worshiping Communities

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2017 Living, Dying, Rising Conference Report

New Worshiping Community Leader Interviews

BACKGROUND

The 2017 conference for the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s 1001 New Worshiping Communities Initiative (NWCs) took place in St. Petersburg Beach, Florida from August 7-10th with the theme "Living, Dying Rising." The conference was attended by people whose NWCs were in various stages of development, from those still in the planning stage to those who have been leading their worshiping communities for years. PC(USA)'s Research Services sent one researcher to conduct informal interviews of participants, most of whom are leaders of NWCs.ⁱ

An analysis of notes from interviews with these leaders elicited four overarching themes. First, we learned some ways that leaders are striving to promote unity while preserving diversity, such as providing safe spaces for people to practice being neighbors. Second, we learned that children are often viewed—and utilized—as a bridge to the broader community. Third, we learned ways in which leaders are making worship more active, by incorporating food, engaging in spiritual practices together, and cultivating the creativity of worshipers. And finally, we learned that new worshiping community leaders are reaching out to find God in the margins in a variety of ways, emphasizing what they believe to be not just the desirability, but also the *necessity* of social justice ministry.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

New worshiping community leaders tend to be very concerned with how they can create a NWC that fosters unity among disparate groups. The types of diversity mentioned in the interviews included race, gender, age, social class, and religion (or lack thereof). For example, Sarah Lee of the Korean House Church has mostly Filipino and Catholic or ex-Catholic attendees, but she is trying to expand the ministry to attract members of other immigrant groups. She wants the church to be more diverse, to bring a better reflection of "Heaven on Earth."

This theological orientation toward diversity was also described by Barb West of Reclamation Ministries, whose main theological focus is rooted in the belief that we are ALL created in God's image. One of Barb's goals is to create a safe space where all three of the major faith groups in the local area (Christian, Jewish, Muslim), along with those who have no faith, can come together and be neighbors. She wants that safe space to be the church, and feels that it can work because the building does not look like a church. However, her coach has advised against



meeting in a church building (even one that does not look churchy) because church does not feel like a safe space for many.

This notion that meeting in a church is a bad idea appeared in other interviews, because many non-Christians have negative views of the Church and Christianity, and would either never come to a church or would feel uncomfortable there if they did.

What they want is a safe space, but safe spaces are hard to create, and true unity in diversity is even more challenging. For example, Barb is very pleased that Peace Church in St. Louis Park, MN, which hosts Reclamation Ministries, also hosts a new immigrant fellowship that worships in English, French, and Awa (Togo). Two groups are worshipping, separately, in the same building. Is this unity in diversity? Maybe it is a step in that direction.

A story from Jim Moseley, the executive presbyter of New Castle Presbytery, illustrates one reason why integrating worship is not automatically the best plan. He talked about a 300-year old congregation that was closed at the request of the members. Before closing, they had considered merging with an existing new immigrant community, but worried that it may only have the appearance of integration. Moseley said that in reality, when such integration happens, the White community tends to upstage the immigrants whenever there is a big decision. They do this by using the logic that they have been there longer, contribute more, etc., but regardless of their stated logic, the outcome is groups of color being marginalized within their own congregation. With this in mind, the congregation decided to have a closing ceremony, and then reopen as a new immigrant community. “A good closure is in fact a witness to hope. The Gospel is inclusive of living, dying, and new birth,” said Jim.

Many new worshipping communities are actively trying to foster unity in diversity. Okra Abbey is one example. This worshipping community is comprised of predominantly White leaders working in a predominantly Black community. The community is slowly gentrifying and diversifying. According to Layne Brubaker, of Okra Abbey, one of their goals is to foster unity across the disparate groups. Their method is food; the NWC centers around a community garden. Although there are other pastoral presences in the community, they seem to be targeting specific demographics, whereas Okra Abbey is trying to bring people from various demographics together.

Another example of a church that is working toward true unity in diversity is Light of Hope Presbyterian Church, led by Edwin Gonzalez-Gertz. Edwin spoke of the cultural challenges inherent in their work, stating that “We have to learn to hang out with weird people.” He plans to emphasize engaging in intercultural conversations in the fall. Edwin also argues that, when working with marginalized groups, you are almost forced into social justice ministry. He did a sermon series called 12 Modern Prophets, addressing issues of racism, oppression, and



inequality, as they exist within the gospels. There was some backlash, and five people left the church as a result. But backlash goes both ways: according to Edwin, new people have joined the church because they are drawn by the diversity of the people and of the worship experience, which is not the same every Sunday.

Such diversity is common not just within a worshiping community, but between them as well. Whereas the method of Okra Abbey is food, the method of Light of Hope is creative worship, and the method of Reclamation Ministries is community service---different approaches for different groups, all attempting to create safe spaces for a plethora of individuals to thrive.

New Castle Presbytery is currently wrestling with how to allow for this shift in how to “do church.” The executive presbyter Jim Moseley explained that the focus of the presbytery is on creating rich soil, not planting; “If the soil is rich, anything can grow. Let God sift through what grows. The more varieties we have, the better because that adds resilience.” As such, most of the congregations and new worshiping communities described by Jim in the interview are focused on a particular demographic; here, the diversity comes not from within any particular community, but rather in the diversity of communities (some examples: the Big Gay Church, an upper middle-class congregation, immigrant fellowships, a community dedicated to women who have recently been released from prison).

Moseley argues that when the presbyteries oversaw church planting, it didn’t work. Privilege and power are still too much a part of the presbytery’s DNA. However, when existing congregations plant new ones, the new congregation takes some of the DNA from the existing congregation instead of from the presbytery. This is the gift large congregations bring: the willingness and ability to plant smaller ones. If there are enough of these efforts, it could change the DNA of the entire denomination.

Perhaps diverse groups can best find unity through casual interactions, slowly over time. Shalom International Ministries is a multicultural immigrant congregation, which is already diverse, representing 15 African countries and the United States within their membership. Most of their members are refugees. In our interview, Elysee Fachet (one of the ministry leaders) told of how they started a soccer team. It became a beautiful story of interracial relations, as when their newly arranged team arrived on the field to play for the first time, they found there had been a scheduling conflict. An Asian team was already there playing. So what could the African team do but join in? They took a “very historic picture. It was beautiful to see,” said Elysee.



CHILDREN AS BRIDGE

In Elysee's story, children were the bridge between cultures. This can be ethnic cultures, but the bridge can also span between the church and the community, or the church and the unchurched. This is an argument made by Constance McIntosh, who leads Renegade Gospel, a "Matthew 25 church" that is geared toward ex-Catholics and their unchurched kids. She reaches the parents through the children by showing them love and attention. The parents then follow.

Okra Abbey also built a bridge to their community through the community's children. When they first got started, one of the ministry leaders, Vincent Grossi, talked in our interview the previous year about how he faced challenges with the area children, who stole his bicycle and vandalized property. He responded by working with the children, getting them involved in the work of the Abbey. When the children had something meaningful to do, and some sense of ownership of the community, they were no longer a problem, and in fact became part of the new worshipping community.

Elysee, a ministry leader at Shalom International Ministries, also began meeting people by going out into the community and playing basketball with the children there. Shalom International Ministries spends one hour each week visiting the local refugee apartment complex, greeting those there and being a presence, saying hello and "making people feel included." However, they found that there were a lot of non-Christians in the community being left out, so they ended up doing a children's ministry. This is a place and time where children come and just play and learn, and Shalom provides a safe space for them to do so. The ministry has become so successful that the church sometimes runs out of cars and has to call up their partner church for volunteers to drive the children. This is in keeping with their mission to seek the Shalom of Community (Jeremiah 29). According to Elysee, "we can only feel good if our community is good."

The children's ministry helped the community grow, and as a result Shalom started a youth group three years ago. Just meeting at church was not enough for the youth, so youth members started calling friends, and thus became another bridge to the community. The youth group raised its own money to attend a youth conference at Montreat, to better learn what it means to be a Presbyterian. They held a silent auction to raise the money. And now each year the youth comes up with new ideas to raise money. They don't want to disempower the youth by giving them money; empower the youth to realize that they have something to bring to the table.



Barb West at Reclamation Ministries wants to focus on children in middle school, because their school is within walking distance of the church. Reclamation Ministries will offer after-school tutoring (“homework lab”), service projects, dinner, and worship after dinner. They hope people who come for the activities and food will stay for Christ-centered worship afterwards.

Another target group for Barb is the single mothers of these children. Because addiction is common in this neighborhood, one way to help these women is by offering a 12-step program specifically for women, to provide a feminine way through the twelve steps. In addition, she offers them art classes such as jewelry making.

Light of Hope has a thriving summer camp, which they began after discovering 95% of children in the area were academically behind. The children don’t know they are in a remedial camp but parents do. They are also planning to open a Light of Hope Presbyterian Academy, a Christian school that accepts individuals with disabilities and minorities.

ACTIVE FORMS OF WORSHIP

In addition to seeking unity in diversity through a diversity of safe spaces, new worshipping community leaders also emphasize the importance of creating a diversity of worship experiences. In particular, active forms of worship were often noted. This can be either through physical activity (e.g. walking the labyrinth) or interpersonal activity (e.g., conversation instead of a traditional sermon).

One example of physically active worship is Light of Hope’s Museum of the Passion, which was a self-guided tour of the Passion story, with eight stations. Each station had an activity that was designed to make the person reflective of their relationship with God. Its intent was to promote spiritual formation by combining Biblical information with spiritual practices.

Similarly, their pastor Edwin Gonzalez-Gertz also once preached while walking a labyrinth, as part of a communion service. The idea was to open the minds of the worshipers toward seeking different kinds of relationships with God. Coloring stations are also offered during worship, and they even brought in a movement therapist to worship once, and as a result “people now are more comfortable expressing worship with their bodies.”

Edwin describes all of this as transformational worship, wherein there is a shifting from a formal style of worship to a “ministry of worship” that will address the needs of the local congregation and the community they are trying to serve. Additionally, Light of Hope has a monthly community meal, averaging about 80 people for the meal; most stay for worship afterwards.



Throughout these interviews, spirit, art, and food were common themes both in and surrounding worship. Through their “Peas and Love” program, Okra Abbey is serving food to the elderly. They also host weekly potluck dinners, where worship and fellowship occurs. Their ministry is focused on food, but it also includes the arts. They have brought in community members to help with art installations and graffiti to decorate their space.

The worship style at Reclamation Ministries is slightly alternative. Although it follows the lectionary, the style of liturgy is Celtic, and instead of a traditional sermon they have a conversation surrounding the Bible verses. To emphasize this non-traditional approach, worship is not held in a sanctuary with pews, but instead in a parlor with chairs.

We can see similar trends in more traditional worshiping communities, as well. For example, the Riverfront is in a growing, upscale community. This worshiping community has no church building and no plans to have a building. Worship is in a pavilion in the summer and in a contemporary arts center in winter. Worship includes Methodists and Episcopalians too, and often centers around the arts.

At Anchor City Church, pastor Jeya So uses art and creativity as a method of worship. She argues that by “bypassing the verbal centers,” we can access a deeper connection to the Holy Spirit, which exists within all of us. According to Jeya, hands-on activities “disrupt us enough to connect to the Creator” because creativity is the ability to steward our imagination to love people as we love ourselves. It creates a “heart-to-hand” connection. Jeya states that one of her challenges in this approach is that Asians are uncomfortable with creativity. She argues that her job as a pastor is not to disseminate information, but rather to cultivate the imagination: to help people see clearly into the fullness of their call, and to help people look for moments where the Divine is shining through.

GOD IN THE MARGINS

Anchor City Church is focused on “third culture kids” (children who are raised in a culture other than their parents’), who according to Jeya are “neither nor,” and “both and.” She argues that although not all in the church are third culture, all understand what it means to look for a place to belong; to be stuck in that liminal space. Liminal spaces are places (and times) of transition. Like waiting rooms, foyers, and elevators, it feels unsettling to spend too much time in them. God is in that liminal space. In-betweenness, Jeya states, is a gift.

The theology of God in the margins was well elucidated by Barb West, who draws inspiration from the time she spent in Iona, from which she learned much about process theology, Celtic spirituality, and truth-telling. Her main theological focus is rooted in the belief that we are ALL created in God’s image. Everything has God in it. God cares about us and about the planet. But



more than this, because God became human, God understands pain. As such, God is in solidarity with the oppressed.

People can also feel that they are in the margins of Christianity—to want to follow Jesus, but feel that their questions and ideals might make them unwelcome at the table. Sue Yoder has started a new worshipping community that addresses this demographic. The Barn was planted in 2005, and when it reached 100 members, they planted a new community called “Blank Slate” for people with questions. Blank Slate meets in Sue’s living room. One challenge they face is breaking the idolatry of the past—how things have always been done.

The “dechurched” (those who have left the church without intending to return) are a target demographic for Constance McIntosh of Renegade Gospel, as well. For Constance, everything centers around practicing grace, forgiveness, and social justice. Accepting God’s grace means accepting ourselves, and loving God means loving others. She argues that Jesus was a rebel; he came to start a revolution, not form a religion. As such, following Jesus means siding with the marginalized and disrupting the status quo.

Karen Estes is interested in starting a church for another kind of in-betweens: Geeks. This group would meet in the back of a local game shop. Their worship would focus on connecting theology to people’s everyday lives. She has found there is an interest, and hopes to pursue it.

Light of Hope plans to start and launch a not-for-profit agency called Rivers of Hope in March, and are hiring a grant writer part-time for a year. One lesson they’ve already learned from this is to know your worshipers’ strengths; a grant-writing expert was right in their church and they didn’t know it. They are seeding money “to alleviate and prevent poverty through education, better life skills, and dealing with housing.” They are buying a home to provide a halfway house ministry and calling it “Hope House.” They are partnering with Promise House of Clark County, GA.

Jim Moseley tells of a congregation that sprang up in an area near a women’s correctional institution in his presbytery. They focused on women being released from the correctional institution. They offered regular Bible study, which evolved into art and art therapy, and a coffeehouse. Sunday worship included a meal, a praise band, praise worship, and pulled from Pentecostal and Baptist backgrounds. After four years, it closed. The new congregation did not win support from area congregations and groups, who felt what they were doing was distracting to the work of local social service agencies. One lesson we can take from this is that you can start a new ministry and find resistance from existing services and congregations. Also, as soon as you start working with people on the margins, it becomes social justice work whether you want it to or not. This ministry was also exhausting for its leaders and therefore



unsustainable; however, it left a legacy that brought together a group of Black female pastors who had no previous visibility in the community.

Jim Moseley believes that there is a fundamental shift in how people approach religion. The new focus isn't on doctrine; it is on meaning, belonging, and asking the deep questions. These three spiritual needs really go hand-in-hand: people must feel that they truly belong before they feel safe enough to ask the deep questions, which are necessary to access meaning. For that to happen, worshiping communities need to provide safe spaces that will facilitate unity in diversity, one that includes children and all the "childish" gifts of creativity, openness, and play, and especially one that reaches out to the margins, because there we will find God.



Appendix

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY LEADERS

1. What are the core Christian beliefs about Jesus, Church, witness, gospel, and disciples that (will) ground this work of ministry?
2. What is the vision or mission for this NWC?
3. Who has God placed on your heart to engage?
4. How will you reach people and disciple them?
5. What activities might be necessary to engage the people you are trying to reach?
6. Do you have a specific plan to attract “nones” and “dones”?
7. Do you have a plan for implementing/growing this NWC?
8. How is your NWC funded? Do you have a plan for making the NWC self-sustaining?
9. What distinguishes NWCs from established congregations?
10. How do you think you might grow into an established congregation? Is that a goal?

LIST OF PEOPLE WHOSE COMMENTS INFORMED THIS REPORT

1. Layne Brubaker, Okra Abbey, New Orleans, LA
2. Barb West, Reclamation Ministries, St. Louis Park, MN
3. Jeanie Shaw, Eventide, Sacramento, CA
4. Karen Estes, Geek Church (being planned)
5. Jim Moseley, New Castle Presbytery
6. Jeya So, Anchor City Church, Dan Diego, CA
7. Edwin Gonzalez-Gertz, Light of Hope Presbyterian Church, Marietta, GA
8. Sue Yoder, The Barn Faith Community and Blank Slate, Allentown, PA
9. Elysee Fchet, Shalom International Ministry, Clarkston, GA
10. Sarah Lee, Korean House Church
11. Constance McIntosh, The Renegade Gospel Worshiping Community, Presbytery of South Louisiana

ⁱ This work was co-sponsored by the 1001 NWC staff, who paid lodging and some food expenses for a researcher to attend the conference and waived conference fees, and Research Services, who paid for the balance of expenses for one researcher to attend. A convenience sample of conference participants was interviewed informally during the conference, in various locations, including lobbies, meeting rooms, and restaurants. Notes were taken by the interviewer, who also designed the research project and authored the report; conversations were not recorded. Participants consented to be interviewed by signing a signup sheet or by providing the interviewer their cell phone number to be contacted with an interview date and time. The study consisted of qualitative interviews; the goal was to extract themes about the experiences of NWCs, and are not intended to be generalized to a broader population. All interviews were conducted in English.

